8

Mainstream media

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The recent history of 'democratic backsliding' in countries like Hungary, or the modern rise of authoritarian systems that maintain façade elections (like Putin's Russia), both demonstrate that elections are worthless if they are not conducted within rules that guarantee media diversity and at least a rough balance in the partisanship of news sources available to citizens. Australia retains a longstanding conventional media system of a mixed privately and publicly owned kind, with a particular version adapted to its federal structure and politics (**Griffiths, 2021**; Tiffen, 1994).

What does liberal democracy require of a media system?

- The media system should be diverse and pluralistic, including different media types, operating under varied systems of regulation, designed to foster free competition for audiences and attention, and a strong accountability of media producers to citizens and public opinion.
- Taken as a whole, media regulations should guard against the distortions of competition introduced by media monopolies or oligopolies (dominance of information/content 'markets' by two or three owners or firms), and against any state direction of or dominance over the media.
- A key part of media pluralism is a 'free press', that is, newspapers that are privately owned, where new entrants can enter competition freely and media-specific forms of regulation are avoided or minimised. Only normal forms of legal supervision and business regulation (those common to any industry) should apply to the press, so that a full range of (legitimate, non-violent) political opinions can be expressed.
- In broadcasting, on the other hand, free competition has been restricted in the past by network effects, state control of limited bandwidth, and the continuing salience and immediacy of TV/radio for citizens' political information. So here all liberal democracies have judged that a degree of 'special' regulation of broadcasters is needed to ensure balanced or bipartisan or neutral coverage of politics, especially in election campaign periods. However, regulation of broadcasters must always be handled at arm's length from control by politicians or state officials, by an impartial quasi-non-governmental organisation (quango) with a diverse board and professional staff.

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- Where government funds a state broadcaster (like the Australian Broadcasting Corporation or the SBS channel), this should also be set up 'at arm's length', and with a quango governance structure. Government ministers and top civil servants should avoid forms of intervention that might seem to compromise the state broadcaster's independence in generating political, public policy or other news and commentary.
- The professionalism of journalists, broadcasters and commentators is an important component of a healthy media system. Professional training, employment incentives and the 'reputational economy' in media organisations should all encourage these groups to internalise respect for the public interest. The self-regulation of media professions' value systems should provide important safeguards against excesses or irresponsible behaviours, while maintaining competition and incentives for innovation.
- The overall media system should provide citizens with reliable and diverse political information, and muster evidence and commentary about public policy choices, in ways that are easy to access, at very low cost. The system should operate as transparently as possible, so that truthful/factual content predominates, and mistakes or 'fake news' are both quickly uncovered and counteracted.
- Where any media reporting is unfair, incorrect or invades personal and family privacy then ordinary people should be able to secure practical redress. Citizens are entitled to expect that media organisations will respect all laws applying to them, and will not be able to exploit their power so as to deter investigations of media misbehaviour or prosecutions by the police or prosecutors.
- Journalists investigating or commenting on possible wrongdoing by politicians, state agencies, corporations or other powerful interests should be able to cite a public interest motivation as a sufficient defence against legal actions to suppress coverage. Media organisations should enjoy some legal and judicial protection against attempts to harass, intimidate or penalise them by state agencies, large and powerful corporations, other organised interests, or very wealthy people.
- At election times especially, the press and broadcasters should inform the electorate accurately about the competing party manifestos and campaigns, and use their coverage to encourage citizens' democratic participation.

Along with most liberal democracies, Australia has well developed and long-established systems for guaranteeing media pluralism, which includes six main components:

- A *free press*, one that is privately owned and regulated chiefly by normal business regulations and civil and criminal law provisions, is one key centrepiece. All the major newspapers (except *The Australian* which is truly national) are based in different state capitals, and their relative sizes reflect the scale of their state's population. They normally adopt either a strong political alignment to one party (usually the Liberal-National Coalition) – or a more bi-partisan or variable stance towards the top two parties (Liberal-National Coalition or Labor), especially in state politics. A voluntary self-regulation scheme has provided limited redress in the event of material inaccuracies or journalistic misbehaviours (Finkelstein and Tiffin, 2015).

- A *publicly owned national broadcaster* – the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) – is the second most long-established component of the Australian media system (Inglis, 1983). It is operated by a quango, the ABC Board, with most members and the chair appointed by the federal government. Without its own advertising revenues the ABC has been almost wholly funded by budgets agreed with the Treasury and Canberra ministers. However, the ABC is supposed to operate at arm's length from any political control at the Commonwealth and state levels. In practice, since the ABC changed from being a commission to a government corporation in 1983, Coalition governments have consistently cut its funding overall and Labor governments have increased it (Ricketson and Mullens, 2022).
- In addition, there is a publicly subsidised *hybrid (public broadcaster) company*, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), that seeks to cater for ethnic minorities and non-English language groups (like Italian, Greek, French, etc.) that might otherwise be neglected by commercial ('mainstream') private TV and radio companies. A special channel of SBS is the NITV (National Indigenous Television), a channel that provides coverage largely produced by and relevant to aboriginal communities and people.
- The final component of the broadcasting system has been a small set of *commercial TV and radio companies* (again based in state capitals) with political coverage regulated by the same requirement to be politically impartial (especially at election time). An industry self-regulation body also adjudicates public complaints insulated from control by politicians, the state and from the broadcasters themselves.
- A lot of reliance has also been placed on *journalistic professionalism*, with graduate staff following common standards of reporting and editorial accuracy (**Joseph and Richards, 2014**). Breaches of these norms may fall foul of self-regulation bodies, but they are chiefly enforced informally by weak and inconsistently applied social sanctions, such as reputational damage or career disadvantages for people within the profession who breach good journalism norms.
- *Social media* has become an increasingly salient component of the Australian media system, and like the free press remains largely unregulated, beyond normal legal provisions such as action against 'hate speech' or defamation. The biggest online sites and associated social media are journalistically produced by newspapers, and generally operate on the same lines, although with less political agenda-setting of news priorities. However, much politically relevant content has also been generated by a wide range of non-government organisations (NGOs), pressure groups and individual citizens, many of whom are strongly politically aligned and may not feel bound by journalistic standards, such that unchecked 'disinformation' on non-mainstream media social sites has been an escalating problem (see Chapter 9).

How far does this 'ideal type' pluralist media model stand up as a foundation for Australian political democracy? I begin by looking at how the recent movement of both press and broadcast outlets online has created a single, strongly convergent media system (more than ever before), potentially undermining diversity of sources for citizens in securing political information. Next, I consider in summary form the current strengths and weaknesses of Australia's conventional media system from a democracy perspective, and assess emerging future opportunities and threats in a SWOT analysis. The sections following that evaluate issues of particular concern in more detail.

Recent developments

The dominant media trend of modern times has been that both print and broadcast sources have converged towards having online content and users have shifted online, moving away from legacy print and broadcast formats. The 2012 Finkelstein Inquiry already raised the issues for both the press and broadcast media (**Pearson, 2012**; **Finkelstein and Ricketson, 2012**; **Fernandez, 2012**), but little happened after it, especially on press self-regulation (Finkelstein and Tiffen, 2015). Subsequently, previous trends accelerated with potentially averse implications for citizens' political knowledge because it may erode a previous diversity of political news outlets driven by differently weighted and autonomous journalistic imperatives – the search for a good story and defence of the public interest (Tiffen, Rowe and Curran, 2017). These foundations have been important for maintaining an overall media system where political information has been checked for accuracy and some measure of overall impartiality and equal access to political news has been maintained by media counter-vailing forces (**Joseph and Richards, 2014**; **Weaver and Willnat, 2014**).

Of course, the twin poles of a free press and impartial broadcast news cannot remain fully separate, and some measure of story-pooling is inevitable. Press journalism can often 'set the tone' for overall coverage across all channels, and titles may sometimes launch concerted campaigns on issues that they sustain over many rounds of the news cycle, sometimes reflecting a clear partisan imperative. But operating on different dynamics means that the press and broadcast media can in principle serve as checks and balances on each other. A newspaper lead story or partisanly driven campaign that draws on inaccurate data or lacks substance will wither if TV and radio give it no airtime, and gaining a reputation for inaccuracy might damage its readership numbers. By contrast, suppose that the publicly funded ABC or regulated private broadcasters should fear the consequences of running stories critical of the incumbent government or public agencies (because ministers worsen their funding or regulatory regimes) – here newspapers' freedom to set their own agenda and pursue good stories should ideally ensure that important issues are covered and not suppressed or marginalised.

In the internet and digital news age, Australians especially have dramatically shifted their news-following behaviours and habits to respond to the immediacy and convenience of news coverage on the web. Both the press and broadcasters have developed their online offerings in very effective ways, despite much of their content having been historically appropriated and rerun free on the social media sites of the giant platform companies, especially Google, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and Apple. While Apple News created relationships with content providers for some time, the other firms resisted paying anything for media content. Both the newspapers and private TV firms complained loudly about the damage they suffered in developing paying online readerships because of the platforms making their news available free of charge, while the Silicon Valley giants countered that the reproduction of news on their channels secured massive free publicity for the papers and private TV channels. In 2021, an important intervention by the federal government radically changed this situation and platform providers began paying something to news content generators.

In fact, the growth of paying online audiences in Australia was very rapid and successful by comparison with other media markets in mature liberal democracies. Press sites financed by subscriptions and advertising have increasingly hosted video materials as well. Meanwhile free-to-view sites run by the ABC and other TV channels have also grown very fast, focusing on their own video content but also encompassing many text-based stories. The primary consequence

has been a massive *convergence* of the press and broadcasters, with both sets of companies becoming large-scale online news operators of video/audio and text stories, and attracting similar kinds of audiences and modes of consumption. Online news competition has become the most intense sphere of interactions, especially around political news. Many more stories are now covered and multiple sites give real-time updates to an audience that has become news-hungry and adept at accessing and comparing sources. In addition, all the press and broadcast sites have developed strong social media operations to connect with their audiences (see Chapter 9).

In short, the growth of conventional media online and in digital forms has proved a dramatic challenge to the pluralist logic for separating out the press and the broadcast realms into distinct spheres with their own characteristic mode of operating. For journalists, managers and corporations in both spheres there remain some particularities and differences. Important aspects of press operations in political news and commentary have created some content that broadcasters never normally handle, like hosting individual commentators expressing strongly held opinion-based perspectives such as Andrew Boult on Sky News. Similarly, press outlets have shown a greater capacity to initiate and pursue stories over a long time, providing in-depth coverage and sustaining concerted 'campaigns' on certain issues or scandals (see below), or targeting individual politicians caught up in scandals. Broadcasters have mostly handled commentary more in bi-partisan formats like the ABC's flagship discussion programme, Q + A, where (rough) balance between the top two parties' interests and perspectives has been sought and mostly achieved. However, some late-night 'current affairs' programmes on Sky News have hosted commentary that has proved very similar to the Liberal-national papers or even the far right (**Guardian, 2023**). Broadcast news has sometime joined in 'wolf-pack' episodes where all journalists have scented a major scandal or revelation and run similar negative, personality-driven stories But broadcasters have only really launched major initiatives of their own via a handful of TV investigative programmes, operating in circumscribed ways (for example, **Ting et al., 2022**). Despite these differences, for both sides of the supposed conventional media divide, maximising their digital audiences and binding them closer via social media have become key additional organisational and journalistic devices, essential for their survival and flourishing.

The development of online press news has centred on the state capitals across Australia, where covering both federal and state politics has helped the newspaper industry maintain a vigorous presence in political debate. Recent estimates suggest that in an average seven-day period, over 94 per cent of citizens over 14 years old (nearly 20 million people) either read a print title or accessed news from a press-run website or application (see Figure 8.1). Around three-quarters of Australians read or accessed news via metropolitan titles located in state capital cities, with the top three papers racking up cross-platform audiences of more than five million each (and the *Sydney Morning Herald* topping 8.5 million). The top eight sources reached close to or above three million readers each, and included just two 'national-alone' titles – *The Australian*, and the business-orientated *Financial Review*. In 2022, nearly one in five (18 per cent) of respondents to the Reuters Institute (**2022**) survey reported paying for an online subscription, with a third of these also paying for local news (p.27). Over half of subscribers paid for two or more, national and regional titles. One in eleven paid a subscription to a foreign press title, perhaps reflecting strong 'country of origin' interests among new Australian citizens, or the restricted coverage of international news in many domestic papers.

The turn to digital news largely kept the pre-existing (legacy) architecture of the newspaper industry intact. The right-hand columns of Figure 8.1 show that just two companies have long dominated the press universe, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation with five key titles reaching in all a total audience of 20.1 million Australians in 2020–21, and Nine Media reaching

Figure 8.1: The main newspapers and press websites across Australia's states and major cities, and their usual political leanings, March 2020–March 2021

Newspaper	Thousands (000s)				Per cent audience (%) both modes	Core state and city	Online access	Owner	Politics
	Print readers	Digital readers	Total cross-platform audience	Both modes readers					
Sydney Morning Herald	2,012	7,683	**8,519**	1,176	13.8	NSW, Sydney metro	Free	Nine Media/ Fairfax	Centrist, mixed, critical
The Age	1,585	5,186	**5,990**	781	13.0	Victoria, Melbourne metro	Free	Nine Media/ Fairfax	Mixed, critical
The Australian	3,047	2,632	**5,092**	587	11.5		Paywall	Murdoch	Pro Liberal/ National Coalition
Daily Telegraph	2,485	3,027	**4,879**	633	13.0	NSW, Sydney metro	Paywall	Murdoch	Anti-Labor, pro Coalition
Herald Sun	2,571	2,838	**4,562**	847	18.6	Victoria, Melbourne metro	Paywall	Murdoch	Anti-Labor, pro Coalition
Financial Review	1,212	2,298	**3,295**	215	6.5	Business remit	Paywall	Nine Media	Pro business
Courier-Mail	1,564	1,768	**2,913**	419	14.4	Queensland, Brisbane metro	Paywall	Murdoch	Right wing, pro Coalition
West Australian	1,203	842	**1,764**	281	15.9	West Australia, Perth	Paywall	Seven West Media	Leans right, but has endorsed Labor
Adelaide Advertizer	894	1,160	**1,725**	329	19.1	South Australia, Adelaide	Paywall	Murdoch	Anti-Labor, pro Coalition
Canberra Times	205	735	**908**	32	3.5	ACT & Queenbeyan NSW	Free		Centrist & Labor
The Saturday Paper	511	359	**846**	24	2.8	Weekly, long-form journalism			Mixed
Newcastle Herald	235	320	**542**	13	2.4	NSW, Newcastle, Hunter region and Central Coast		Australian Community Media	Mixed
Mercury	160	299	**432**	27	6.3	Tasmania, Hobart		Murdoch	Anti-Labor, pro Coalition

Sources: Compiled by author from data on **Roy Morgan Single Source (2023).** *'Newspaper Cross-Platform Audience, 12 months to March 2023', webpage:* **https://www.roymorgan.com/readerships/newspaper-cross-platform-audience. See also Alpha Beta Australia (2020).**

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 per cent because people use multiple media sources. Digital data include Apple News subscribers.

17.8 million. Of course, these numbers include a substantial overlap in the two major firms' readerships and online audiences, which is hard to track. In most states only a small proportion of Australians remain outside this reach.

Does ownership matter for political news diversity? Australia's highly oligopolistic market has always shown strong partisanship of the press, demonstrated in the last column of Figure 8.1. This longstanding pattern is strongly entrenched even among Anglosphere democracies (Noam and the International Media Concentration Collaboration, 2016). With a few occasional departures (and unusual exceptions at state level) all the Murdoch titles are normally in favour of the Liberal-National Coalition, strongly critical of Labor and virulently hostile to the Greens and green issue coverage, a stance largely shared by the business-orientated *Financial Review* owned by Nine Media. In Melbourne Nine's *The Age* has been more balanced in its coverage, but in New South Wales its dominant *Sydney Morning Herald* has normally been conservative and anti-Labor, albeit behind more of a veil of even-handedness. Only a few genuinely different and digital-only 'press' sources have broken through to a mass audience, notably the centre-left Australian *Guardian* (an offshoot of the British paper) and *The Conversation,* which tends to reflect the centre-left position of most Australian universities faculty, albeit in a serious and evidence-based manner.

Turning to the broadcasters, the ABC has long maintained an impressive reach in terms of its political news on TV and on national and local radio, as Figure 8.2 shows. Despite pressures from the press and commercial TV for the corporation to restrict its online activity, the ABC has also been able to develop strong online offers, including many text-based news items. These have been restricted far less than in the UK, for instance (where the regulator forced the BBC's

Figure 8.2: Usage of the Australian Broadcasting Commission's (ABC) broadcast news sources from 2020–2021

Type of news accessing	Platform	Thousands
ABC News on TV	News and current affairs (main channel and ABC NEWS weekly reach)	6,595
	ABC NEWS channel weekly reach	3,912
ABC News Digital	ABC news and current affairs weekly users	12,190
ABC news social	YouTube monthly unique users	12,272
	Facebook monthly unique users	815
	News and current affairs category iview – monthly plays	3,085
	News livestreams on iview – monthly plays	2,702
	YouTube news on-demand – monthly plays	22,809
	YouTube livestream – monthly views	3,593

Source: Compiled by author using data from Australian Government Transparency Portal (2022) Australian Broadcasting Corporation Annual Report 2021. Webpage on 'Audience Reach', News. **https://www.transparency.gov.au/publications/infrastructure-transport-regional-development-and-communications/australian-broadcasting-corporation/australian-broadcasting-corporation-annual-report-2020-21**

Note: The orange rows here show the average number of people reached weekly on average. The white rows show unique users per month. The green rows show individual download/access totals per month, many of which may be repeated accesses from the same people. The ABC app for viewing past ABC programmes is 'iview'.

website to host only text stories that have aired on TV or radio). In line with international trends, ABC audience numbers grew appreciably during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, by 2022, the proportion of survey respondents saying that they trusted the ABC fell to 66 per cent, down from 78 per cent in 2018 (**Reuters Institute, 2022**).

For the commercial terrestrial TV channels (which also operate commercial state and local radio stations), it is unfortunately not feasible to get clear news-only numbers for audience reach, and so we need to use web visits as an acceptable proxy of the relative size of audiences. Figure 8.3 shows total visits in a month in mid-2023 (including many repeat visits, so different from previous unique visitors data) for three main news-specific commercial TV web domains (shown shaded), and for other (more general) whole-channel domains where news-only data has not been available. For comparison, the top row shows the ABC News channel number, which was more than double the reach for Nine News, three times that for 7News, and nearly eight times that for Sky News, the 24-hour news channel.

Figure 8.3: The comparative sizes of TV media website outlets assessed by means of total visits

Rank	Outlet	Total monthly visits (000s)	Location	Type of web domain
1	ABC News (Australia)	70,312	Sydney, Australia	Public corporation news website
2	Nine News Australia	30,820	Sydney, Australia	Private TV channel national news
3	7News	20,601	Sydney, Australia	Private TV channel national news website
4	NITV	12,947	Crows Nest, Australia	Semi-private corporation web domain
5	SBS	12,947	New South Wales, Australia	Semi-private corporation web domain
6	Sky News Australia	8,832	New South Wales, Australia	24 hours news channel website
7	Foxtel	5,978	New South Wales, Australia	Private digital TV channel web domain
8	Channel 9	4,985	Australia Willoughby	Private TV channel national web domain
9	The Seven Network	3,968	Sydney, Australia	Private TV channel national web domain
10	Seven Network	3,968	Australia	Private TV channel national web domain

Source: Compiled by the author from data on Muck Rack (2023) 'Top 10 TV Stations in Australia', 17 June, webpage (no longer available); **similarweb (2023)***; and* **Wikipedia; (2024)**.

Note: The third column shows all monthly visits to each Web domain (including many repeat visits to a site by the same people or organisations), as measured by SimilarWeb in mid-June 2023. In the final column on the right, yellow shading indicates news-specific sites, while white shading indicates a broader website including cultural or entertainment materials as well as news.

The entries in white rows are for whole channel sites (and so not directly comparable) but news accesses were likely a substantial share of the SBS total (partly for its overseas news coverage). Overall, commercial TV has continued to add to the diversity of the media system in ways that have been comparable in scale to the role of the ABC.

For all terrestrial and free-to-air TV services, both private and public, media digitalisation has had a further significant impact on how the public access news. While 36 per cent of people regularly access free-to-air TV, 40 per cent of Australians have increasingly watched TV dramas, films and specialist documentaries (for example, for gardening, cooking or housing improvements) in separate internet subscription channels (like Netflix, Binge, Disney, etc.) or used ABC's free digital platform (**Stock, 2023**; **Lotz and McCutcheon, 2023a and 2023b**). Subscribers to pay-TV have dramatically reduced their use of terrestrial TV. This shift has been particularly rapid because of the commercial channels' heavy reliance for revenues on advertising breaks that lengthen the time needed to watch a film or drama far more than in other liberal democracies (like the UK or France), and also limited public take-up of commercial TV's digital services to one in seven people. The increasing specialisation of viewing habits has especially affected young people, with only a quarter of those under 34 regularly accessing terrestrial TV. The primary consequence for political news has been a large reduction in people serendipitously acquiring news by seeing or hearing it on a general purpose, free-to-air channel (whether ABC or commercial) before or after a drama/film or documentary. It seems likely then that people are increasingly accessing only searched-for news online. And critics argue that in future there is a risk that a substantial section of citizens may stop watching news altogether as they shift only to internet TV. However, compulsory voting has perhaps meant that this danger has been least likely to occur in Australia, and as yet there are few signs of this potential problem taking off.

When asked in the Reuters Institute (**2022**) survey whether they mostly read news or watched it, over three-fifths of Australians surveyed (61 per cent) said that they mainly read about it and only one in eight (12 per cent) that they chiefly watched. Eleven per cent thought it was about the same and 16 per cent did not know (pp.13, 15). This suggests the primacy of newspaper sites plus broadcasters' text webpages. Yet there has also been plenty of evidence of people using diverse news sources in the paragraphs above – for instance, a third of people claimed to have listened to a podcast in the last month, and 18 per cent said that they had accessed news by email.

Overall, the evidence has suggested so far that Australian citizens cultivate a healthy scepticism about what they read, see or hear from conventional media. In the Reuters Institute (**2022**) survey, the proportion saying that they 'trust most news most of the time' was 41 per cent. Yet only 29 per cent thought that news organisations in their market were politically far apart (compared with 41 per cent in the USA and 37 per cent in the UK). Perhaps linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion of people who said that they sometimes or often avoided the news reached 41 per cent in 2022 (up from 29 per cent in 2019). Only 4 per cent of these 'avoider' respondents older than 35 said that they sometimes struggled to understand the news, but this proportion was four times larger among people under 35.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
Australia has retained a conventional media system that has remained pluralistic, thanks to reforms in the late 1980s that separated out the ownership of print media and broadcasting channels; plus the continued bi-partisan regulation of broadcast news, and public funding for the ABC and SBS channels news operations. The partisan allegiances of most newspapers are strong and heavily favour the Liberal-National Coalition at most elections. But state-level partisanship by titles sometimes differs from their federal political allegiance, and even nationally newspaper partisanship may vary over time.	Australia's press and private TV and radio industries are heavily concentrated in the hands of just a few corporations and individuals (see Figures 8.1 and 8.3). Media ownership has been among the most concentrated in any liberal democracy, for decades. However, there has been some evidence that News Corp no longer has the influence on public opinion that it may once have enjoyed (**Tiffen, 2022**).
Earlier pluralistic expectations looked to professionalisation of the media increasing journalistic independence and thus tending to reduce or marginalise the political influence of media owners. Before 2010, there were signs that Australian journalists moved somewhat left, while press outlets stayed mainly right wing (**Joseph and Richards, 2014**: Table 10.4). Similarly, anonymous corporation ownership was at one time expected to displace the personal influence of owners and billionaires.	In practice, Australia has been the archetypal case of repeated (if changing) 'buccaneering' press and media tycoons with strong political views, who have actively sought to shape political and policy coverage to boost parties or causes that they favour. Among many striking examples, Rupert Murdoch was for long the leading case. His influence lasted for decades (**Sabbagh, 2023**) and was strongly attacked by former PM Kevin Rudd and many on Australia's centre-left (see below).
The importance of state politics in Australian federalism, especially for 'bread and butter' issues (like healthcare, education, transport and the environment) has sustained relatively strong regional newspaper media and broadcast news at state level.	A relatively weak 'self-governing' system for the free press has operated to regulate its coverage via the Australian Press Council. The regulation of public and private broadcasters' news at election time has been relatively strict. The ABC board regulates its coverage, and the Australian Communications and Media Authority oversees private broadcasters. Broadcast rules have secured more equal coverage for all parties, albeit often with a bias to the top two parties. However, outside campaign periods, broadcast regulation has tended to weaken. Notably some highly partisan current affairs late-night programmes evading regulation have been hosted by Sky News and others.

As in the USA, a single dominant newspaper has emerged in the very large capital cities of each state, where most people live. However, state-based papers have had some incentives to moderate or sometimes vary their partisan approaches to politics at the state and federal levels, in order to maximise their regional readership and avoid creating an opening for potential rivals in their state.	Major newspapers have developed critically important news websites as reading online has become the dominant form in which people acquire political and policy news. With greater 'real time' immediacy and the ability to generate many versions and variants of stories online, the level of self-policing of their content by newspapers has declined and a greater potential for salient disinformation with partisan and policy consequences has opened up (see Chapter 9 on social media). The online presence of press baron corporations and private broadcasters have been greatly extended in convergent ways, undermining the 1987 rule change supposedly keeping these channels separate.
A world-leading policy intervention by coalition ministers in 2021 was the News Media and Digital Platforms Bargaining Code (see below). It responded to media companies' complaints that they were threatened by the social media platform firms' coverage of news occurring without any payment for the content. The Code targeted the big internet platform companies (like Facebook, Google and X (formerly Twitter)), requiring them to reach an agreement and make some payment to news outlet whose content they ran. After an initial standoff when the companies threatened to withdraw services from Australia, the platform companies agreed to make substantial (but undisclosed) payments to support reporting and revenues in the main Australian newspapers and even news broadcasters.	The payments that platform giants have made under the Code to conventional media outlets were individually negotiated, and the amounts involved in each deal were not made public. It seems likely that smaller, independent media outlets have more difficulty in securing a deal or receiving substantial compensation amounts. By contrast, the existing financial and public dominance of major players have been reinforced.
Australia has no Bill of Rights (among other devices) to safeguard media independence. However, from the early 1990s, the High Court introduced and developed an 'implied freedom to communicate on matters of politics and government' that has provided some protection for the media. In general, however, Australia judges tend to find for the executive whenever conflicts of interest arise with the media, and so the alleged 'freedom' above has not been consistently developed.	Barriers to media fairness and respect for the rights of ordinary citizens have been created by the media corporations' financial ability to initiate and defend legal challenges more easily than ordinary citizens. Large corporations, wealthy individuals and government agencies are the only actors who can realistically use the legal system and courts to secure redress for misreporting or quasi-defamation.
Peer group surveillance of journalism, plus citizen vigilance, have both been extended by the growth of social media (see Chapter 9). In the digital era, misconduct or mis-reporting are both more likely to be quickly identified and called out, with reputational damage for 'serious' journalists. But this does not apply to columnists or journalists working for populist titles.	Instances of journalistic unprofessionalism and harassment of non-public figures in the news recur regularly. Expectations in earlier decades that a generally greater and more specialised professionalism would develop among press journalists over time have not been met.

Future opportunities	Future threats
The ability of Australia's media to surface and run major stories independently of government and corporate power centres has been demonstrated by a range of successful legal defences against efforts to 'chill' investigative journalism. For instance, in June 2023, three newspapers that had run well-evidenced stories accusing a much-honoured army SAS veteran of killing prisoners in Afghanistan years before were vindicated by a judgement in a defamation civil case brought by the soldier but funded by the billionaire chief executive of Nine media. The Albanese government's 2023 launch of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) at the federal level may boost the media's ability to hold politicians and agencies to account for wrongdoing.	Without well-established media rights there always remains potential for the strong executive (in Australian federal government especially) to 'over-react' to media stories critical of government policy in ways that 'chill' journalistic freedom. In 2019, the Australian Federal Police raided and seized papers from the offices of broadcaster ABC and the home of a Sunday paper journalist. Both had published leaked official files on military misconduct and espionage issues. After a ding-dong legal battle in court, the seized files were never returned, but the police did not pursue any prosecutions (see below).
As free-to-air channels' dominance over key programme types (such as drama, film and documentaries) reduces, so the evidence shows that Australians are increasingly seeking out news actively online, rather than relying on channels to structure their access. Compulsory voting may work against any tendency for increased numbers of citizens to avoid political news altogether.	The growth of subscription channels and broadcast media specialisation may reduce citizens' 'synergistic' exposure to political news on terrestrial channels, a trend especially likely among younger people.
There are some signs in the Australian media system of 'shock jocks' or media stars with strong polarising politics. But most broadcast media coverage still counter-balances the fairly conventional partisanship of the major newspapers.	More polarised broadcast media on the USA Fox News model might develop in future as broadcasting and video-casting/podcasting blur together, as with Sky News late night comment shows, which some Liberal politicians have decried as leading their party towards extremist positions (**Guardian, 2023**).

From a democratic point of view most of the key issues around the media's role in politics revolve around the link between key media and corporate centres of power, the media's independence from government interferences, and the apparently ever-closer symbiotic relationships between the media and politicians and parties. I examine each in turn in the sections below.

Media independence and corporate control

Defenders of the free press as critical for maintaining the public accountability of government and the public services received an important boost in June 2023 when a judge dismissed the defamation civil law case brought by former SAS officer Ben Roberts-Smith against two journalists (Nick McKenzie and Chris Masters) and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and *Canberra Times*. In a 2018 story, the journalists claimed that Roberts-Smith had shot dead several Taliban prisoners in Afghanistan during the deployment of Australian troops there in 2003 and 2014, and quoted several eye-witnesses in each case. After a trial lasting 110 days and costing $15.6 million, when SAS members broke their unit's normal vow of silence to testify against Roberts-Smith, the judge found that on the balance of probabilities the allegations were true – that Roberts-Smith was a war criminal, and had in addition bullied troops under his command and lied in court (**Doherty and Visontay, 2023**). The case was a *cause celebre* because Roberts-Smith was undoubtedly a brave soldier who was awarded the VC in 2011, and his medals were displayed at the official Canberra War Memorial **(Drennan, 2023**). He was also the son of an eminent judge, held a key job with Seven Network, and had his case funded in full by Seven Network's billionaire owner Kerry Stokes (as a philanthropic act).

This then was a classic instance where a powerful government official – in this case a much-honoured soldier who was initially defended by the armed forces and even honoured as Australia's 'Father of the Year' in a public poll (**Drennan, 2023**) – was held to account in the public interest by the operations of independent journalists building a story (over several years) and the editors of a free press deciding to run huge risks to publish it, despite the involvement of a powerful media corporation and its billionaire owner. Only diverse private ownership of the media can guarantee this level of autonomy, say defenders of the press. And the involvement of major corporations also ensured that the defending journalists and papers could draw on sufficient resources to contest the substantial costs of the defamation case, let alone damages had any been awarded.

The activities of independent media plus more questioning attitudes by journalists have also played a key role in triggering more diffuse issues, as with a discernible polarisation in government–media relations over gender equality issues in 2021–22. The catalyst was PM Scott Morrison's initially dismissive response to a report by Samantha Maiden (the political editor of News.com.au) about serious allegations of sexual misconduct brought by a former Liberal Party woman staffer (Brittany Higgins) against a colleague. In what proved to be Australia's #MeToo event, Morrison's insensitive remarks were seen by the Canberra lobby journalists as epitomising the Coalition's longstanding propensity for misogyny, which dated back to the poor treatment of former Labor PM Julia Gillard. Later on Morrison also intervened in Liberal candidate pre-selection processes in Sydney's leafy suburbs in ways that alienated the more progressive liberal voters there and further reinforced the misogyny narrative. As Chapter 5 shows, gender equality issues thereafter become one key mobilising theme and source of success for the Teal movement and likely contributed to Morrison's downfall in the 2022 federal election (**Media Watch, 2022a**).

Concentrated media ownership and political influence

However, the wider picture of a few exceptionally wealthy individuals owning virtually all salient press corporations (outlined above and in Figure 8.1) has given rise to a great many

democracy-related issues and concerns. Australia has a long and chequered history of tycoons with right-wing, pro-business political views using press outlets to grow their political influence aggressively and shape public opinion, especially at election times (Papandrea and Tiffen, 2016). Key figures have included Kerry Packer, the press tycoon who built the Channel Nine Network and to retain his press titles sold it to Alan Bond (involved in corruption in Queensland and Western Australia (Barry, 2001)) in 1987. However, by far the most interventionist owner over decades has been Rupert Murdoch via his company News Corporation Australia (hereafter News Corp), which started out from a small Adelaide newspaper. Initially backing the Liberal-National Coalition, he temporarily threw his greatly enlarged media's weight behind Gough Whitlam as Labor leader, but only for a short while before reverting to the right. From the 1970s on Murdoch expanded into the UK and USA but retained strong interests in Australian politics and public affairs.

In 2009, the Labor PM Kevin Rudd accused News Corp and Murdoch of running a 'vendetta' against him. Murdoch (by then a US citizen and so unable to own Australian broadcasters, only newspapers) countered that he was 'over-sensitive'. When the Liberal-National Coalition fared well in the 2013 federal election Murdoch tweeted: 'Aust. election public sick of public sector workers and phony welfare scroungers sucking life out of economy. Other nations to follow in time' (**Guardian, 2013**). Tony Abbott later declared that 'Rupert Murdoch has more impact than any living Australian' (**Chalmers, 2015**). After News Corp was investigated in the UK for hacking celebrities' and politicians' phones and Murdoch had to close the *News of the World* title and sell his UK Sky TV and Sky News channels, criticism of the Murdoch titles mounted on the Australian centre-left, with Rudd again prominent (**Mayne, 2013**). For many it became a fact widely accepted across the Australian political system that News Corp always acted as an arm of the Liberal-National Coalition, especially when they were in government, and as a propaganda machine during elections (**Media Watch, 2022b**).

During the 2019 to 2022 period, the general stance of the Murdoch press of denying climate change, or minimising its extent or impacts, together with columnists giving credence to disinformation about it, sparked renewed controversy over the alleged 'culture of fear' that Murdoch's operations created for opponents. Rudd again claimed: 'We don't have press freedom. Murdoch's journalists are not free journalistic agents. They are tools and a political operation with a fixed ideological and in some cases commercial agenda' (**Simons, 2020**). News Corp's own publicists and other defenders deny that company or Murdoch involvement alters their journalists' stories or editorial lines, and argue that readers can always leave for other sources in the free press market if they are unhappy. But the selection of journalists and columnists has clearly been one that sustains a particular political agenda.

However, News Corp may no longer have the influence on public opinion that it once did, with critics arguing that the company has increasingly produced niche products for niche audiences of 'alienated, older whites, mobilising their resentments over status anxiety' (Tiffen, 2022). News Corp's diminishing market power was reflected in its declining share of advertising revenue as a consequence of the increase in the share of online advertising, which grew from 25 to 53 per cent of revenues between 2012 and 2019 (**Alpha Beta Australia, 2020**; and see Chapter 9). Google and Meta received two-thirds of the income (**ACCC, 2019**). This change impacted on News Corp's and other content providers' ability to generate public interest journalism, and potentially challenged the media's ability to hold the powerful to account. However, the Liberal government mounted something of a rescue effort for the press, as the next paragraphs discuss.

The 2021 News Media and Digital Platforms Bargaining Code

In many countries the media industry has complained for years that their expensively produced content has been appropriated and relayed free of charge by four of the GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft) internet platform companies (the exception being Amazon). Apple negotiated payments to media companies in the late 2010s when it launched Apple News, but the other three firms (plus X [formerly Twitter], TikTok and other smaller social media platforms) held out against contributing. They argued that media outlets gained immeasurably from the free publicity they got from content being reproduced online where millions of readers and viewers could reach it.

Following a long-lasting Australia Competition and Consumer Commission investigation which broadly supported the media outlets' case (**ACCC, 2019**), in 2020 Liberal-National Coalition ministers decided to end the stalemate in negotiations. A bill was introduced to Parliament to make mandatory the application of a News Media and Digital Platforms Bargaining Code (NMBC) that the government had painstakingly negotiated with both sides of the dispute over the previous year. The NMBC required the big internet platform companies (like Facebook, Google and X [formerly Twitter]) to voluntarily negotiate a (non-public) agreement with each of the news outlets whose content they reproduced. If the companies refused to comply then the department would intervene to itself conduct a mandatory arbitration process between the platform companies and media outlets, and to compel payments. This was the first time such a scheme had ever been implemented in any liberal democracy, and the platform companies initially reacted adversely to it, threatening not to comply and instead to withdraw all news services from their Australian sites and customers. In the submission phase for the new legislation 'Google Australia director Mel Silva said the bill was "untenable" and that the company would discontinue access to its search engine within Australia if the NMBC was enacted without changes' (**Wikipedia, 2023a**). As the legislation progressed through Parliament in February 2021, Google changed its mind and negotiated lump sum deals with Seven West Media, Nine Entertainment Co., and News Corp to provide content for the company's new 'News Showcase' feature.

On 17 February 2021, Facebook implemented its threat, cutting out all Australia news from its Facebook sites. Its action triggered widespread domestic and international condemnation of its 'blackmail' stance. The PM, Scott Morrison, declared that: 'Facebook's actions to unfriend Australia, cutting off essential information services on health and emergency services, were as arrogant as they were disappointing' (**Meade, 2021**). The adverse publicity, plus the potential regulatory costs for other Silicon Valley companies if multiple countries turned to direct government regulation to compel payments, led to a speedy reappraisal. The blocking action was called off, and Facebook negotiated voluntary (and undisclosed) private payment agreements with Australian outlets as the NMBC required and resumed news coverage on its sites.

The NMBC's implementation attracted political support across the spectrum and was generally welcomed by companies and journalists, although they argued that the NMBC's funding remained far smaller than the value that platform companies gained from press and broadcast stories (**Treasury, 2022**):

> *More than 30 deals have been reached after the first year of operation, with the number of media companies much higher: NMBC allows collective bargaining for the companies with revenues below 10 million Australian dollars; one of the agreements involved 84 smaller companies, another 24. The total value of the*

> *deals was 200 million Australian dollars. Notable failures include the inability of the Special Broadcasting Service and The Conversation to reach an agreement with Facebook. (**Wikipedia, 2023a**)*

However, critics argue that the scheme effectively reinforces the already strong positions of the established press and TV corporation giants, while smaller, independent media outlets have not secured deals or useful funding. In addition, 'Google and Meta remain highly critical of Australia's NMBC and what they see as an arbitrary requirement to pay well-established commercial news businesses under threat of government designation' (**Flew, 2023a**; **Flew, 2023b**).

The societal roles of mainstream media

The media's influence relevant for democracy has sometimes been too narrowly construed, as just about holding government officials and politicians to account or raising and explaining policy issues. However, there is a vital and wider 'fourth estate' role in holding *all other major institutions* in civil society to account for their actions and policies. And in Australia (as in other liberal democracies like the USA and Britain), there have been numerous, apparently pretty well-founded accusations of past collusion by the press and broadcasters with other social and organisational elites to marginalise or suppress coverage of historic scandals. Cases uncovered only after years of silence include the long history of sexual assaults carried out by clergymen within both the Catholic and Anglican churches, and the 'forced adoption' of many children of unmarried mothers:

> *It seems that religious and welfare bodies agreed that the solution to illegitimate babies was adoption by a married woman who was 'fit' to mother. From the 1950s to the 1970s, these organisations established homes across Australia 'to support and protect young, single pregnant women' where mothers later alleged coercion and mistreatment to get them to surrender their children. (**Gair, 2012**)*

Historic investigations also revealed numerous scandals around Australia's treatment of First Nations peoples well into the 20th century, including the removal of 10 to 33 per cent of Indigenous and mixed-race children from parents for fostering with white families. The number of children involved here possibly reached 70,000. Many of the 500,000 children imported from the UK without their parents and then fostered to Australian families under the 'Home Children' scheme also experienced ill-treatment. This scheme operated throughout most of the first three decades after 1945, and was another example where no media dogs barked for years before the official Australia Senate reports on 'Forgotten Australians' of 2001 and 2004.

Both across several states and at national level also, the available evidence in all of these instances suggests that journalists and editors either avoided investigating or covering potential scandal stories of which they were made aware, in some cases for decades, or backed off from pursuing initial investigations after elite lobbying. Partly also this stance stemmed from fear of costly defamation and libel cases against them (such as the Roberts-Smith example above). But undoubtedly media owners and editors were susceptible to informal coercion from powerful economic or social actors in national or state circles and influenced by an 'elite consensus' that dismissed victims' allegations as unfounded.

However, as the Roberts-Smith defamation case above also illustrates, the current media dynamic has developed towards greater independence and more relatively autonomous journalistic

judgement about what stories about other institutions were worth pursuing in the public interest. In this respect, Australian public law has not always been helpful, as the sensational trial of the Melbourne Catholic Cardinal George Pell on historical sexual assault charges in 2018 illustrated. In 2018, a Victoria state judge issued a suppression order to limit reporting of the case, and in 2019 state prosecutors sent a letter to just short of 100 journalists threatening contempt of court charges. They later filed charges against 36 individual journalists and organisations. A trial in the Victoria Supreme Court started in later 2020 and ended four months later when all the charges against individual journalists were dropped and the outlets involved paid a fine of $1.1 million. Every liberal democracy needs some media controls to safeguard court cases against 'trial by media', since sensationalist reporting can potentially distort the legal process, especially in jury trials. But given the past history of media non-coverage of sexual misbehaviours by Catholic priests and other clergy, the Victoria law officers' reactions seemed heavy-handed.

From a different perspective, the widespread willingness of powerful and activist media to breach the restrictive court order in the Pell case also raises issues around the risks to ordinary citizens and organisations that can arise. Few Australians can confidently afford to risk high legal costs by suing outlets where they are misreported or defamed, and two self-regulation mechanisms are supposed to fill this gap by providing for low-costs complaints to be impartially assessed and outlets forced to justify their reporting and issue retractions for errors. Yet critics argue that both these mechanisms are weak and ineffective, with approaches and attitudes skewed towards the owners and corporate editors of the outlets involved:

> *The Australian Press Council is the accountability body for the newspaper publishers and their online platforms – though not individual journalists. The accountability body for commercial radio and television and their online platforms is the Australian Communications and Media Authority, though once again not for individual journalists or broadcasters.*
>
> *Neither of these bodies has any credibility among journalists. As* [the journalist union] *MEEA said* [in announcing its 2021 withdrawal from both bodies]*, its members are more concerned about getting a going-over on ABC TV's 'Media Watch' program than about anything the formal regulators do. (***Mueller, 2021***)*

Academic critics also argue that as elsewhere, self-regulation efforts run by media organisations themselves have proved remarkably inept and achieved very low public credibility in Australia (Gaber and Tiffin, 2018).

Perhaps surprisingly though, the Australian public's trust in newspapers has not been particularly lower than it has been for broadcast media. Between 2016 and 2018 trust in the different media sectors declined very slightly across the board, for all sources – for radio (from 41 to 38 per cent), TV (from 36 to 32 per cent), print media (from 31 to 29 per cent), and for web-based media (from 26 to 20 per cent) (**Stoker, Evans and Halupka, 2018**, p.40). Yet during the COVID-19 pandemic public trust in the mainstream media improved to the levels shown in Figure 8.4. Overall, two in five Australian respondents said that they trusted the media on COVID-19 information, far below the four-fifths who trusted 'scientists and experts'. Responses were relatively consistent across different generation groups, with younger people trusting mainstream media only a little less than older generations. A noticeable exception to the increase in trust during the pandemic was social media, where trust levels showed continued decline, attributed to controversies over 'fake news' (abundant around COVID-19's origins, treatment and vaccinations) and to data and privacy scandals (see Chapter 9).

Figure 8.4: The percentage (%) of respondents answering 'Strongly agree' or 'Tend to agree' that media sources can be trusted to provide honest and objective information about COVID-19, by generation, in May 2021

Column	Total	Builders	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials	Generation Z
Years born range		*1925–45*	*1945–65*	*1965–79*	*1980–94*	*1995–2203*
Television media	40	45	45	39	36	36
Radio media	39	41	44	41	34	37
Newspaper media	38	40	41	39	36	34
Social media	15	14	11	15	19	14
No. of respondents	*1,184*	*282*	*284*	*303*	*210*	*105*

Source: Re-presented from **Stoker, Evans and Halupka, 2018** *Democracy 2025 Report No. 1: Trust and Democracy in Australia – Democratic Decline and Renewal, Canberra: Democracy 2025/Museum of Australian Democracy. See also (***Evans, Halupka and Stoker, 2018***).*

Note: the question asked was: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?' 'I trust [source] to provide honest and objective information about COVID-19.'

Sample: n=1184, Weighted by age, gender, location.

For comparison: Asked about their trust in 'Scientists and experts', between 78 and 80 per cent in every generation group responded 'Strongly Agree' or 'Tend to Agree'.

In other surveys, public trust in journalists has consistently been low, averaging around 30 per cent of Australians who trust journalists. However, different question wordings can produce different responses. In the World Values Survey, only 18 per cent of Australia respondents said that they had 'a great deal ' or 'quite a lot of confidence in the press', above the UK (on 13), but far below the levels in the USA, France and Italy (all on 30), Sweden (40) or Canada (43) (**Sheppard, McAllister and Makkai, 2018**; World Values Survey, 2018). Gender differences have important effects also, with the majority of female respondents believing sexism to be widespread in the media, an increase attributed to broader cultural awareness of sexism and gender issues.

An alternative insight on how citizens and elites see the media and democracy is covered in our concluding Chapter 28. We show there that surveys of what citizens and political elites liked or disliked about Australian democracy saw the media's roles very differently (see Figures 28.11 and 28.12). Political elite respondents rated a free press as their 4th ranked 'like' in 2016 and as their 10th ranked like in 2019. But in 2019 the elites' top dislike was 'Media misrepresentation (misinformation, pressure)'. By contrast, citizens did not mention a free press in their likes, while their 3rd ranked dislike was that 'The media has too much power'. However, in one area citizens and elites' dislikes did seem to show some concurrence. Elites included as their 3rd ranked dislike in 2019 'The personalisation of politics by the media and decline in media standards', while in 2018 for citizens their 10th ranked dislike was that 'The media focuses too much on personalities and not enough on policy'.

Media freedom and government intervention

In April 2018, Annika Smethurst, a journalist with a strong record of investigative reporting at both the state and federal levels, was working as the political editor of the News Corp title *Sunday Telegraph*, and published 'top secret' emails between the civil service heads of the Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Defence concerning an alleged plan to allow greater surveillance of Australian citizens by the security services. In mid-2019, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) raided Smethurst's home and the Sydney offices of ABC looking for classified intelligence documents and seized files and papers. The action triggered a storm of criticism from the media with News Corp calling it 'a dangerous act of intimidation'. By contrast, the then-PM Scott Morrison made only a weak defence of the need for the police action.

That same week the AFP also raided the offices of ABC News and took away dozens of files relating to a 2017 story that the network had run (and was continuing to work on) about misconduct by the Australian military in Afghanistan (see above), as well as intelligence service spying powers. A second storm around media freedom followed and the ABC's managing director stated that: 'The ABC stands by its journalists, will protect its sources and continue to report without fear or favour on national security and intelligence issues when there is a clear public interest' (**Elfrink, 2019**). Both the warrants used in the raids cited a 1914 law and were fiercely disputed by the media organisations involved. The ABC sued the police to secure the return of the seized documents but their case was dismissed in February 2020. However, two months later the High Court ruled that warrants relied upon by the AFP were invalid and the cases were later dropped by the AFP. Both these cases illustrate that there have been some relatively frequent conflicts of interest between government agencies and politicians and media organisations, with the media normally now taking a pretty robust line to defend their journalists and their ability to protect sources and operate in an independent fashion.

The relationship between the commercial media and politicians and officials was also affected by the fact that the government itself has been one of the biggest sources of advertising revenue (especially in the COVID-19 pandemic). Normally most publicly funded advertising is about matters of public information that are politically neutral and without any salience for partisan politics. A very notable exception occurred in the run up to the May 2019 election when PM Scott Morrison was gearing up to call an election despite his poll ratings lagging slightly behind the Labor party. In addition to 'rorting' (illegitimately channelling) money differentially to key constituencies (see Chapter 13), ministers also spent a great deal of money on government advertising in the newspapers and on commercial terrestrial TV right up to the PM's final announcement of the election date. Ministers claimed nothing untoward here, arguing that the advertisements were just 'neutral' messages about government policies. In fact, they bore an almost uncanny resemblance to the Liberal-National government's 'talking points' and later campaign slogans, and in other liberal democracies (such as the UK) would have been banned accordingly. Critics argued that the heavy flow of money to the media organisations was bound to have dulled the running of critical stories on the topics of the advertisements, contributing to the sports rorts and other scandals only surfacing *after* the election had safely delivered an unexpected win for the Coalition. This problem of public money being spent in ways favouring the incumbent party were not repeated in the run-up to the 2022 federal election, when perhaps civil servants were more careful to insist on the need for impartiality.

The symbiosis between the media and political elite

Scholars of media have long studied a process known as 'mediatisation' by which the press, TV and now online media have 'colonised' or come to dominate a whole range of other social systems, from financial and economic markets, through cultural activities and political processes – imposing on them an increasingly strong 'discipline' about how issues and decisions can be communicated, in what tempos and discourses (Kissas, 2019). Some observers argue that the media system has inter-locked with political and governmental processes, undermining their ability to operate as separate domains. A second symbiosis explanation stresses a continuing separation of the political and journalistic institutionalist logics, but also their growing together from both ends due to the interdependence of politicians and journalists on each other. The final view instead stresses the 'omni-presence' of the media as a factor causing all social actors to adjust how they behave, not least in political life where the central questions are 'How will this play with the media? And with voters?'

When the new Parliament House in Canberra opened in 1988 (replacing the small and cramped older building from the 1920s in the capital's Parliamentary Triangle) it was designed from the outset to co-house multiple functions – the debating chambers; the PM's office, cabinet room and ministers and their office teams in a ministerial wing; party rooms and MPs' and senators' offices; and in a separate section, the offices of the news media – all co-existing within the same mega-building. So, perhaps even more than in other countries, political journalists operate in exceptionally close day-to-day proximity with senior politicians and their staff when Parliament is sitting, and they develop very close relationships and knowledge of each other (van Dalen and van Aelst, 2014). Consequently, in Australian federal politics, and to a lesser degree in state governments and parliaments, there are exceptionally close exchanges – politicians seeking to place or leak information or commentary, and journalists hunting for news angles and story lines ahead of competitors. By contrast, the main federal departments and agencies are located mainly across downtown Canberra and some in Sydney, so that journalist-administration links are much less close. These features of the Canberra village have undoubtedly contributed to the strong general media representation of Australian policy-making in terms that habitually stress the short-term dominance of politicians and partisan interests over the rational analysis of options and administrative feasibility. Because ministers and their private offices mostly live isolated from their departmental offices but cheek by jowl with media reporters the mediatisation of federal politics has been particularly cohesive. Of course, in specialist areas of journalistic expertise, like economics, finance or science reporting, journalistic scrutiny remains tougher and better informed. But within newspapers and TV channels, specialist staff also face strong competition from general or political journalists with their own systems of networks with politicians seeking to 'place' stories.

Many features of how Parliament itself operates reflect this strong influence (see Chapters 11 and 12) – such as the salience of question time in the House of Representatives, prime ministerial dominance and 'gladiatorial' clashes with the opposition leader, or the all-pervasive backdrop image of the Parliament building in many thousands of political press conferences or journalists giving 'packages' of news updates to camera. Media intensity has heightened through the 24-hour news cycle, driven by the ABC and Sky's specialist news channels, bolstered by the development of social media briefings by politicians and staffers and media

commentary. It is argued that 'mediatisation' has contributed to who gets to be selected as an MP or senator, to how politicians interact with all other political players (including government departments and agencies when they are in office), and to the dominance of media management roles in political staffing. The characteristic results alleged are the creation of a shallow, personality-focused political news where the independence of the media has been blurred in a symbiotic political-media system.

In contrast, supporters of the media's current role argue that journalistic professionalism incorporating strong public interest elements has increasingly become well developed, strengthening arguments that the media are well able to defend their autonomy, especially against the classic 'hard' control means of ownership, government legal restrictions and politicians seeking to manipulate coverage – all of which are relatively crude and ineffective in the social media age. Unfortunately recent data on Australian journalists as a profession has been scarce, but they were already 80 per cent graduates in a 2013 study. It also found that 90 per cent of journalists rated a role 'to be a watchdog of government' as 'extremely important', while 80 per cent wanted to report news as fast as possible, and 72 per cent to 'provide analysis of events' (**Joseph and Richards, 2014**). These were far higher levels than those among journalists in almost all other liberal democracies. Yet in 2019 Australia dropped out of the top 20 of the *World Press Freedom Index* compiled by Reporters without Borders, and fell even further to rank 27th by 2023 (**Wikipedia, 2023b**; **Reporters without Borders, 2019**). Of course, rankings and scores of this kind are eminently contestable, but among Anglosphere countries only the USA scored lower.

Conclusion

Conventional news media occupy a critical role in ensuring the vitality of liberal democratic politics, both by generating citizens' interest and involvement in politics and by helping to ensure that politicians and governments act in ways that respect rights, operate fully within the law and sustain democratic principles and citizens' rights. In recent decades, the Australian media has demonstrated a strongly independent capacity to scrutinise not only the political realm but also other important institutions across civil society. However, this has not always been the case with many historical scandals surfacing through serendipity rather than due process. Significant concerns also persist around the domination of the media system by just a few media corporations run by activist tycoons, the political imbalance of press coverage against Labor and the Greens, the aggressive support of climate change denialism in the Murdoch media, and the increasingly symbiotic relationship between politicians and media outlets. The disturbing combination of news by algorithm, declining civic discourse and information being used as a weapon in a hyper-partisan war of ideas have had serious implications for the quality of democratic practice.

In any liberal democracy a delicate balance has to be struck between affording the media the freedoms it requires to perform its civil watchdog role and guaranteeing the public's right to know, and ensuring that it performs its democratic role responsibly. On the government side this requires less 'spin' in political communication and the development of respectful working relationships with the media industry. On the media system side, this requires commitment to the democratic value of a free and responsible media, balancing the concentration of media

ownership through funding public interest journalism with professional ethical requirements of accuracy, fairness, truth-telling, impartiality, and respect for persons. Above all it requires building citizen capacity to address 'truth decay'.

Increasing criticism of media power is especially worrisome given the media's traditional fourth estate role as a check on the power of executive government. Key modern problems revolve around what the Rand Corporation calls 'truth decay', the loss of trust in data, analysis and objective facts in political life (**Kavanagh and Rich, 2018**). As mainstream media have increasingly been read online so many problems of the online environment may transfer to them – including increasing disagreement about evidence and analytical interpretations of facts and data; the blurring of the line between opinion and fact; the burgeoning volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact; and declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information. Ideological polarisation and media fragmentation accentuate these risks and may further channel political discourse into separate partisan ghettoes, creating a risk that 'Echo chambers ringing with false news make democracies ungovernable' (**Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018**, p.5). External cyber-interference by non-democratic countries could compound this problem. Recent Chinese, Iranian and Russian interference in democratic elections was apparently intended not just to favour one candidate over another, but to disseminate mistrust and confusion where voters lose faith in democracy itself (**Guardian, 2019**).

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