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Media Reporting of the Next Federal Election: What Can We Expect?

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As I was writing this lecture, Fairfax announced plans to shed 1900 staff and erect paywalls for its online content. The following day, Fairfax journalists made public their entreaty to Fairfax's largest single shareholder, mining billionaire Gina Reinhart, to support their editorial independence. The next day, billionaire Rupert Murdoch's News Corp made a \$1.97 billion takeover offer for Consolidated Media Holdings helping billionaire James Packer achieve his goal of exiting media in favour of casinos so Murdoch could advance his goals of greater domination in pay TV and sport. And, as I speak today, there is still ongoing speculation that up to 1000 jobs at News Ltd are at risk.

In all of this, there is a mix of the familiar – including the same media dynasties who've controlled large swathes of Australian content for decades - but also the new. And I don't mean just a new player with strong interests of her own, but also big changes inside and outside our major media companies at a time when the nature of journalism including its democratic and economic foundations, are being re-shaped. Nobody knows how this particular story will end... Not the journalists who are watching their industry transform around them, nor the owners or managers who need

to decide whether to keep trying to secure the economic future of their media assets or whether to retreat, and not the analysts on the sidelines including academics who, like me, are trying to make sense of what it all means.

It may seem that I am digressing somewhat here from the topic at hand - *Media Reporting of the Next Federal Election: What Can We Expect?* – but I am doing so for a purpose; to draw attention to the context in which we need to examine the news media in Australia. When we look at how the media report elections in particular, we also need to think quite broadly about why this might be so; what sort of factors impact upon the reporting of politics and why are certain themes and narratives so prevalent? What constitutes ‘good’ election reporting and how can that be encouraged in the current climate of upheaval?

Barring unforeseen circumstances, there will be a federal election next year and it must be held by 30 November 2013 but, according to Antony Green (whose word I take on such matters), is much more likely to be between August-October 2013. There will likely be a five, - or if the Labor Party feels especially brave - a six week campaign in the lead up to polling day. Based on past form and present circumstances, how will the news media in Australia report this campaign? And will that reporting fulfill all of the functions we might expect (and are promised) by news outlets in a democracy in an information age?

I need to explain how I came to the views that I'm about to outline. A grant from the Australian Research Council allowed me to collect over 10,000 election news reports – mainly from the 2001, 2004 and 2007 federal elections - with some from 2010. These included (mostly) newspaper articles and television clips including TV news, current affairs, comedy and breakfast programs – any clips that mentioned the election - as well as some radio reports and transcripts and some material from various websites. I had the luxury of being able to conduct a five year study of that material including using content analysis to analyse – in a quantitative manner - a sample of nearly 1000 texts. This took six research assistants about eight months to systematically code and compare using a questionnaire with over 100 questions for each news report. I also performed some qualitative analysis and a range of other methods include mapping subjects and sources in news report.

My goal was to test the most common criticisms of media reporting of elections – that election reporting is shallow, doesn't focus much on policies or do a good job of explaining or analysing them, is the outcome of a 'pack' mentality that sees the same stories and frames reported across different media and outlets, that election reporting is obsessed with opinion polls and the 'horse-race' of who's in front and who's behind, that it has been 'dumbed down', increasingly reflects entertainment values, is less about facts and more about opinions and interpretations, is the product of politicians' and their advisers' spin and PR efforts, is often biased but also lazy reflecting narrow viewpoints and familiar sources.

When they set out to test popular notions about how things works, academics are often secretly hoping that their research will allow them to be a myth-buster; that they will find evidence that shatters common myths, causing people to think afresh and see things anew. What I found – and wrote about in my book *How Australia Decides* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) – made me think that some of the many criticisms are over-stated, some are unfair but, alas, I cannot be a myth-buster here for many of the criticisms were indeed true – some to a surprising degree. There may be good reasons for this – or at least reasons that help explain why election reporting ends up the way it does and – returning to my theme at the beginning of this lecture – context matters a great deal. The Australian media – its systems, institutions and culture; Australian politics and the way campaigning is conducted here; as well as Australian news audiences and our preferences and priorities all come into play.

With this in mind, today I'd like to make some predictions of what is to come in 2013 based upon my book and on what I found in my study of election reporting. As a political scientist, I'm usually wary of making election predictions – at least in terms of their results - but, when it comes to election reporting, some patterns are so evident that I'm quite confident that, unless something drastically changes, we will see many of the same tendencies and themes that I saw in reporting of the 2000s repeated in 2013.

How will the media report the next federal election?

A few caveats to begin. Firstly, I'm talking particularly about the mainstream media – especially newspapers (online and printed) and television news. Secondly, even so, it is true that of course not all media are the same, not all outlets are the same and certainly not all individual journalists are the same. There will be variations in how media outlets and journalists report the 2013 election and these are important. And, yet, there will also be some generally occurring patterns and, if my study of previous elections holds true, a lot more similarity in Australian election reporting than we might expect.

1. **There will be an over-arching campaign narrative** with a well-defined beginning, middle and end. The campaign proper begins with the Prime Minister driving to meet the Governor-General and asking for a dissolution of Parliament. TV crews will wait patiently outside Government House to capture the drive through the gates (Sky News excels at this waiting and filling in time) because this is so symbolic and represents the beginning of the campaign. Then, in the middle, are the day-to-day campaign activities, especially of the leaders. These are all building up to the climax of polling day and are usually reported in those terms: ‘what does this mean for the likely result’? On polling day, the Labor and Coalition leaders will be recorded casting their own votes in their respective electorates. This is another highly symbolic moment that will be shown on all of the TV news bulletins on election night. Once the result is known, the winning party leader gives a victory speech and the loser a concession speech, these speeches mark the acceptance of victory and defeat. This is the traditional, obvious

and seemingly pre-determined election narrative. I'd argue that it isn't pre-determined, doesn't suffice and causes a particular kind of focus in reporting that means...

2. **When deciding which topics and individuals are most newsworthy, there will be a striking degree of sameness about mainstream media coverage of the next election.** When I mapped the content of TV news clips and front-page newspaper reports across the 41 days of the 2007 election campaign, ninety-five per cent of the time, the five free-to-air TV news bulletins covered the same topic. Often they used the same visuals, sound-bites and sometimes even the same story order as well. On 17 days (41 per cent of the campaign) a story was judged so newsworthy that every major media outlet covered it — all FTA TV news programs and all of the nine newspapers I studied on their front-page. For more than three quarters of the campaign, at least half of the newspapers reported the same topic on their front-page. (And even this does not reveal the full extent of homogeneity because I focused on front-pages and the election didn't always make it on to the front-page (especially for tabloids) but was covered inside the newspaper.)

3. **The news agenda will be dominated by the two major parties' planned events** – especially the leaders' policy announcements, their public statements and visuals of them out campaigning. To look at the content of election news is to see that

reporting the day-to-day events of the election campaign, the news agenda is largely the product of the parties' tightly controlled campaign techniques successfully woven as they are into the narrative that news media outlets use to tell the story of the election. The method of reporting which sees the leaders followed by a bus (or plane) of accompanying journalists is also at the root of this. And this is mostly now junior reporters following while senior reporters watch and report from afar, away from the hermetically-sealed bubble. This roadshow is a limited, snapshot of the campaign but it's a major focus in news media and the main exceptions outside of the pre-planned, diary-style reporting will be when any gaffes are made by any of the main campaigners (which the media will gratefully seize upon) plus promotion of any media-initiated pseudo-events including opinion polls but also *The Great Debate* and any media-organised town hall meetings of the type seen in 2010.

- 4. The two major parties' leaders will be the prism through which the campaign story is told.** The Labor and Coalition leaders will be the only political actors who regularly get to have a say in their own words in most news reports. One or other leader (usually both for the sake of even-handedness) will be quoted (or get a soundbite) in nearly three-quarters of front-page newspaper articles and TV news reports. Their words will shape the news agenda. Their photos will be used to signify what the election is all about. The focus on them will be unrelenting and highly personalised. It will be almost as if the hundreds of other candidates running for office (or the people they represent) don't exist.

5. In the main, **ministers and shadow ministers** will be newsworthy when they make gaffes. Backbenchers and new candidates will be largely absent in the most-accessed media, only likely to appear in TV news clips when they perform as a human backdrop, nodding away behind their leaders as they visit their electorate.
6. With the exception of Julia Gillard (a big exception I know), **female candidates** will be underrepresented in election coverage of all kinds — not just news but also current affairs, breakfast TV and talkback interviews. If they are included they will generally be *seen* but rarely be heard. In the 930 election reports I examined across newspapers, TV and radio over three elections, only 10 per cent of news stories included a quote from a female politician.
7. **Independents and candidates from minor parties** will be similarly excluded. During the three elections of the 2000s, only five per cent of newspaper articles ever quoted any minor party politician or independent, and only four per cent of radio clips and six per cent of TV clips. This marginality is self-perpetuating as the smaller parties then struggle to attract the media coverage they need to win public support.
8. In other countries, including in the US, there has been an increasing **use of ‘experts’** in news coverage including pollsters, political insiders, business leaders, people from an NGO, lobby group or religious organisation, academics, political

scientists and union leaders. In Australian election reporting that trend is not nearly so strong. Mostly, it will be journalists calling upon other journalists to comment – although there will also be the usual suspects of party-affiliated spokespeople. And the experts who will be called upon to give their views on the election in 2013 will overwhelmingly be male. Even in 2007, only one per cent of the experts quoted in newspaper reports were women, improving only marginally to eight per cent on TV. If history is a guide, business leaders and other journalists will be the two groups most often quoted as experts in 2013.

9. **The public will be surprisingly absent** from media reporting, most often seen as faces in a crowd or a shopping mall or their hands being shaken at campaign events. With the spotlight firmly on the major party leaders, only occasionally will some other actor steal the media limelight and, for a member of the public, the most likely way to achieve this is to fall over in their presence in front of the TV cameras.

10. **It's a cliché but true - the horse-race will be the focus.** The narrative within the narrative is – ‘who’s ahead’? The proportion of news stories quoting opinion poll results increased by 34 per cent in newspapers and 33 per cent in TV news between 2001 and 2007. Even these quantitative figures do not capture just how much opinion polls permeated news coverage in the 2000s. As Rodney Tiffen has noted, journalists tend to report each new poll ‘with breathless proclamations of its importance’ (Tiffen 2007: 1). Or, as Peter Brent (2007: 131) has remarked: ‘There

must be some countries more obsessed with political opinion polls than Australia, although they've yet to be found.' As the number of journalists and the resources of newspapers decline, this will probably be magnified. We have already seen over the last decade that, lacking the sort of scoops that come from either journalistic investigation or the more spontaneous campaigning style of old-school politicians, polls have become one of the few ways that news outlets can initiate a story. The polls are promoted as an 'exclusive' and one that enables newspapers to then generate their own election stories.

11. **Regular opinion polls will be reported in a way that generates a sense of uncertainty and unfolding drama about the election result.** News reports will emphasise change rather than stability, reporting on what has changed since the last poll — even if this is small, inconsequential or within the margin of error — rather than what has stayed the same. If 2013 election reporting follows that of the 2000s, opinion polls will be used to create a narrative of a close contest between the major parties — even if there isn't one — because this is far more interesting than a foregone conclusion. That may be more difficult this time around but not impossible. Even if Labor has been consistently behind in opinion polls for months, nay years, I predict there will still be, in the last few days of the campaign, a titillating sense of a potential comeback, a drawing closer, a narrowing of the gap. To take just a few examples from 2007, on the day before polling day, ABC News reported that the latest polls were suggesting 'tomorrow's federal election could be a cliffhanger' (ABC 7pm News). SBS also reported that it 'could be a cliffhanger after all'. Channel Nine 6pm

news said Howard ‘appears to be in sight of the impossible’ and, in classic horse-race terms, was ‘surging towards the finishing post’.

12. Compared to the horse-race focus, policy coverage will be minimal.

Another cliché but one I found to generally be true of Australian election reporting: policy analysis has declined over time. There is less focus – at least in the front-pages and TV news bulletins - on policies, including less discussion of a smaller range of policies and policy areas. If this holds true in 2013 it is also likely that media reports will, as they generally were in the 2000s, be reactive in their coverage of policy issues, reporting on policies once they are announced by the party leaders and then often analysing policies in terms of the horse-race (will this help Labor/the Coalition’s chances of winning the election?) rather than providing background or context, or exploring what the policy is actually designed to do, whether it will achieve its goals or how it compares to other policies or to those in place in other countries, for example. The parties have, of course, been partly the cause of this by using campaign strategies that see them adopt ‘small targets’, releasing their policies late in the campaign and using their knowledge of the news cycle to manipulate reporting by not providing sufficient time or opportunity for journalists’ inquiries. It requires time, resources and expertise to try to head off such strategies and, in order to be pro-active in reporting policies in more detail, it requires a different understanding of the news cycle.

13. **Journalists will write themselves into the story in 2013 but not necessarily in a way that helps the public understand journalism nor the relations between media and politics.** Politicians exert a high degree of control over the daily news agenda during an election campaign. The way journalists report elections is at the core of this but, rather than change the conventions of reporting — for example, broaden the focus, use a wider circle of sources, conduct investigations, move from the day-to-day focus or otherwise change the main narrative — journalists have tended to take another route. Reporting on opinion polls is one way journalists have sought to regain the initiative. Another is by writing themselves into the story, giving politicians less coverage and giving themselves more. In the 2000s, journalists became increasingly important brokers of meaning in political coverage as they paraphrased, narrated and commented on politicians’ activities. This was partly about reasserting control over the news agenda but also about keeping audiences watching when politicians were seen as a ‘turn off’.

14. This means that **the shrinking politician soundbite will continue.** In Australia, politicians’ sound-bites were down to 6.9 seconds in 2007. In an average TV news story in 2007, reporters and other media figures (including news anchors/hosts and other journalists interviewed as part of the story) spoke for three times longer than the politicians they were reporting on.

15. **The metacampaign will also go on.** As political spin, political marketing and PR have ramped up, journalists have (rightly) been concerned with revealing to their

audiences the behind-the-scenes interactions of politics, including the ‘metacampaign’ that politicians conduct for the benefit of the media. The shot of the media pack gathered around the politician or their advisers in the background are some of the more obvious symbols of this. Journalists highlight how politicians try to manipulate news coverage. We therefore know a lot more about how politics is conducted today than we did forty years ago because of the willingness of journalists to write about it. At its best, meta-coverage gives citizens important information about how the electoral process actually works, highlighting what is going on behind-the-scenes and pointing out important shifts in how politics is conducted. At its worst, it can descend into simplistic representations and take a very cynical form.

16. **Many journalists will bemoan how stage-managed, sterile and boring the campaign is.** They have done so since 1996. This type of meta-coverage helps journalists reiterate their professional role, demonstrate their distance from politicians and explain gaps in their reporting brought about by the effectiveness of political PR. A world-weary, cynical tone often creeps in to coverage even though it’s boring to keep hearing how boring reporters find election campaigns.

17. Journalists will tell their audiences how politicians control and disseminate information but they will be much **less forthcoming about their own methods, tactics and motivations.** Although journalists are writing themselves into stories and turning the camera upon themselves, this is rarely done with any critical scrutiny. Self-analysis often goes only as far as highlighting the importance of the

media's role but stops far short of critically interrogating it. The meta-coverage frame has therefore not reached its full potential to give audiences a full sense of how the interactions between the media and politicians work, or indeed, how those between the media and their audiences work.

18. There will be a focus on entertainment and potentially less election coverage.

Journalists not only have to select stories from all of the material available, they also have to make those stories matter to their audiences. That's not an easy proposition. Many Australians say they are not particularly interested in political news, reporters (like politicians) have to flick the switch to vaudeville. This is amplified in an era of economic pressures in commercial news organisations and the choices often seem to be to give the audience something else instead of politics or make political coverage more 'interesting' and entertaining. Even the ABC's audience surveys in the 2000s showed increasing numbers of viewers and listeners reporting that they thought the ABC focused too much on coverage of federal politics. When I compared Australian coverage to British and American election reporting, I found our TV news clips are already shorter than comparable outlets overseas. Politics isn't automatically given priority. Increasingly, it has to win its place in the news. Increasingly, audience members – who have many other leisure, entertainment and media options - scan news and stay only briefly.

19. 2013 will be heralded '*the internet election*'. There's been a tendency for every election since 1998 to be proclaimed in media reporting as '*the internet election*'

and this one will be no different except the prediction may be more nuanced.

Perhaps it will be cast as ‘the Twitter election’ or ‘the YouTube election’ or with a focus on social networking or on smart phones. We’ve certainly seen proclamation after proclamation and, while it is true that things keep changing (for example, mobile technology has the capacity to drastically alter audiences and news production), and the internet has had profound effects (particularly on news production, I’d argue) the fact will remain that, next year, when it comes to getting election news, TV will still be the most important medium for the majority of Australians in 2013, so will radio, and newspapers will still be very important to setting the news agenda and influencing other media.

20. Can the internet save journalism and enhance election reporting? There is no doubt that the internet has made political news and information much more widely available but involvement by the public is still very selective and uneven. Just because political news and information become available on a new medium this does not mean that people without previous interest in politics suddenly become interested. Nor does use of a different medium mean that the political news audience suddenly becomes more representative. The evidence we have (as opposed to the speculation) suggests the biggest effects of the internet have been on *news production* – the internet has changed the way news is gathered, reported and disseminated and particularly has affected the *economic models* that major news organisations rely upon. In terms of audiences - who accesses online news and especially political news, which sites they visit, what they do there - so far,

much of the evidence suggests the internet has largely been ‘normalised into the traditional political world...’ with existing inequities continued online (Ward and Vedel 2006: 210). This means the online political news audience looks a lot like the offline political news audience especially in terms of ‘quality’ news – older, white, male, affluent, educated. Along with the challenge of how to find an economic model for online journalism, the challenge of how the technology can help engage new audiences – as opposed to just giving the old audience new ways to get information - remains.

21. I hesitate to bring this point up as – after all, I only have one hour – but I can safely predict that **there will be accusations of bias**. There always are! Conservatives will point to the ABC as biased against them and perhaps Fairfax (although this may be diluted or may depend upon Gina Reinhart’s role) while Labor and the Greens will point to the role of News Ltd including its tabloids but also the *Australian*. Here, I shall just note these claims and point out that I think there are very important issues at stake before I move on from what is a hot debate and one that may yet get warmer. I want to get to the next part of the puzzle - what *should* we expect from media reporting in a complex age? What can we do to support and encourage election reporting?

What *should* we expect from media reporting in a complex age?

We expect a lot from the media and, indeed, we are often promised a lot. Yet we also know that the context journalists and others have to work in to create and distribute election news is challenging and increasingly so. If the question here really is what is ‘good’ reporting and how can we get it?, then the answer (at least partly) is that audiences want and expect different things. ‘Good’ reporting differs from outlet to outlet. Not everyone wants a long analysis of a detailed policy every time. Not everyone wants a highly opinionated shock jock shouting down a politician or guest. Not everyone wants a sensationalised tabloid article. Not everyone wants a colourful or satirical piece that makes them laugh. But so long as somebody somewhere wants them, these formats are needed. Personally, I might prefer some news forms over others both as an audience member and a political scientist but I recognise that they all have a place. Diversity is the key. But while there is a need for multiple formats of information and story-telling, we have to recognise that different news forms are the result of different economic models and we don’t want to see the forms of journalism that involve more expensive resources to allow for research, investigation, detailed information, analysis — to suffer while cheaper forms abound. Even if not everyone wants long-form, detailed policy analysis, for example, it’s democratically important that it still exists somewhere.

As I’ve said, diversity is the key but it’s a big problem in Australia. Not just in terms of diversity of ownership (which is a major problem) but also diversity in terms of topics, sources and perspectives. In Australian election reporting, there is far too much homogeneity in topic selection. There is also a very limited number and range of

external sources used. Cost-cutting and declines in journalism staff are going to put even more pressure on journalists to be conservative, to stick with the usual, to follow the leader, to have the story everyone else has and to rely on news wires and political PR handouts. But now is the time to be brave (if not now, when?). To go to a wider range of sources, to find new spokespeople, to be pro-active and do research in the lead-up to the election, to see policy issues not just in terms of the specific policies the parties announce during the campaign but to uncover policy issues before the campaign even begins – what’s at stake, what are the options, what are the costs and benefits, what proposals are being considered, who is pushing which option and why, what do affected groups need, what do they think about particular options, what is politically and administratively possible and what has worked or failed elsewhere?

I think the next thing that is particularly important is that we need in Australia more journalistic self-reflection and more transparency about how reporting works. While it’s now very common in news reports to provide accounts of how politicians spin to journalists, we see very few accounts of how journalists get information or how they (deliberately or otherwise) influence political events. In the UK, we are seeing the Leveson inquiry reveal the relationship between the political and media classes in, for them, sometimes embarrassing detail but in a way that, hopefully, will be cathartic in the longer term. In Australia, we really need to know more about how media and political power intersect due to our much higher concentration of media ownership but there will be no such inquiry in the short- (and probably even the long-) term because we don’t have the conditions that produced the behaviour and then produced the

exposes and the outcry. We don't have highly competitive newspapers, a range of owners, an independent outlet like the *Guardian* newspaper to uncover and doggedly pursue the hacking scandal or crazy-brave politicians who are willing and able to take on an incredibly powerful multinational media organisation.

In Australia, I think what we could have is more journalists being up-front about how they get information and how they craft the reports they produce. Don't pretend that information just comes fully formed or that news is complete or that the story selection is somehow just natural and self-evident. Tell us why you or your outlet pursued that story over many others. Tell us why you spoke to those two particular sources instead of ten potential other ones. Don't just tell us how politicians spin to you, tell us why you go to those events and report on them instead of something else. Tell us what you can't report on and why not. (If you can't say this openly in your outlets then tell Wikileaks or the ABC's *Media Watch* – for example, if your editor is directing you to slant stories to support a partisan bias). I think there's a lot to be gained by such honesty (not only for citizens but also for journalists building up relationships with audiences) but I know there are factors working against this opening up of journalism – including fears of changing a formula that won't be supported by bosses and even of losing one's job in an era of journalistic downsizing and in a country where there are few owners to work for. I also know there has been heavy resistance from outlets and individual journalists to proposed media reforms in this country which might produce greater external accountability. But I do think greater internal and external scrutiny would actually help news organisations.

Audiences want to understand how their news is produced. Many audience members already suspect journalists and politicians are all ‘in it together’, ‘too close’ and a bunch of ‘insiders’. Having reporters explain how journalists operate in the metacampaign of elections, having readers’ ombudsmen, proper explanations of errors, sincere apologies that explain context and admit mistakes as well as giving greater insight into how journalists work would, I think, encourage more loyal audiences rather than having the opposite effect, as well as benefiting our understanding of politics and the media.

My next point is to say to journalists ‘help us help you’. Let us in, not just as audience members or people who can post comments at the bottom of online news stories, or people who ring with tips, or can supply a photo off our mobilephone to accompany your story. Involve us in a more fundamental way in researching, writing and distributing content. We’ve seen this happening overseas where the decline of staffing and resources has led some overseas news organisations to experiment with a range of what have been called ‘pro-am’ partnerships. An example of this from the US is *The News-Press* in Florida which used a panel of retired community members including retired lawyers, CEOs and accountants working on stories with staff reporters. In the UK, in 2009 during the MP expense scandals, the *Guardian* put over 500,000 MP claim forms on their website and asked readers to trawl the data looking for suspicious claims and report back. Why don’t we see this sort of experimentation in Australia? Here, as elsewhere, there is a potential army of retired workers, young people, journalism students, academics, experts, NGO workers and hobbyists who could have

expertise, information, skills and motivation relevant to news reporting. It might not only enhance news reporting but forge a new relationship with ‘the people formerly known as your audience’ and give them reasons to be loyal, to be interested, to defend you when you are down and even to pay for your(/their) content.

Civil society will increasingly have to play more of a role in shining light in dark places and the media need to facilitate that. We see examples already and the main one that comes to mind is that of the law lecturer and his students in the US who have been researching death row inmates cases and proving that innocent men have been executed. In an election context, other groups and individuals can help news media understand policy and election implications – if they’re invited. There are many people out there who deal with a wide range of issues.

When I talk about news media organisations forging a new relationship with audiences, I know I’ll be accused of naivety because really what I’m suggesting is that managers and owners should voluntarily lose some control. And it’s something they’ve resisted (to their peril). They resisted interactivity and blogs online, for example, until that was just unsustainable. Some outlets still restrict genuine dialogue as can be seen from the censorship they exercise in online comments under their news articles. Journalism missed the new media/internet boat in the late 1990s and early 2000s and, to simplify, it was largely because the (mainly) middle-aged white men from private schools running media organisations didn’t understand the internet or its potential and weren’t very interested in trying to. As journalism outlets face uncertain

futures, they might be more willing to get more creative or they may not, going down but still in control. If journalists are to be given the freedom to try to do something different with election reporting, editors, producers, owners, shareholders - but also audiences - will need to allow that.

It's a difficult time to be in journalism and it's a difficult time for anyone who cares about its future to watch it struggle. The biggest issue for organisations at the moment is to monetise their content online. They need to give us a reason to pay for the news that, until now, they've given us for free or that we can get somewhere else for free (and here is why public broadcasting is under fire from commercial media companies in the UK and Australia). Commercial news organisations need to make websites and ipad and iphone apps that give us something new. And yet, when Fairfax announced its job losses recently it was on the same day that it announced that it was going to erect paywalls for its online content. When job losses are conflated with charging for news online, what audiences hear is that they are being asked to pay for something that is going to be less substantial and based on less journalists with less resources. In 2013, it seems we will be asked to pay for more online content but how will news organisations convince us it is worth paying for?

We know what we currently get with election reporting, will they be willing to try something new in 2013? Journalists complain that politicians have hijacked the news agenda and it's true that politicians do have a high degree of influence over what makes the news during elections but this is only because the news media have

fashioned the environment in which politicians' PR and spin flourish by telling the election story in a certain way — a narrow reactive focus, limited sources, reliance on major parties and their leaders, reliance on verbal statements and televisual campaign events. So my ultimate plea is for the news media in Australia to change the narrative. An election doesn't just begin as a car drives up the gates to Yarralumla. The purpose of the election is there before and after. The challenges facing Australians, the policies, the issues, the need for political representation are all ongoing. The election is not a game, a sporting contest or a horse-race. These might be good devices for hooking an audience in but there has to be something more than that once the audience is engaged and that value-add is not insiders all watching each other and self-referencing. There's more to politics than how politics is played for the media and how the media reacts to that. Being reactive is not enough. Relying on the busing method of following the leaders or reporting that trail from the sidelines of secondary sources is not sufficient. Reporting what she said/he said is not enough. The election goes on all around us and the challenge is – in the current context – how to support election reporting that provides what a democracy needs in a complex information age. I think many journalists are well aware of these challenges and I hope that, in 2013, enough changes that they are given the chance to try and address them.

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