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Policy, the Media and You

PART ONE

Welcome to part one of a special two-part Watermark dealing with the media and its relationship to climate change policy. In this edition, we will be focusing predominantly on how we as consumers shape and are shaped by the media, as well as the current media climate in Australia. In part two we will link this information more directly with today's policies on climate change, and how your own consumption of the media can be a powerful tool in creating real change.

What sources of media do you read, watch, or listen to?

What kinds of vested interests might they have?

How could these particular interests be shaping your opinion? Could they be undermining the neutrality of the information?

Inform yourself, educate others, make change.

In the wake of the heated and at times nasty election campaigns of 2013, Australians on all sides of politics are calling for a change in the way we discuss and treat policy issues. Many feel that passion, empathy and intelligent dialogue between politicians, media, and the public are all lacking from the current political climate.

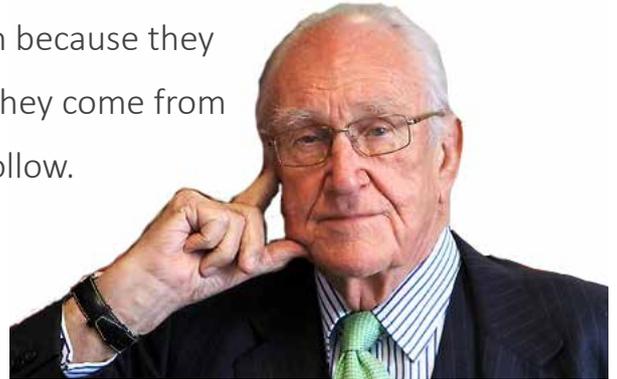
In his book titled *Sideshow: The Dumbing Down of Democracy*, former Australian Labor Party Minister for Finance and Member for Melbourne Lindsay Tanner suggests that the relationship between politics and the media in Australia is due for an overhaul. Tanner believes that disillusionment and disinterest in Australian politics is more widespread than ever. One piece of evidence he uses to demonstrate our lack of enthusiasm is the decision (made during the 2010 election campaign) to postpone a crucial political debate between the two main party leaders so as not to interfere with the scheduling of a televised cookery competition.

Of course, the blame for this disconnect cannot be leveled solely at the public, just as we can't blame politicians or the media alone. We can however start by thinking intelligently about our own responsibilities and rights as voters, taxpayers, and compassionate people. **If we think critically about issues, we will increase the demand for higher levels of journalism and political debate.**



It's possible to appeal to the **better things** in our nature, the things that ought to happen to **make the world a better place**. It is also possible to **play upon our fears and our concerns about the unknown**, people unknown because they come from a different land, they look different and they come from a religion that is different to that which most of us follow.

Now, when you appeal to these things, you're really appealing to the worst part of our nature and not to the best. ”



- Malcolm Fraser, Former Prime Minister of Australia



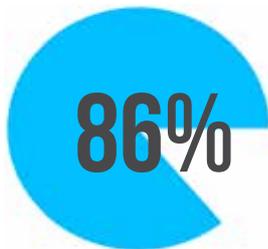
Media surrounds us, but does it inform us?

One of the greatest challenges of our society is to ensure that the public are well-informed and engaged with the important issues. This is becoming a complicated problem in Australia, where media ownership is one of the most concentrated in the democratic world.



Are you only getting one side of the story?

TWO COMPANIES (NEWSCORP AND FAIRFAX) ACCOUNT FOR

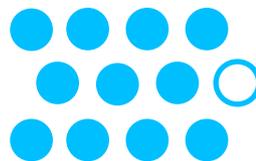


OF NEWSPAPER SALES IN AUSTRALIA.

For the sake of comparison: in the UK, the top two newspaper owners have a 54% share. In the US, the top two have just a 14% share.

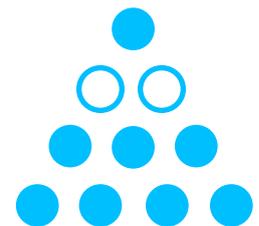
11 OUT OF 12 CAPITAL CITY NEWSPAPERS

(e.g. *The Sydney Morning Herald*)



ARE OWNED BY EITHER NEWSCORP OR FAIRFAX, OF WHICH

NEWSCORP CONTROLS 8.



8 OUT OF 10

AUSTRALIAN ONLINE NEWS SITES ARE OWNED BY ONE OF THESE TWO COMPANIES.

Media ownership means the power to influence public opinion.

We need **diversity** in the media for:

1. Our own decision-making.

A diversity of views and opinions will inform us of the available options - not just in elections, but in everyday discussion of politics. We should be able to make our own decisions based on transparent, clearly-presented facts, not skewed versions of the truth.

2. A fair democratic process.

We use the news to form opinions about the people representing us. If the news source is biased we develop an uninformed opinion, which undermines the basic functions of a democracy.

3. Controlling political influence.

Having a diverse media means that it is less likely that one media mogul will be able to have too much influence over the results of an election, and therefore too much power over politicians.

4. Keeping an eye on politicians and corporations.

By scrutinising their decisions and policies, the media helps keep our politicians honest and acting in the interest of the public. It also monitors the behaviour of big business, ensuring that they act in an ethical and responsible manner towards their employees, shareholders, the public and the environment.

5. A community voice.

A diversity of media means that the media reflects the needs of our community and culture. Smaller media outlets provide an essential local voice, especially for people living in rural areas.



Regardless of who or what a media outlet supports, political coverage that expresses a dramatic bias or promotes a particular party is destructive to a democratic country. Media has the power to manipulate our opinions through strong and emotional language or images and can even deliberately mislead, instead of providing a balanced view of the facts.

What does this have to do with climate change?

To illustrate the way that media and media ownership are linked to policy making, we need only look at the way the issue of climate change is discussed in the Australian media landscape. **In part two of this special edition of Watermark, we will be doing just that.**

Don't forget to follow up with part two, available next week!

Why do we need the ABC and SBS?

They offer news and information **uninfluenced by commercial interests.**

They showcase and **promote the work of creative Australians.**

They provide a **range of content** which often cannot be found on commercial networks.

Some communities rely entirely on the ABC and the SBS for local news and information, like those living in **remote Australia** or people who need news in a language other than English.

Public radio, in particular, is inexpensive to produce and is a highly valuable source of professionally reported news for millions of Australians.

According to a 2013 poll by Essential Polling, The ABC leads as **the nation's most trusted source of news** - closely followed by the SBS.

What should their role and function be?

The ABC has recently faced criticism from the Prime Minister for being “on everyone’s side but Australia’s”, raising questions about the role of public broadcasters and whether or not they will face funding cuts under the current government. Debate about what the ABC and SBS stand for and how they perform is an important part of our political landscape - we are all entitled to a say because we all fund these institutions.

The essential qualities of our national broadcasting services should be that they are **trusted, effective, neutral and available and relevant to all Australians**, and it’s up to us how they should fulfil these criteria. Mr Abbott’s criticism of the ABC is concerning because he risks **confusing the good of the nation with the good of the current government.** The ABC and the SBS must strive to present the truth to the public (even when that truth is unflattering), instead of functioning as a mouthpiece for the ruling party.

What is really in our nation’s best interests is that our national broadcasters are **fearlessly objective** and maintain a **rigorous commitment to the truth.**

REFLECTION

“I would like us all to make a serious commitment to respect and protect creation, to be attentive to every person, to counter the culture of waste and disposable, and to promote a culture of solidarity.”

POPE FRANCIS, WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY 2013.

Watermark is an occasional publication of the Conference of Leaders in Religious Institutes in NSW.

TO-DO LIST

- **Follow** the Social Justice Committee of CLRI (NSW) on Twitter for news and opportunities for action: www.twitter.com/clrinsw
- **Be an active consumer of the media.** This week, try reading a few articles from an Australian news source you wouldn’t usually read. We recommend www.crikey.com.au, www.theconversation.com or www.theguardian.com/au/.
- Make sure to **follow up our story with part two of Watermark**, released next week. As always, both parts will be available at clrinsw.org