

Australia's Media 2004 – A Democratic Audit

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Paper presented to Indonesia-Australia Biannual Symposium,
University of Indonesia,
February 2004

Abstract

Australia is one of about half a dozen countries which had uninterrupted democratic rule for the whole of the twentieth century. The most basic democratic standard for media is well and truly secure in Australia. Australia's journalists are not subject to arbitrary arrest or to state or vigilante violence, and news organisations are not vulnerable to politically motivated closure or persecution. Moreover in being a credible watchdog, providing a large degree of disclosure about the workings of government and in reporting major debates in Australian politics, the media essentially enhances Australian democracy.

However to stop the analysis here is to be much too complacent about emerging issues in the vitality of Australian media and democracy. Two clusters of questions need further consideration:

- Do media markets and structures enhance the democratic role of the media, encouraging penetrating disclosure and diversity of opinion? Or are trends towards oligopoly such as to themselves constitute an unaccountable centre of social power, and to lead to distortions and exclusions? Is the ever increasing emphasis on profit maximization having deleterious effects on the quality of news reporting?
- Are the news media institutionally equipped to keep the major centres of power in society under effective surveillance? Are they able to penetrate important areas of secrecy where government can operate unaccountably? Do the media have the capacity and will to overcome the spin doctoring by those in power?

These questions will be addressed through examining some recent controversies including the issue of weapons of mass destruction. Although such judgements will always be contentious, the Australian media are enforcing democratic standards of accountability through their emphasis on disclosure better than they are enhancing the quality of policy formation through promoting a forum for debate and deliberation.

Introduction

Australia is one of about half a dozen countries which had uninterrupted democratic rule for the whole of the twentieth century. Over time the democratic role of the media has been consolidated. The most basic democratic standard for media is well and truly secure. Australia's journalists are not subject to arbitrary arrest or to state or vigilante violence, and news organisations are not vulnerable to politically motivated closure or persecution. On the whole, the media can assert its prerogatives secure in the knowledge that its independence will not be threatened. Their institutional autonomy is well established and there is a relatively strong professional ethic not overly beholden to pressures of patronage and sectional interests. In many basic ways then, the Australian media enhances Australian democracy.

It should be stressed that the forces which allow a stable democracy such as Australia to keep functioning are quite different from those that bring a workable democracy into being. Producing democracy is much harder work than sustaining it. To a substantial extent, the practice of democracy is self-reinforcing. As time passes, the institutions of democracy become increasingly solid, and structure all participants' actions and expectations, and the rules of the game are taken for granted by all. With each transition in government, with each challenge overcome, the habits of democracy become more ingrained.

The prerogatives and rights of different forces in civil society become more taken for granted, so that they are all but unchallengeable. Although the party in power in Australia can have profound effects on programs and institutions, the vibrant balance between Australian civil society and the state is such that the state will never be able to dominate. Although far from universally responsive to all elements, the media remain a vigorous arena in which civil society forces find expression.

Some have aptly described institutions as the hardware and attitudes as the software of democracy. To continue the metaphor, stable democracies are hard wired to remain democratic.

However to leave the analysis here – simply asserting the securely democratic nature of Australia's media and that on the whole the media enhances Australian democracy – is too complacent. As the exercise of state power evolves, so the media's relationship to it needs to keep developing. Although the achievement of a century of democracy should not be minimized, there are important short-comings in Australian democracy, and some trends are working in ways that weaken as well as strengthen Australian democracy. We will consider these under two broad headings – those to do with media markets, and those to do with the performance of the news media in relation to the challenges of reporting contemporary politics. Before proceeding to explore them, we need to consider the basic relations between media and democratic theory.

Media and Democracy

So far we have been using the term democracy uncritically. At one level it is appropriate and accurate to describe Australia as a democracy, although at another Australia like all other countries falls a long way short of fully realizing democratic ideals.

What defines a democracy? At a minimum it means that the government has always changed according to constitutional processes, and that it has had to face regularly scheduled, fairly conducted, competitive elections in which (close to) all the adult population could vote. Democracies thus meet the criteria of inclusiveness, competitiveness and constitutionality.

These criteria distinguish democratic from authoritarian regimes. They make it much more probable that in the relationship between the state and its citizens there will be a considerable degree of accountability and responsiveness and choice – even though elections are very imperfect vehicles for ensuring such virtues. There is an overwhelming pragmatic case that democracy delivers better government, especially in the long run, than any authoritarian system. In particular, democracies ensure smooth transitions from one government to the next, and allow changes of policy direction in line with broad public preferences. As Winston Churchill said democracy is the worst of all systems of government, except for all the others ever tried.

But democracy is more than a pragmatic set of institutional arrangements. It embodies the highest aspirations for the proper way in which humanity should govern itself. Our thinking about the issues of democracy and media today comes most immediately from the enlightenment ideas and the struggles against state despotism in Europe and America. It is a rich heritage whose ideals still inform struggles against oppression and in favour of freedom of conscience, individual liberty, and struggles for self-determination and democratisation. The aspirations for freedom of speech, and democratic choice and accountability are still the foundation for thinking about issues of freedom of the press.

One strand of these arguments asserted the inviolability of individual rights. Free speech was an affirmation of human reason, of each person's right to decide freely their religious and political beliefs. To deny this right was a crime against the human spirit.¹ A later and equally influential strand, however, sought to justify freedom of speech and freedom of the press on instrumental grounds, asserting its overall social utility. 'Enlightenment theorists in general tended to contrast publicity with the obscurantism of priests, the intrigues of courtiers, and the secret cruelties of tyrants, petty or enthroned.' They believed, as Brandeis later put it, that sunlight was the best disinfectant. Increasingly important was the argument that open criticism and public review increased the capacity of governments to rectify mistakes. They thus introduced 'the historically astonishing principle that public disagreement is a creative force,' and hence the recognition that opposition was an important institution in good government.² The right to dissent became not only good in principle, but also the source of pragmatic benefits, leading to better government and a fuller flowering of social potential.

This has led to important theoretical critiques of the limited extent of democracy in contemporary liberal democratic states. There is a difficult balance here. On the one hand, we should not be niggardly about recognizing the extent and importance of this achievement. By historical and comparative standards, democracy as defined above has delivered more benign government, a better balance between state and citizen, and greater political stability than any other system. Nevertheless neither should we imagine that these are perfect democracies or that the gap between actual and ideal is unimportant, or that democratic freedoms cannot be eroded by practices of executive government.

A central problem with using the Enlightenment democratic tradition is that the ideals were framed in an era when the scale of contemporary institutions was unimagined and unimaginable. The size and scope of the modern state, and hence the individual's ability to relate to it, is qualitatively different from the era when the liberal tradition was being developed. Moreover the period since has seen the emergence of new political institutions – most importantly the domination of politics by strongly organised, disciplined parties which has transformed the workings of parliament and the nature of elections.

One of the greatest challenges facing contemporary democratic states is the declining sense of efficacy among individual citizens, and the perceived lack of opportunities for meaningful participation. The most vital area of democratic theorising from the late 1960s on focussed upon participatory democracy. It was valuable for highlighting the extent to which under our representative democratic institutions the public's role had become a phantom, that the avenues for participation were extremely narrow, that issues of freedom extended into daily life as well as macro-political institutions. However its purist tone is ill-suited to dealing with the messiness and ambiguities of large institutions and the complex interplay of competing interests and ideals. It often reads as a utopian renunciation of the contemporary world, not accepting its bigness and complexity rather than as a guide for reforming institutions.

The rise of mass communication is one of those institutions which make the 'town meeting' images of democracy seem nostalgic and irrelevant. Mass communication is by its nature structured to flow overwhelmingly in one direction. The freedom to speak is untouched, but the ability to be heard becomes extremely problematic. Rhetoric about equal access or an equal ability to participate, any rhetoric which centres primarily upon the capacities and attributes of individuals, will inevitably seem irrelevant in this era of huge institutions.

The media is integral to any conception of democracy. Most basically freedom of expression extends logically into the importance of freedom of the press. But also the capacity for informed choice rests on assumptions about the untrammelled flow of information. For example, the doyen of contemporary democratic theory, Robert Dahl, laid out seven conditions for elections to guarantee substantial popular sovereignty over the polity. The early ones pertained essentially to the integrity and fairness of the electoral process and the presence of rival candidates, while the last one decreed 'voters have a good deal of information about the policies of the candidates'. In his many

penetrating writings about democracy, Dahl does not pursue the adequacy of the information available to voters.³

On the whole, democratic theorists such as Dahl are stronger at considering the implementation rather than the formation of public opinion. 'If you had asked a pioneer democrat where the information was to come from on which the will of the people was to be based, he would have been puzzled by the question. It would have seemed a little as if you had asked him where his life or his soul came from. The will of the people, he almost always assumed, exists at all times'. The centrepiece of democratic theory is that government is the vehicle of the public will, 'that the voice of the people was the voice of God'. To adopt a questioning stance towards the formation of public opinion was like challenging the democratic faith itself: 'the paradox was too great, the stakes too big, their ideal too precious for critical examination'. Communication has been the unexamined assumption in theories of democracy. 'Men took in their facts as they took in their breath' and in any unconstrained process, truth would triumph: "Who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?" (John Milton).⁴

But in such rhetoric there was always a greater clarity about the importance of the ideals than about the institutions which would deliver them. The rhetoric about press freedom was fashioned in the heat of the fight against tyranny. This has given the tradition much of its enriching vision, and has inspired many struggling against oppression. It has also meant that there is a presumption that simply with the removal of despotism, free speech will flourish. The tradition is much stronger on criticising those forces which restrict freedom than prescribing those which enhance it. The result is that the language of rights is elaborated lyrically and at length, while the consideration of the accompanying institutional foundations remains undeveloped.

Similarly the tradition is less good at saying what the content of these media will be. When you read their prescriptions, they sound more like a sociology seminar than they do like the *Daily Telegraph* or the Channel Ten news. Does every manifestation of the independent media aid democracy? To further cite examples from the Sydney media, it may well be that someone such as Alan Jones or many of the stories on *Today Tonight* are the price of democracy – that any attempt to ban such programs would damage democracy – but that is a rather different proposition.

It is to these areas of media institutions that we turn first and then to content.

Media Institutions

Do media markets and structures enhance the democratic role of the media, encouraging penetrating disclosure and diversity of opinion?

‘Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.’

So wrote AJ Liebling, the famous *New Yorker* press critic, who dedicated a volume of his writings ‘to the foundation of a school for publishers, failing which no school of

journalism can have meaning'.⁵ This is the central conundrum about the free press and its democratic role. As the American columnist James Reston wrote, the journalist's duty is to the public, but the public is not the journalist's employer.

Although the media play a pivotal political role, central to our democratic health, their performance of this public role rests to a large degree on them pursuing their private commercial interests. It may well be that this commercial viability, establishing as it does, an independence from the government of the day, is the best single basis for ensuring democratic media performance. Nevertheless if market forces and democratic performance coincide it is fortuitous rather than automatic.

Equating freedom of the press with a property right is particularly problematic in an age of oligopoly, where the major virtues of the free market – responsiveness, openness, dynamism – are not necessarily manifested. It is decades since a new daily newspaper was successfully launched in Australia, and most of the Australian press are in monopoly or semi-monopoly positions. Broadcasting has always been an officially certified oligopoly, preventing newcomers from starting new services. The outstanding feature of the contemporary media is not just its commercial nature, but its sheer size and concentration – and its entanglement with government in shaping its future commercial opportunities.

Monopoly or Diversity: As is well known Australia has among the most concentrated media ownership in the democratic world. The largest press company, Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, accounts for around two thirds of metropolitan daily circulation, while the two largest companies (Murdoch and Fairfax) together account for 90% of that market. To some extent that is counter-balanced by the mixed system in television, where there are two public channels and three commercial channels. However the biggest commercial network is owned by Australia's richest man, Kerry Packer, who has extensive other interests in the media.

This is a dangerous situation. The most obvious danger of concentrated ownership is that the proprietors may use their outlets as vehicles to express partisan interests or promote their commercial interests. The potential is there but has only been occasionally pronounced in contemporary Australian politics. The most infamous political vendetta was between the Murdoch press and the Labor Party, beginning in 1975 and continuing into the early 1980s. Certainly the Murdoch press has shown time and again that it is not a reliable reporter where its own interests are concerned.

Media concentration has given the two largest media corporations – the Packer and Murdoch groups – an extraordinary degree of leverage. This concentration of media ownership, and hence political muscle of the largest media proprietors, has coincided in a collapse of confidence about the purposes and possibility of government action as a tool to produce social benefit. Successive governments have acted in ways that have circumscribed rather than increased media diversity. To put it baldly, there has been a bi-partisan prostitution of media policy. What we have here is not a threat to democracy

stemming from media being too weak, but a bad impact on public policy from some media organisations being too strong.

The deleterious policy impact is most evident in the area of new media. Here a technology that promises abundance of services has developed in a way that has already become effectively a monopoly, with the company Foxtel, jointly owned by Telstra, Murdoch and Packer. The justification for the monopoly comes from the expense of providing the infrastructure, but a government should be ensuring that such a natural monopoly becomes a common carrier, and ensure competition of services available on the technology. The current situation threatens in effect a new feudalism. So far Australian consumers have shown their disapproval with a relatively low take up rate of pay TV.

Nevertheless beyond their own direct commercial interests, and even to some extent here, Australian news organizations are characterized by a relatively strong degree of professionalism. News judgements are overwhelmingly made independently of partisan considerations.

Profit maximisation: The other ways in which economic forces are impinging directly on the quality of our news are somewhat more subtle than ownership structures. Over the last generation, corporations have become more narrowly profit-oriented in their operations. One side of this is a greater marketing orientation, with the increasing use of advertorials and supplements designed primarily to attract advertising, and the concentration on areas which interest the audience rather than any other sense of public importance. No losers on page one, decreed former *Sydney Morning Herald* editor in chief John Alexander.

With the increasing market orientation, the media's dramatic skills have increased more than their forensic ones. The concentration on profits has meant a cost-cutting wherever possible in news gathering, and has seen reductions in expensive areas – areas with high public importance but low profitability – such as international news and investigative reporting. But often when costs are cut, the media will be less able to test the claims of major sources, and less able to devote the investigative effort to penetrating areas of secrecy. There is a real issue here that our media will become better and better at reproducing and disseminating information produced by others. The great changes in media technology, the abundance of channels, the internet, are all improving the means of delivery – not the quality of the content. Moreover if they fragment the audience, each organisation can spend less money on each program produced.

The increasing concentration on profits also has more subtle and pernicious effects than the choice of topics to cover or the rationalisation of news gathering resources. It affects also the style and content of coverage. The operation of market forces means responsiveness to consumers, but in this respect it often means reinforcing audience prejudices. Perhaps this can be seen most clearly in the success of Sydney talk radio kings such as Alan Jones and John Laws. Their programs involve a minimum of investigation and the elevation of opinion. These opinions inevitably flatter their

audiences, and whatever the difficult issue they are discussing, always convey a sense of certainty. There is no room for doubt, or for trade-offs between competing values. Instead there is always a comforting certainty and simplicity.

Is the media institutionally equipped to perform its pivotal role

Are the news media institutionally equipped to keep the major centres of power in society under effective surveillance? Are the media overwhelmed by the manipulative spin doctoring strategies of government? Does the media present a representative diversity of views, or are important streams of opinion excluded?

The starting point for considering these grave questions is to understand that they are only a small part of the media's priorities. Most of the media are more concerned with maximizing audiences, and as such their priorities may differ radically from the most pressing policy problems. In one of the most famous critiques Neil Postman asserted that we are amusing ourselves to death, with the flummery of television news supplanting attention to more serious problems.⁶ Even the fragmentary formats of news presentations amid conflicting claims are apparently cognitively disabling for many. News presents an episodic and fragmentary view of the world. In broadcast news in particular, with its emphasis on speed, brevity and actuality, there is vividness without context, information without accountability, variety without the sense of choice or control.

Above we noted how the profit maximizing attitudes in the media mean that their independent news gathering efforts are static or declining. At the same time, the efforts devoted to manipulating the media have increased enormously. Governments and all political groups have recognized the central importance of affecting the public agenda, and are devoting themselves to achieving their aims with greater professionalism and skill with each passing year. The rise of spin doctors (a term that will celebrate its twentieth anniversary in 2004) is testimony to the intensity of this effort. However indirectly it is also testimony to democratic vitality, evidence that more direct forms of domination are not available to political rulers.

The ability of a government to create the media reality they wish was lampooned in the movie 'Wag the Dog'. The comedy of the movie derives from the absurdity of these successful efforts, but gains its appeal because it taps into a vein of public cynicism about media manipulation. Normally of course, there are a range of competing forces and their efforts neutralise each other, and this allows the media more scope for cross-checking. Very occasionally, however, the government's ability to manipulate appearances at least for a politically crucial time can have the power to shock.

Two cases in Australian politics in recent years have starkly raised the issue of governments' capacity to manipulate the media, and have also demonstrated dramatically the political importance of setting the public agenda. One was the children overboard incident and the elevation of the boat people issue in the lead-up to the 2001 Australian election. The other was the issue of Weapons of Mass Destruction as the justification for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

While there are important issues about the government's deception in the children overboard incident, this was only one moment in what was a much larger victory for the government in determining the battleground on which the election was fought. That election demonstrated more dramatically than any other recent Australian election the importance of agenda setting in affecting political fortunes. In the preceding year the conservative Howard government had suffered a series of setbacks, with Labor winning all state elections contested, scoring one major by-election victory and a large swing in another. Early in 2001, with all opinion polls showing the Opposition well ahead, pundits were all but unanimously writing off the government's chances of winning another term. However in the end, it won with a substantially increased margin. Explanations for this dramatic turnaround include Australia's relatively good economic performance and the government reversing some of its more unpopular decisions. But central to any explanation must be the issue of asylum seekers.

On Sunday August 26 the Norwegian merchant vessel the *Tampa* properly responded to the distress calls of a sinking boatload of asylum seekers, and set out to land at the Australian territory of Christmas Island to offload its extra cargo of 433 people, mainly Afghans and Iraqis. The Australian government refused permission for it to land, saying it had to go back to Indonesia. There then followed a tense stalemate. At one stage Australian SAS troops boarded the boat, and eventually the asylum seekers were transferred to the tiny Pacific Island nation of Nauru. This was the first of several government actions to dramatise the problem of what they called illegal immigrants. Two weeks later the terrible events of September 11 made security concerns far more urgent than they had been at least since the end of the Cold War.

So when the election campaign began in early October, with a continuing parade of both security related and 'illegal immigrant' news stories, the very different political atmosphere had transformed the parties' prospects. The Howard Government vigorously pursued it as a winning electoral agenda. Its advertising quoted the Prime Minister: 'we will decide who comes to this country, and the circumstances under which they come.'

The first agenda victory for the government was the battle for issue priority. The issue of uncontrolled immigration, especially when wedded to national security, overpowered domestic election issues in public salience. Labor secretary Geoff Walsh noted that in the thirty days leading up to the election, front page stories in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* headlined Labor's agenda only twice; 'three covered the Melbourne Cup but over twenty were devoted to asylum seekers, the war against terrorism, anthrax and jihads.'⁷

The second was a victory of issue framing. Instead of treating the story as a human tragedy, the arrivals were successfully defined as a threat. Even though many of them were fleeing from the Taliban regime, they were treated as potential terrorists rather than refugees. They were made to appear unsympathetic aliens – alleged in the most graphic incident, immediately after the election was called, to have thrown children overboard. Moreover, the emphasis was very much on the evils of the 'people smugglers' rather than the desperation of those buying their services. Beyond public opinion, the asylum

seekers issue gave the government initiative and made the opposition reactive and defensive. It united and galvanised those on the conservative side of the political spectrum – winning back those who had defected to the racist splinter party Pauline Hanson's One Nation.

At brief moments during the election campaign, the veracity of the children overboard incident was questioned. But media attempts to pursue the issue were frustrated because there was no public forum where the key witnesses could be questioned, and most of them refused to speak to the media during the election campaign. The government was also able to resist demands for further disclosure because the Labor opposition was putting no pressure on it over the issue, because they were hoping to shift the media focus to domestic issues. After the election, various parliamentary committees probed the issue. The revelations since the election have embarrassed various government figures although not in a politically fatal way.

On a much greater scale the continuing contention over the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq has shown a similar rhythm – with the government able to dominate with its definitions of reality during a politically decisive period, with media and opposition groups gradually establishing a counter view over time. In Australia, Britain and the United States, the claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction was crucial to the political case for war. This was always a controversial claim, although the lack of access to definitively prove the case one way or the other meant it was impossible to resolve.

Once the war began, the focus changed to the immediate military action, and with this being so decisive so quickly, it largely generated favourable coverage for the governments involved. The high point of the political celebration of the military victory was President Bush appearing on the US aircraft carrier, USS Abraham Lincoln, dressed in battle gear, and proclaiming Mission Accomplished. From that point on, however, the war became increasingly controversial again, as casualties and disorder continued at a high level in Iraq, and as the alleged weapons of mass destruction were not found. This continuing failure led to many inquiries into Western decision-making in the lead-up to the war.

The media's role attracted the most acute controversy in Britain. A BBC report on breakfast radio by Andrew Gilligan asserted that the government had 'sexed up' intelligence reports to make the threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction seem more dangerous. The extravagant reaction to the story by the Prime Minister's entourage, especially his main 'spin doctor' Alastair Campbell, led to great pressure all round, which ended tragically with the suicide of the source of the story, the defence scientist, Dr David Kelly. This in turn led to a public inquiry by the judge Lord Hutton. In process this inquiry was a great boon to public disclosure with many witnesses illuminating both the BBC's processes and the inner workings of government. This included the government's determination to humiliate the reporter and the BBC over the report, the leaking of Dr Kelly's name into the press, and the process by which the Intelligence Dossier on Iraq was constructed. Of course, Lord Hutton's report found almost entirely

in favour of the government and against the BBC, leading to the resignations of the BBC Chairman and Managing Director, and likely to have continuing consequences inside the Corporation in the near future. It demonstrates vividly the very high stakes for all concerned that can attend some news reporting.

Ironically the Hutton Report was leaked to the *Sun* newspaper, that act focusing attention back on the news manipulation activities of the government. Moreover its report coincided with the chief American weapons inspector, David Kay, resigning from his post, and saying that he thought there were no weapons of mass destruction to be found, and that at the time of the invasion they didn't exist. There are now inquiries in both Britain and America into the adequacy of the work of the intelligence services, and it is likely that there will be a further such inquiry in Australia.

In 2004, the shape of public controversies – and their ability to politically damage the political leaders who promoted what turned out to be false claims – is still unclear. Politically, the key to the extent of the damage is more likely to be continuing developments in post-Saddam Iraq rather than the historical truth – unless there is a ‘smoking gun’ which proves conclusively that a government leader knowingly lied at the time. Many controversies in the news are like this (although usually not of course of such huge consequence.) The truth remains somewhat murky rather than clearly resolved, with partisans of both sides able to maintain their own beliefs.

Both cases demonstrate how in certain circumstances (for example where the scope for independent observation is low, and information flow can be curtailed) the government has considerable initiative in defining the agenda and making factual claims. They point to the vulnerability of the media, in contrast to the usual emphasis in public commentary asserting its power. News is actually a parasitic institution. It lives off the information other institutions make available. The quality of news is of course dependent on the quality of the news organizations, but less obviously it is also a product of the environment on which it is reporting. Where one source has a monopoly in generating news, there is less scope for the media to cross-check claims, and achieve more penetrating reporting and more pluralistic commentary. However where there are diverse sources in the environment, the media can amplify the debates and differences to enhance democratic processes.

Media manipulation is alive and well, but normally it is a far cry from a monolithic big brother controlling opinion. Although the public stances of political leaders are now the product of carefully calculated strategies, the strategies of political opponents is often mutually puncturing. The media are subject to manipulation but also have their own defences, especially over time. Perfect media manipulation is only an option for those with perfect control of political developments.

Conclusion - Media's democratic performance:

In any comparative or historical perspective, Australia's contemporary media situation is very democratic. Many forces may keep our media more politically conformist than some would like, but it is not the threat that they will be closed down by the government.

The news media's political importance lies firstly in the huge audiences they reach, and the way these audiences typically transcend and cut across other social divisions and political constituencies. The mass media are the first institutions to exist solely for the purpose of communication, with a relative independence from other major social institutions. In the process, even when marked by mediocrity, they have greatly enlarged the scope and possibility of public knowledge about the state and other centres of social power. Like all other major social trends, this has not been a completely unambiguous process. At the same time, the media have often been vehicles of misinformation, the willing accomplice in PR feints by the powerful.

The growth of news has seen the development of a historically novel institution, one devoted to disclosure, and dependent on audience acceptance for its viability. Some have seen its centrality, especially the show business values in broadcasting news, as cheapening political discourse. However, in all media, there are incentives to be responsive to public taste and wants. Indeed, some of the things which high-brow critics dislike about the media are also things they dislike about the public. Audience acceptance is central to the enterprise, and as Anthony Smith observed, credibility is the *sine qua non* of news.

News has enormously enlarged the scope of information available to ordinary citizens. It has done this geographically, so that we receive (erratically) news of affairs happening in all corners of our planet. Equally significant is the massive presence of the media around political institutions. We know far more about our rulers and their policies than was available to the public in any preceding age. These pressures for disclosure have transformed political processes and created tensions surrounding the control and dissemination of information and impressions. It is an important consideration in the formulation of policy and state action. It constrains policy options towards those which are or which appear to be publicly acceptable. It means that policy agendas are not only determined by the demands of vested interests, but that they must also respond to public concerns at least as manifested in the excitements of the media. As this shows, the media's impact upon policy cannot be assumed to be always beneficial, and is often double-edged. In particular broadcasting's increased speed of transmission has brought pressures for immediate accountability, which in turn may change the timing of political responses. However faster decisions are not necessarily better decisions.

The news media are a reactive institution. They reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the political environment in which they are operating. Their accuracy depends upon the integrity of the institutions they are reporting. Their canvassing of debates often reflects the nature of the political controversies and contests around them. In all this, they hopefully enlarge the margins for freedom which increase public accountability and the capacity for informed choice. Overall we might conclude that the huge increase in disclosure because of the news media's activities has aided in ensuring the accountability

of governments, but the media are less effective in aiding the deliberative functions of policy formation and appraisal.⁸

¹ John Keane *The Media and Democracy* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991) p.11f

² Stephen Holmes 'Liberal constraints on private power?: Reflections on the origins and rationale of access regulation' in Judith Lichtenberg (ed) *Democracy and the Mass Media* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990) p.28-31

³ Robert A. Dahl *On Democracy* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000)

⁴ All quotations are from Walter Lippmann *Public Opinion* (Macmillan, New York, 1960, originally published 1920). Quotes are from in order p.317, 259, 258 and 318.

⁵ A. J. Liebling *The Press* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1975) p.35

⁶ Neil Postman *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Heinemann, London, 1985)

⁷ David Marr and Marian Wilkinson *Dark Victory* (Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003) p.275. See also David Solomon (ed) *Howard's Race: Winning the Unwinnable Election* (Harper Collins, Sydney, 2002)

⁸ This chapter draws on two other chapters which I have previously written on the topic of Australian media and democracy: 'The news media and Australian politics' in Boreham, Hall and Stokes (eds) *The Politics of Australian Society* (2nd ed, Pearson Education Australia, Longman, Sydney, 2004) and 'The media and democracy: Reclaiming an intellectual agenda' in Julianne Schultz (ed) *Not just another business. Journalists, Citizens and the Media* (Pluto Press, Sydney, 1994)