

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

*Sally Young*

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 have controlled large swathes of Australian content for decades—but also the new. And I do not 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, is being reshaped. 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 and October 2013.

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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 fulfil 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 am 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 reports.

My goal was to test the most common criticisms of media reporting of elections—that election reporting is shallow, does not 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 is in front and who is 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*<sup>1</sup>—made me think that some of the many criticisms are overstated, 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

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Young, *How Australia Decides: Election Reporting and the Media*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2011.

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 would 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 am 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 am 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 am 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.

**There will be an overarching 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 predetermined election narrative. I would argue that it is not predetermined, does not suffice and causes a particular kind of focus in reporting.

**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

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reports across the 41 days of the 2007 election campaign, 95 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 free-to-air 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 did not always make it on to the front page (especially for tabloids) but was covered inside the newspaper.)

**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 is 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.

**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 sound bite) 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) do not exist.

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.

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 ten per cent of news stories included a quote from a female politician.

**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.

In other countries, including in the US, there has been an increasing **use of ‘experts’** in news coverage including pollsters, political insiders, business leaders, academics, political scientists, union leaders and people from an NGO, lobby group or religious organisation. 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.

**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.

**It is 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’.<sup>2</sup> Or, as Peter Brent has remarked: ‘There must be some countries more obsessed with

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<sup>2</sup> Rodney Tiffen, ‘Polls and elections: A primer for the perplexed’, *Australian Policy Online*, 16 October 2007, p. 1, available at <http://www.sisr.net/apo/electionpolls.pdf>.

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political opinion polls than Australia, although they've yet to be found'.<sup>3</sup> 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.

**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'.

**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

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Brent, 'Poll position: Making sense of opinion polls' in Christian Kerr (ed), *The Crikey Guide to the 2007 Federal Election*, Camberwell Vic., Penguin, 2007, p. 131.

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 proactive in reporting policies in more detail, it requires a different understanding of the news cycle.

**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'.

This means that **the shrinking politician sound bite 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.

**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.

**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

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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 is boring to keep hearing how boring reporters find election campaigns.

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.

**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 is 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 is not 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.

**2013 will be heralded 'the internet election'**. There has 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 have 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 would 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. Radio and

newspapers will still be very important to setting the news agenda and influencing other media.

**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 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’<sup>4</sup> with existing inequities continued online. 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 and 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.

I hesitate to bring this point up 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

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Ward and Thierry Vedel, ‘Introduction: The potential of the internet revisited’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2006, p. 210.

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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 storytelling, we have to recognise that different news forms are the result of different economic models and we do not 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 is democratically important that it still exists somewhere.

As I have said, diversity is the key but it is 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 proactive 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 is 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 is 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 do not have the conditions that produced the behaviour and then produced the exposés and the outcry. We do not 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. Do not 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. Do not 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 cannot report on and why not. (If you cannot 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 is 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 will not 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 mobile phone to accompany your story. Involve us in a more fundamental way in researching, writing and distributing content. We have 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

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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 are 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 will be accused of naivety because really what I am suggesting is that managers and owners should voluntarily lose some control. And it is something they have 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 did not understand the internet or its potential and were not 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 is a difficult time to be in journalism and it is 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 have 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 fewer journalists with fewer 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 is 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 does not 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 is 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 bussing 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.



**Question** — You mentioned how poll-driven the news is and how much coverage there is. Has there been any research done at the consumer end about how much actual interest there is in the amount of political and parliamentary coverage we have?

**Sally Young** — It is an interesting point because you will often get journalists and media organisations saying ‘We would love to do something different but people will not buy it. I would love to have a detailed analysis of immigration policy and really

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put a lot of research into it but even if I did it, people would not necessarily read it, or watch it, or listen to it'. So one of the interesting things about the field that I work in is that not a lot of research has been done on audiences and what they want. I think there is a presumption that the media organisations know because they know when circulation declines or ratings decline. TV news and current affairs, for example, watch minute by minute of when audiences go on or drift off and they say when politicians come on you just see it dive. So I think a lot of it is presumption and hunch about what audiences want. A lot of it is not backed up by research or any detailed analysis.

**Question** — You referenced Australia's lack of a newspaper like the *Guardian*, and the *Guardian* is a paper that does not have a paywall so what are the differences about the *Guardian* that allow it to function as it does?

**Sally Young** — There is a lot of talk about how the *Guardian* is in financial strife as well and it does not have any magic formula for monetising online content either. Because it is a non-profit body it does not have to answer to shareholders and do cost-cutting in the way that we have seen, for example, with some other media organisations. But it does have resources to do what it does and I think it does a very good job but there are different circumstances there that we do not see in Australia. A body that is purely designed as an independent foundation or independent non-profit organisation, does not have to have those commercial pressures. It is an interesting example of what could be possible but we have not seen any white knight in Australia willing to look at that news model.

**Question** — Do you think it is specific to the organisation of the *Guardian* or do you think it also relates to a difference between Australian and British media culture?

**Sally Young** — I think all of those things come into play. There is a different culture in terms of newspaper in the UK for example. You only need to walk into a newsagency in the UK and there are many titles there whereas in Australia in many cities we only have one major metropolitan newspaper. There is a competitive element there. There is a different economic underpinning to the *Guardian*. It has a loyal audience. It is still struggling with some of those questions of how to make profit and how to survive in the long term and there is a lot of discussion within the *Guardian* about how they are going to face some of those challenges as well. It does not have any particular solution yet. It has a lot of traffic on its website. It gets international audiences in a way that many online newspapers do not so it has got a capacity but even so it is still trying to work out those details.

**Question** — You talk about citizen journalism, and the potential for that to play more of a role in election reporting. A lot of the commentary that has been going on in the last week or so in relation to the changes at Fairfax and News Ltd has talked about how citizen journalism can never be a replacement for ‘real’ journalism because journalists have particular expertise in information gathering and in seeing through spin. I wonder from all the thousands of hours of media reporting that you have actually watched whether you think that is really the case, that journalists do have some core set of specialist skills which means they can do better or can do different things than citizen reporters can?

**Sally Young** — I think that journalists do have specialist training and skills. What is interesting about journalism training is we are seeing a lot of people really wanting to do journalism studies, for example masters in journalism at universities and so on. There are a lot of people that want to go into this field even as the professional model is collapsing around it. There are particular skills that journalists have. A lot of it is about experience. Someone who has worked in journalism for many years and knows the players and knows the context—surely there is a value to that. I think what is interesting about the experimentation that is going on overseas is that you are pairing people up, people who have got a lot of experience and who have worked in journalism a long time with people who have not and might have a fresh pair of eyes and a different set of skills to bring to it. I heard someone speaking a little while ago saying that citizen journalism is the answer: the professional model is dying, we cannot expect to pay journalists, the money is not there, the advertising revenue has gone, that model is not going to work anymore and we are going to have to rely on citizens to do journalism. I think that is problematic. Citizens can do a lot of different types of things but organisations are important here. You still need some sort of resource for that and we cannot expect people to do it for the love of it. There is a professional element to this. People need to get paid for this content as well. There needs to be some sort of model that can support that. Let citizens play a role but still have an economic underpinning that is going to make this viable into the future.

**Question** — You have spoken about allegations of bias in the media. More recently there have been suggestions that the media sometimes become substantive players, perhaps in relation to the allegations against the Speaker, the ‘utegate’ affair and perhaps the *Australian*’s campaign over the schools proposals. In your predictions for the next election, do you think there will be an issue of the media becoming substantive players in the sense of running campaigns rather than merely reporting?

**Sally Young** — There are two things I would say about that. One is the media and journalists have always been players. If you look back at the fifties and some of the things reporters were doing then, they were not just reporting from the sidelines, they

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were actively involved in the political behind-the-scenes goings on. I think that has always been there. I read before I came in that Rupert Murdoch had said today that newspapers are a business and businesses need to be viable or they do not exist. Now that is a bit of a worry for papers like the *Australian*, for example, that reportedly don't make a profit. So if they are not making a profit, what are they for? It used to be said that they are in the public interest—this is part of democracy, they are a fourth estate, they hold power to account, they do all sorts of democratic functions—but they also needed that commercial underpinning. I think as that economic model has shifted, what some of the papers are doing, and some of the owners are doing, is using them very obviously as a tool of political influence and running particular campaigns and I think we are seeing more of that gearing up as the profit mechanism goes down. And I think for some of them it is revealing what they are really about.

**Question** — During the Queensland election campaign the *Courier-Mail* journalists basically boycotted the campaign bus and said we are not going to play that game. As a result there seemed to be a bit more substantive analytical journalism in the reporting from that paper. Do you think that there is any likelihood that sort of tactic will be pursued in future and if so what might be the effect of it?

**Sally Young** — It is quite possible because that has been happening in the US quite a bit as well. There have been campaigns to get off the bus. The senior journalists here seem to have retreated quite a lot from that; not many of them travel around in the bus anymore I believe. In the US there has been more of a move away from that in a sense that the election really does not happen there up on a stage for the TV cameras; the real action is going on elsewhere. The trick is to get to what is the real action and I think journalists can do that in a number of forms. I think that we will see more calls to get off the bus because readers are quite aware, because journalists are telling them, for example in newspapers, that these events are set up: 'We went to a barbeque and they weren't real sausages, they didn't even cook them, they just unfolded it, TV got the shots and everybody left'. Once you start telling us that is happening then we say to you, 'Why are you going?' The trends we are seeing overseas are that it does help when journalists say, 'Well, we are not going to go to this stuff. While you are setting up this barbeque and I am supposed to get shots of it, other stuff is going on that is perhaps far more important and gets a better sense of the campaign and the issues at stake'. I think a change like that is the sort of thing that would be a good experiment to try.