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MEDIA COVERAGE

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In accounting for the 2019 federal election result, Opposition leader Bill Shorten extended the blame for his loss beyond his political opponents to the media. He told his party room that powerful vested interests had campaigned against Labor through sections of the media itself and had got what they wanted. Like recent fallen Australian political leaders before him—including Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Julia Gillard—Shorten felt the media, among others, played a part in his political downfall: ‘Obviously, we were up against corporate leviathans, a financial behemoth, spending unprecedented hundreds of millions of dollars advertising, telling lies, spreading fear’ (Osborne 2019). No names were mentioned, but likely in Shorten’s crosshairs were Rupert Murdoch’s daily metropolitan newspapers and pay television station *Sky News Australia*, which repeatedly ran negative stories, panel discussions and headlines describing Shorten as ‘The great divider’ (Rolfe 2019). But Shorten might also have been referring to a number of radio presenters with whom he declined to do interviews during the campaign, including 3AW’s Neil Mitchell in Melbourne and 2GB’s Alan Jones in Sydney, both of whom described Shorten as ‘toxic’ to voters (Osborne 2019). Both are right-of-centre commentators employed by Macquarie Media, in which Nine Entertainment Co. has a dominant share. Nine’s newly acquired financial daily, the *Australian Financial Review*, also urged voters to stay with the Coalition in its election-eve editorial.

But how much do Australia's traditional media—comprising newspapers, radio and television—influence an election outcome through their political coverage? It is a vexed question, particularly in the internet age, when media audiences are fragmented across traditional and digital platforms. It is further complicated by a backdrop of economic decline for traditional media outlets with limited resources and shrinking newsrooms. Since the previous election, changes to cross-media ownership laws in 2017 resulted in further consolidation of Australian media. The reforms enabled television network Nine to take over the Fairfax mastheads and end Fairfax's 177-year name association with the Australian media industry. During the campaign, another round of redundancies also saw Perth's only daily newspaper, the *West Australian*, shed 30 journalism jobs. Funding cuts to the national broadcaster, the ABC, since the 2016 election have also seen job losses across the network. News Corp also shed 55 jobs shortly after the election (Watkins and Dyer 2019).

Yet, notwithstanding this turbulence and transition for the established media, party leaders still perceive mainstream media power as a key factor in their political fortunes. Complicating this is a climate of public distrust towards the media, with Australians increasingly concerned about 'fake news' (62 per cent compared with the global average of 55 per cent) and falling levels of trust in the news media (Fisher et al. 2019: 16–17).

Measuring media effects on voter behaviour is notoriously difficult. Researchers have found many factors can influence voters' responses to campaign coverage—such as voters' level of political engagement, with the 'least engaged' more susceptible to political messaging (Albaek et al. 2014); the importance of the issue (Wlezien 2005); the use of negativity in messaging (Carson et al. 2020); and the type of media platform on which the story is conveyed, with television generally considered the most powerful (Lau and Rovner 2009). Given these complexities, this chapter leaves aside attempts to gauge audience perceptions and media effects. Rather, our aim is to assess traditional media's election coverage outputs, focusing first on front-page newspaper stories—the issues editors prioritise over others—then the political content available on radio and television during the 2019 campaign and, last, a brief word about the campaign on social media.

How the press reported the 2019 election campaign

Traditional media remains a worthy area of study. While more and more Australians are migrating to the digital sphere to get their news, the majority of Australians (57 per cent) still use offline sources as their main source of news (Fisher et al. 2019: 13). We examine newspaper and broadcast media because they remain Australia's largest collective employer of journalists and produce more original news stories than alternative sources. As such, they have the capacity to set the news agenda for other media (intermedia effects), including online and social media (Sikanku 2011). For example, Australia's traditional media outlets occupy seven of the top 10 'most read' Australian digital news sites each month (Pash 2019). Collectively, Australia's press duopoly of Nine and News Corp have about 32 million monthly views. Adding in the ABC's websites, this figure swells to 40 million, meaning that 'traditional' media's online audiences account for more than two-thirds (69 per cent) of the views of the top 10 digital news sites each month (Pash 2019).¹

To assess how Australia's 12 major daily newspapers covered the election, we collected front pages from Monday to Saturday editions during the 37-day campaign.² The population was 377 front pages, accounting for absences during Easter and Anzac Day when some outlets did not publish. Front pages and their election stories were the units of analysis because they provide a sense of indicative coverage, rather than complete coverage of the campaign. They offer a snapshot of the stories that editors believe are of high news value, thus earning a place on the premium page of their newspaper, which is designed to attract readers' attention. These stories are replicated online. Thus, tracking page-one stories provides an overview of the election issues that were highlighted to the public during the campaign and were given attention over other topics. Each front page was given a binary code for the presence or absence of election coverage. If present, an election article was coded for its primary topic and sentiment. If there were more than one election story, the dominant story was selected. Sentiment was judged in terms of being negative, positive

1 The top 10 news sites were (from one to 10): news.com.au, nine.com.au, ABC News websites, smh.com.au, *Daily Mail Australia*, Yahoo!, *The Guardian*, Fairfax Digital Regional Network, *The Age* [Melbourne] and the *Daily Telegraph* [Sydney].

2 We exclude Sunday papers as not all mastheads in the study produced a Sunday edition.

or neutral overall for the political party that featured most prominently in the story.³ The same methodology was used in 2016, thus providing similar data for cautious comparisons.

First—and as found in 2016—federal election campaigns are newsworthy events in Australia. Election stories featured on 69 per cent of eligible front pages (compared with 50 per cent in 2016, which was a longer, eight-week campaign). This finding is consistent with international studies of election coverage (Deacon and Wring 2015: 313). However, there are considerable differences in the frequency of front-page coverage between mastheads and capital cities (see Figure 22.1). While many of the same stories were shared across masthead groups, this occurred across both major newspaper groups but was particularly evident with Nine's papers. A total of 24 of 32 front pages of *The Age* (Melbourne) and the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried the same election story, often using identical headlines.⁴ In a nation that has highly concentrated ownership of its press compared with other democracies, this is problematic. Convergence of news stories across the masthead group is a way of adapting to limited resources following journalist redundancies, but it can limit story diversity and give more weight to some election issues than others. Compared with 2016, story convergence had more than doubled in 2019. In 2016, the carriage of the same stories on the front pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* occurred 11 times (Carson and McNair 2019: 434).

Figure 22.1 shows that Australia's two national newspapers, *The Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review*, along with the capital-city dailies of Melbourne, Sydney and Perth—*The Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *West Australian*, respectively—featured election news on their front pages most days. This was not the case with Darwin's irreverent *NT News* or even, somewhat surprisingly, the daily paper of the nation's capital, *The Canberra Times*.

3 A random selection of 10 per cent of the story population was recoded by an independent researcher, Dr Andrew Gibbons of the University of Texas, Austin. The intercoder reliability was 80 per cent.

4 The dates for which the same or very similar stories were published on the front pages of *The Age* [Melbourne] and the *Sydney Morning Herald* were: 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, 22, 24, 25, 28, 29 and 30 April; 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 17 May and polling day, 18 May.

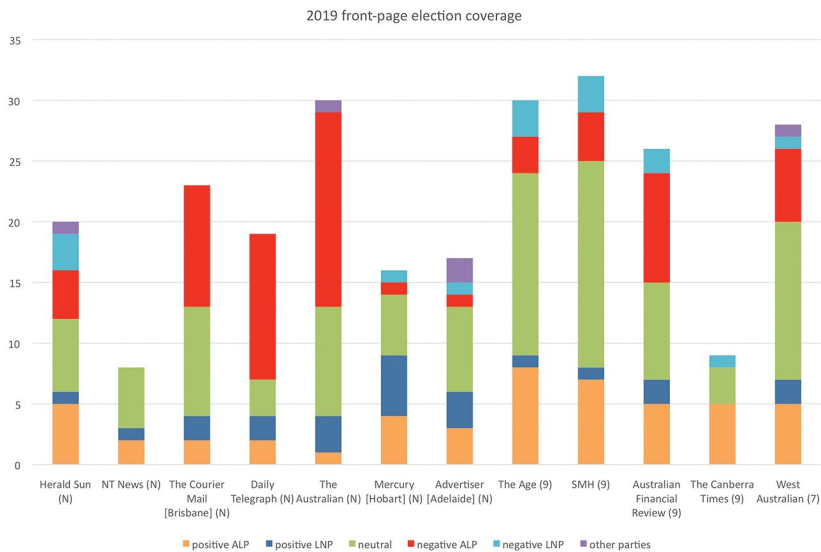


Figure 22.1 2019 election coverage in daily metropolitan Australian newspapers

Notes: No. = 258 election front-page stories; missing data = 12 stories or 2.9% per cent; newspaper owners are in parentheses, ‘N’ = News Corp, ‘9’ = Nine Entertainment Co. and ‘7’ = Seven West Media.

Source: Authors.

We also find that the amount of front-page election coverage increased across the five-and-a-half-week campaign. This is not surprising because the start of the official campaign was interrupted by the Easter holiday and major media stories such as racehorse Winx winning her last race, the Sri Lankan bombings, the arrival of a British royal baby and France’s devastating Notre-Dame Cathedral fire. Also, early voting opened on 29 April, the start of week four of the campaign, suggesting that party messaging intensified to attract maximum media attention to reach voters before casting their ballot sometime during the final weeks (see Figure 22.2).

Tone of coverage

About one-third of election stories were neutral in tone (100 stories, or 38 per cent). However, of the stories that were not neutral in their overall message, more were negative (81 stories) than positive (72 stories)—a feature consistent with US studies (Patterson 2016). Many

more front-page stories focused on the ALP (115 stories) than on the Coalition (38 stories), which might be because Labor was expected to win, although stories about the ALP tended to be negative (66 stories) rather than positive (49 stories) overall (see Figure 22.2).

If we simply compare the negative and the positive stories about the two major parties, the disproportionate front-page coverage given to Labor and its leader, Bill Shorten, becomes clearer. Figure 22.3 compares the negative coverage of the major parties from 2016 with that for 2019 as a percentage of the number of front pages assessed for each campaign.⁵ In percentage terms, hostility towards Labor was almost unchanged from 2016 to 2019 (18 per cent compared with 17 per cent). In fact, the ALP had proportionally more positive page-one stories in 2019 than in 2016's press coverage (13 per cent compared with 3 per cent), when the party achieved a better electoral result.

The stories focused on Labor covered wideranging issues; however, overwhelmingly, the negative coverage focused on the costs of Labor's policies and tax increases that would follow if elected. Other prominent negative stories for Labor targeted the leadership of Shorten, the party's unclear position on the proposed Adani coalmine in Queensland and its plan to scrap franking credits for self-funded retirees who did not pay tax. More negative headlines about Labor came from the Murdoch stable of newspapers than from Nine, with the exception of Nine's *Australian Financial Review*. Conversely, the negative headlines directed at the Coalition came predominantly from the Nine stable of newspapers. However, overall there were fewer negative front pages about the Coalition and, in the case of the first week, there were no negative front-page stories. The page-one topics that were negative for the Coalition concentrated on inadequate costings or details in its policies on climate change, roads, housing and unemployment, and on being behind in the polls.

The positive stories for both major parties were fewer. For Labor, these included positive responses to policies addressing hospital funding, child care, violence against women, lifting wages for the low paid and Labor's lead in the polls. Positive Labor policy stories were more common in the Nine mastheads than in the Murdoch-owned papers and were often syndicated.

5 As 2016 was a longer campaign, the figure is expressed as a proportion of the front pages assessed to make the two election years comparable.

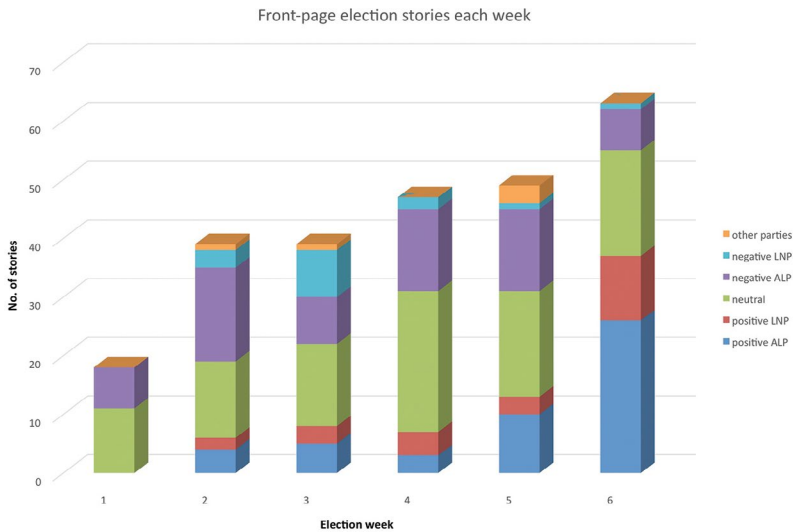


Figure 22.2 Comparing sentiment of stories about parties and their leaders

Notes: No. = 258 front pages with election stories; no. = 107 non-election front pages (not shown here).

Source: Authors.

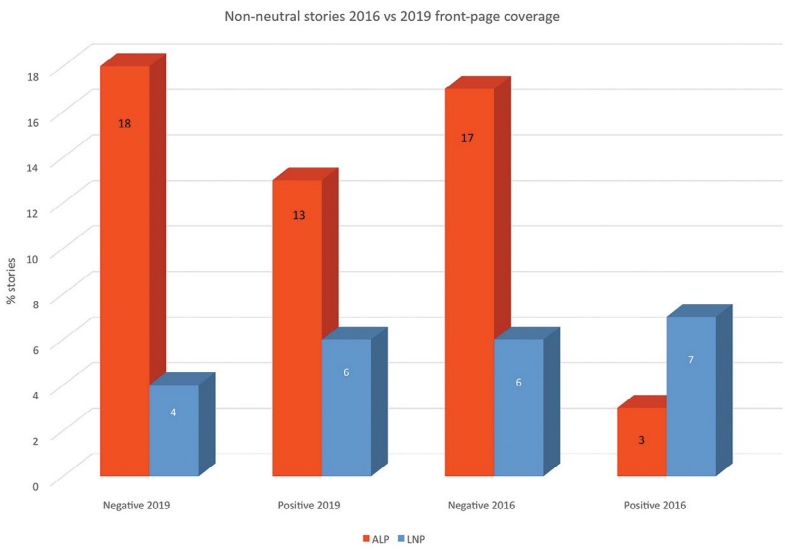


Figure 22.3 Comparing the proportions of stories in the 2016 and 2019 election campaigns that were not neutral in sentiment

Notes: In 2019, no. = 365, missing data = 12 stories; in 2016, no. = 518, missing data = 10 stories.

Source: Authors.

Stories paying tribute to the legacy of former prime minister Bob Hawke, who died days before the final ballot, also increased the proportion of positive Labor stories. These results contradict a perception that coverage of the Labor Party was more often negative, at least in quantitative terms, in the press during the 2019 election campaign than during the previous election.

The press and issue agenda-setting

Turning further attention to the issues that made it to the front pages of Australia's daily newspapers, topics varied from State to State, yet stories most frequently placed on page one covered policies about taxation, the economy, housing, interest rates and concerns over Labor's proposed tax increases and expenditure if elected to office (see Figure 22.4). These economically focused policy areas are often associated more favourably with the Coalition than with Labor—something known as 'issue ownership' (Konstantinidis 2008). Less common on page one were topics of which Labor typically has issue ownership, such as health, education and workers' pay and conditions. From this perspective, the selection of issues by editors that made front-page headlines collectively fitted the Coalition's framing of the election campaign better than Labor's.

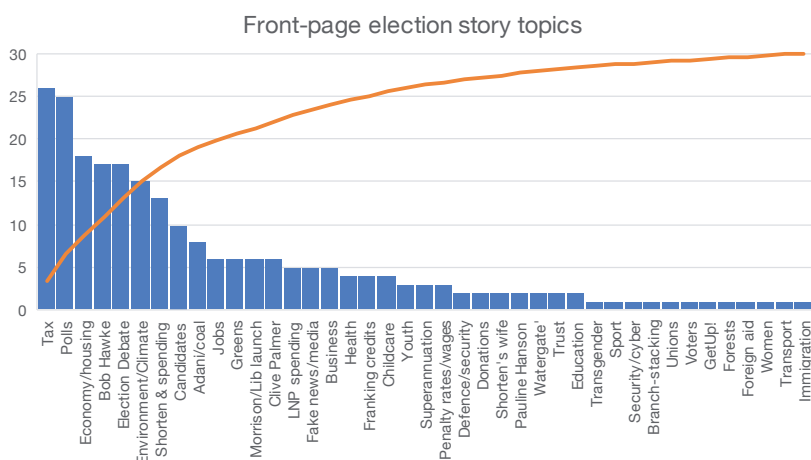


Figure 22.4 Story topics most commonly featured on the front pages of the daily press during the 2019 election campaign

Notes: No. = 39; orange denotes process stories; blue denotes policy-focused topics.

Source: Authors.

The data show that stories about tax and concerns about Labor's spending dominated the front-page coverage in weeks one and two of the campaign, setting up an election narrative. Jobs and penalty rates—issues promoted by Labor—were among the top issues of week three, but this media attention was divided by Clive Palmer's big advertising spend and his role as a possible preference-deal kingmaker. Further, the role of former Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce in signing off on a multimillion-dollar sum of taxpayers' funds as part of a water buyback scheme—dubbed 'Watergate'—also made headlines in the Nine papers and was the subject of a long and much commented on interview with Joyce on the ABC Radio program *RN Drive* on 22 April, in which he denied any wrongdoing in the decision.

The top three election topics that dominated week four's coverage were the first leaders' debate, in Western Australia, which was televised on Channel Seven (12 front-page stories); the environment, including the future of Queensland's controversial Adani coalmine (10 stories); and a number of stories about candidates from both major parties withdrawing after unsavoury content was discovered on their social media sites or caches (four stories). Week five reverted to issues about the economy and related concerns about housing affordability and interest rates. Negative headlines about Labor's plan to scrap franking credits for Australians who did not pay tax, such as self-funded retirees, also featured. The economy again dominated the campaign's final week until Hawke's death overwhelmed the coverage.

Television coverage

While television remains an important source of news, the number of Australians relying on it for election news has declined steadily over time, from 63 per cent in 1969 to 25 per cent in 2016 (Cameron and McAllister 2016: 8). But analysing the reach of any particular medium is complicated by the fact that content is no longer necessarily confined to specific platforms; a little-watched interview segment from a TV program might develop a much larger audience via social media or radio and online platforms provide access to content on demand that are not recorded in ratings results.

These factors notwithstanding, television coverage of the campaign followed a broadly familiar pattern, culminating in election night broadcasts. However, there were some noteworthy features, one of which was the more prominent role played by the free-to-air commercial Network 10 and its coverage of political events through its news–current affairs panel program *The Project*.

Ahead of the announcement of the 18 May election date, the program broadcast an extended and uninterrupted interview in which co-host Waleed Aly challenged Prime Minister Scott Morrison about whether the Liberal Party had a problem with Islamophobia, and pressed him to address a news report from 2011 that said while he was shadow immigration minister, he urged a 2010 Shadow Cabinet meeting ‘to capitalise on the electorate’s growing concerns about “Muslim immigration”, “Muslims in Australia” and the “inability” of Muslim migrants to integrate’ (Remeikis 2019).

The 35-minute interview materialised after Morrison threatened to sue Aly following comments the latter made in a broadcast editorial about the mass murder of 50 Muslim worshippers in Christchurch that also referenced the aforementioned 2011 news report. Both that editorial and the subsequent interview with Morrison reflected a more agenda-setting role for the Network 10 program; as Australian TV veteran and Network 10 consultant on news and current affairs Peter Meakin commented, the interview indicated that the show was more than ‘a court jester sniggering on the sidelines’ (Watkins 2019).

Despite lower ratings in recent years, the program’s particular significance within the news media ecology is that its viewers are predominantly in the 18–49-years age bracket, while its competition on Nine, Seven and the ABC have ageing demographics, with many viewers aged over 60. Moreover, its reach is exponentially extended through social media; Aly’s emotional and personal editorial in response to the shootings in Christchurch drew 427,000 viewers on TV, but on social media it was seen almost 14 million times via the show’s Twitter and Facebook pages alone (Watkins and Dyer 2019).

The Project also led the television coverage of the ‘Watergate’ affair referenced earlier, featuring reports by independent journalist Michael West and the show’s own Hamish McDonald. Yet while described in a program tweet on 5 May as a story ‘that just won’t go away: the murky,

taxpayer-funded water buyback that's raised a lot of questions', it failed to sustain significant traction across the lifespan of the campaign, as the press analysis showed.

As always, TV provided a platform throughout the campaign for contenders to attempt to move beyond standard talking points—though, not surprisingly, these were also amplified ad nauseum—and to land 'gotcha' punches against a number of hapless candidates, most notably, One Nation's Steve Dickson, who resigned in disgrace after *A Current Affair* aired footage filmed by *Al Jazeera* of the Senate candidate 'making derogatory comments and groping a woman in undercover footage filmed in a Washington DC strip club' (Hunter and Crockford 2019).

Meanwhile, one of the most prominent fixtures on the small screen throughout the contest, beginning well before the campaign itself, was UAP founder, Clive Palmer, who eschewed interviews for a saturated advertising blitz, which included as many as 150,000 television ads (McCutcheon 2019). This tactic failed to win him a single seat, but may have helped thwart Labor's ambitions, especially in Queensland.

'Sky News Australia'

With much focus during the campaign on the election coverage of News Corp papers, the performance of the Murdoch-owned *Sky News Australia* was scrutinised elsewhere in the media, and criticised by Labor leaders past and present, especially its 'after dark' line-up, which features mostly right-wing hosts, including Peta Credlin, Andrew Bolt, Chris Kenny, Alan Jones and Paul Murray. Described by some as a 'Foxification' of the pay-TV channel, the line-up has produced an increase in ratings (Lallo 2019). And, while available only as a pay channel in most metropolitan areas, some *Sky News* programming was for the first time during an election campaign available on free-to-air TV in regional areas through the WIN network in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, and Statewide across Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory. Of the markets where TV ratings are available, the nightly reach during the election campaign was just over 60,000 nationally, with the largest monitored audiences in New South Wales and Queensland, and more than half of that total audience was aged over 65 (see Figure 22.5).

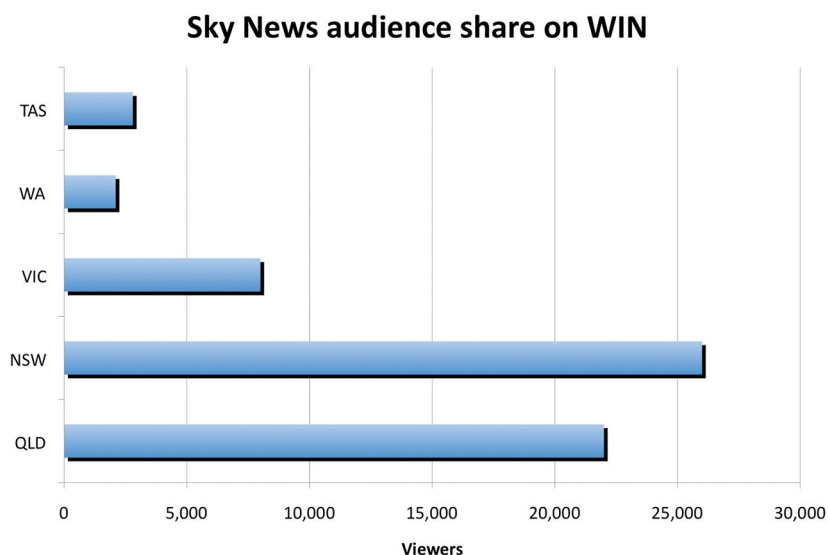


Figure 22.5 Ratings figures for Sky News content on free-to-air television during the 2019 election campaign

Note: South Australia and some smaller regional markets were not monitored by Regional Tam and are thus not included in the graph.

Source: Authors, using Regional Tam ratings figures of average evening reach from 21 April to 18 May 2019.

Analysis conducted by *The New Daily* website of *Sky*'s programming over three consecutive nights found that anti-Labor commentary was seven times more likely to appear on the news service than negative rhetoric about the Coalition. PHON received more than twice as many positive comments as negative, 26 to 11, on *Sky*, while the Greens received not one positive comment and 28 negative comments (Stapleton 2019).

So contentious was the coverage that it became the subject of an on-air exchange on *Sky* itself between Murray and morning host Kieran Gilbert, during which Gilbert said to Murray in response to an apparent swipe from the latter: 'You're not a big fan of Bill Shorten's. He could have orchestrated the second coming and you probably wouldn't have been too positive about it. So that's the starting point isn't it?' (Meade 2019).

The possible impact of *Sky News*'s evening coverage on the election outcome needs to be seen in the context of the station's relatively small, albeit growing, share of the overall television audience; with repeat and

catch-up viewers factored in, the weekly reach of *Paul Murray Live* averages 275,000 viewers, with *The Bolt Report* nearing 240,000 and *Credlin* on almost 200,000 (Lallo 2019).

Whatever the possible influence of *Sky News*, it is important to distinguish between viewership of the station content itself and the audiences that some of its presenters command through other media formats. For instance, Bolt's blog, published via News Corp daily newspaper sites (outside the paywall), is billed as the nation's most read political blog, while Alan Jones's 2GB radio breakfast program—which has a 17.6 per cent share of the Sydney radio audience—is also syndicated to Brisbane's 4BC (Kelly 2019). Jones, whose political influence has long been debated (Salter 2006; McKenzie-Murray 2018), was highly critical of Labor throughout the campaign and predicted a Coalition victory. And, following the election, in reference to the refusal of Shorten to appear on his program, Jones commented that 'no-one's ever won an election boycotting this program' (Jones 2019).

ABC coverage

ABC TV's campaign coverage included standard programming on its main station and more extensive interviews on its *News 24* channel, many of which were conducted between 4 pm and 6 pm by Patricia Karvelas and replayed during her subsequent 6 pm *RN Drive* program on ABC Radio National. The network's *News Breakfast*, 7 pm news and current affairs program, 7.30, featured a steady mix of daily commentary, interviews with politicians and profiles of swing seats, with particular focus on the normally safe seat of Warringah, which former prime minister Tony Abbott lost to Independent and former Olympian Zali Steggall. Even the weekly current affairs program *Four Corners*, which did not broadcast election stories during the campaign, featured a special entitled 'Abbott's End', which was broadcast two days after the poll and chronicled the successful campaign that saw him ousted from the seat he had held for 25 years.

Interviews with politicians and election analysis also featured on the weekly Sunday morning program, *Insiders*, and on the Monday night panel program, *Q&A*. Over the course of the campaign, *Q&A* included an episode focused on Queensland, featuring five political candidates, two standard episodes that included a mix of politicians and other panellists

and a program on which the sole guest was Bill Shorten. Scott Morrison declined an invitation to appear as the sole guest on the program (McMahon 2019).

Throughout the campaign, the ABC positioned its inhouse psephologist Antony Green as its trump card, featuring him extensively in promotions of its election coverage in acknowledgement of his growing stature over a three-decade career. The national broadcaster also provided ongoing public opinion findings from its own Vote Compass survey,⁶ which were a common talking point across its network.

Satirical takes on the election campaign were provided by *The Weekly with Charlie Pickering* and in interstitial sketches from comedians Mark Humphreys and Sammy J. A notable absence from the network's campaign programming in 2019 was the comedy team known as 'The Chaser', whose two-decade relationship with the ABC had included regular election-year programs that were successful in terms of both ratings and awards. The team revealed in late 2018 that the ABC would not be funding them (Moran and Cooper 2018). Also absent from the national broadcaster was the human interest interview-format program *Kitchen Cabinet*, presented by Annabel Crabb, which provided a different kind of engagement with many leading politicians during the 2016 election campaign.

The ABC was briefly an issue in its own right ahead of the 2019 campaign when Prime Minister Morrison eschewed convention by directly appointing Ita Buttrose as new ABC Chair, despite her not having been on the shortlist for the position (Jeffrey and Staff 2019). The appointment of Buttrose followed a period of instability in the corporation following the sacking of former managing director Michelle Guthrie in September 2018, and the subsequent resignation of ABC chair Justin Milne in the wake of allegations of political interference (Meade 2018). Commenting ahead of official confirmation that Buttrose would take up the role, Shorten said that while Buttrose was competent, qualified and 'very respected', the then mooted appointment amounted to 'more political interference' (Koslowski 2019). However, this controversy proved short-lived.

6 Andrea Carson is on the academic advisory panel of Vote Compass.

Election debates

Televised debates between leaders have been a staple of Australian campaigns but have arguably become less important over time. Just 21 per cent of Australians reported watching a debate in 2016—down from 71 per cent in 1993 (Cameron and McAllister 2016: 9). Over time, the debates have also come to be seen as an increasingly unreliable predictor of electoral success, with leaders either dodging them or setting conditions on where and when they are held (Carson 2019).

This held true in 2019. While in general (but by no means unanimous) terms Shorten was seen as the better performer across the three debates, neither leader delivered a decisive blow in any of the encounters. The first debate, broadcast on multiple channels of the Seven network, attracted less than 1 million viewers across metropolitan and regional areas—a far cry from the 3.4 million-strong audience that watched the 2010 campaign leaders' debate between Julia Gilliard and Tony Abbott, which was screened on the three free-to-air networks and the ABC (Craig 2012: 112). The second of the 2019 debates, which screened on *Sky*, attracted fewer than 100,000 viewers—less than 40 per cent of the audience for each of two rugby league matches screened on the pay-TV network on the same night (Dyer 2019)—but produced one of the more memorable exchanges between the two leaders, when Shorten described Morrison as 'a classic space invader' after the Prime Minister appeared to physically close in on him on the stage.

The final debate, hosted by the National Press Club and broadcast on ABC TV and *Sky* in prime time, garnered a respectable 882,000 viewers—but was eclipsed by Seven's reality program *House Rules* (975,000 viewers) (Rigby and Kelly 2019).

Election night coverage

For the first time, all networks covered election night to some extent, though in the case of SBS, coverage commenced after 10 pm, by which time it was already evident that the Coalition was likely to be returned to government. In ratings terms, the ABC dominated, attracting an even larger audience share than for the 2016 election, and averaging 1.34 million viewers nationally through the combined audience of its

main channel and *News 24*. It was well ahead of Nine (597,000), Seven Network (489,000) and Network 10, whose figure of 170,000 was just 3.6 per cent of the free-to-air audience (Burrowes 2019).

It may not have figured in the ratings, but election coverage also featured on community television stations delivered by The Junction, a network of students involved in a reporting project of journalism schools at more than 20 Australian universities. The world-first election programming was broadcast on Melbourne-based community TV station Channel 31 and relayed to Adelaide and Perth as well as via the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia's network of radio stations.

Political messaging on social media

As noted earlier, this was a campaign fragmented across multiple dimensions: time, with school holidays distracting voters and early voting interrupting campaign messaging for some; geography, with different issues gaining traction in different States, such as the Adani coalmine in Queensland; and media platforms, with political messaging shaped by both traditional and social media logics.

Different media logics present obvious resourcing challenges and costs for political parties, which aim to tailor political messaging to different users of social media sites, whether it be Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube or Snapchat. According to Facebook analytics (using the tool CrowdTangle), the official pages of the two major political parties and their leaders attracted 2.29 million user interactions during the official campaign. Interactions included shares, comments and reactions such as 'likes'.

Analysis of these data shows that Labor and Bill Shorten were attracting more interactions than the Coalition before and during the first week of the campaign. However, as Figure 22.6 shows, this quickly reversed by the second week, notwithstanding that Morrison had fewer Facebook followers than Shorten at the outset of the campaign (148,000 versus 235,000). One of the reasons for this change was the increased frequency of postings and strategic use of video by Morrison and the Coalition on Facebook.

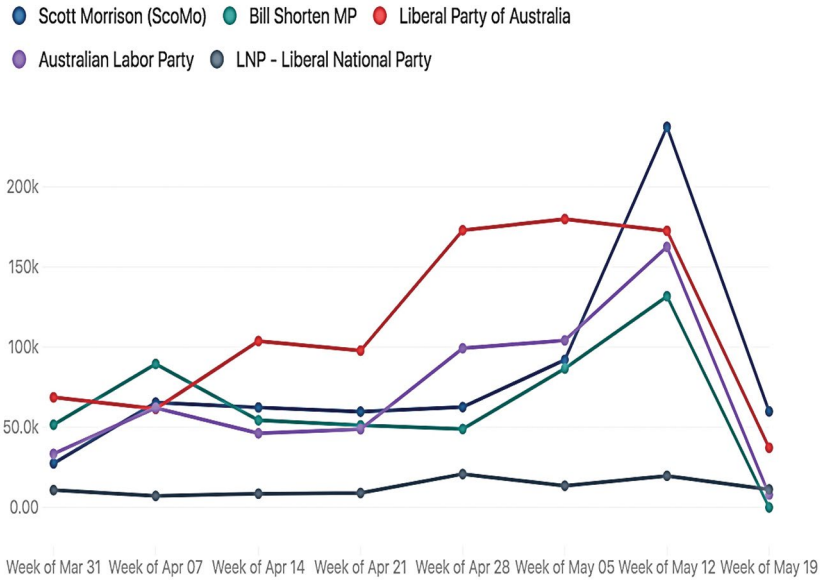


Figure 22.6 The total number of online interactions with the major political parties and their leaders' political communications before and during the 2019 election campaign

Source: Authors, using CrowdTangle data.

An analysis of the types of messages shows that the Liberals' Facebook page posted more content than Labor's (671 versus 435 posts), as was the case with Morrison's page compared with Shorten's (175 versus 165 posts). Morrison's posts were often more personal in nature, including about how Morrison proposed to his wife, Jenny (posted the day after calling the election). The election itself was called by Morrison using a Facebook video post before alerting reporters. In the final week of the campaign, 'ScoMo', as Morrison labels himself on Facebook, posted 30 videos compared with Shorten's 14, garnering 1.4 million views compared with Shorten's 236,000 views. The same pattern occurred between the Liberals' official Facebook page and Labor's. Between the day the election was called and polling day, 173 videos were posted on the Liberals' Facebook page, attracting 7.94 million views compared with Labor's 154 videos, which were viewed 2.77 million times. While these metrics do not include paid online advertising or other social media sites, the Facebook data show that the Liberals reached a larger audience through their strategic online communications during the campaign despite having fewer followers.

Labor was highly critical of some of the online election campaign content—notably, references to the so-called death tax, which appeared following a Seven Network news story on its breakfast program *Sunrise* in July 2018, which, in turn, followed up on a *Daily Telegraph* story speculating about unions wanting to reintroduce an inheritance tax (Holderhead 2018). The Seven Network segment was reposted by Labor's opponents, including Pauline Hanson, along with commentary that Labor would introduce a death tax if elected (Hanson 2018). While the 'death tax' was fake news, it did evolve from mainstream media coverage and was therefore difficult for some viewers to discern as false. As argued elsewhere in this volume, this reinforced a negative campaign message that a vote for Labor meant an increase in taxes.

Conclusion

The political communications of the 2019 campaign were fragmented not just across the traditional media platforms of radio, television and the press, but also across social media sites and paid and free media. They were also interrupted by major news events and holidays such as Easter and Anzac Day. These distractions disrupted news reporting and possibly voters' attention to election news during segments of the campaign. Early voting also saw a record number of Australians (see Chapter 3, this volume) make up their minds before the campaign had concluded. Election coverage also varied between States in story selection and intensity.

This theme of fragmentation brings us back to the plausibility of the claim made by Bill Shorten after the election that the media was implicated in his election defeat, through opponents with deep pockets 'telling lies' and 'spreading fear'.

While it is impossible to refute or defend these claims with precision, the newspaper data presented here show election coverage of Labor was quantitatively no more negative than the press coverage of the 2016 election campaign when Labor won more seats. However, the types of stories that made front-page headlines in 2019 more often amplified issues that the Coalition was promoting in its campaign messaging than those perceived to work more strongly for Labor. The front-page emphasis on tax increases and Labor spending at a time of economic uncertainty for Australians supported the Coalition's campaign narrative. Moreover, the diversity of topics was further compromised by newspaper

stablemates syndicating the same page-one stories. The coverage of Labor on *Sky News*'s programming and its free-to-air broadcasting into regional areas via the WIN network (albeit to a small audience) also reinforced negative messages about Labor.

Whether these media choices were an artefact of the agenda-setting effectiveness of the Coalition or of the media itself, they served to complement the key slogan of the Coalition: 'The Bill Australia can't afford.' Further, the Coalition's tactical use of social media, particularly its use of video posts, saw Morrison and his party attract more viewers to their election stories on Facebook than their political opponents. Social media also provided a platform that enabled third parties and other actors, in addition to the Coalition, to spread a fear campaign falsely claiming that Labor would introduce a 'death tax'. While these different media platforms reach different publics, stories about extra taxes and Labor spending—whether true or not—coalesced to serve the Coalition's key message, giving some credence to Shorten's criticism of election coverage.

As noted in the introduction, however, caution is needed in any estimation of the overall impact media coverage has on voters' choices, particularly with record numbers of Australians voting before the campaign concluded. Examining media content provides some indication of what election issues voters may have encountered in the 2019 campaign, but it does not tell us how they responded to them at the ballot box.

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