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Sending a message: *The Australian*'s reporting of media policy

Abstract

As Australia's only national general newspaper, with an elite 'political class' audience, The Australian *has been at the forefront of newspaper proprietor attempts to influence media policy. This article analyses* The Australian*'s reporting of two key media policy proposals affecting newspapers: the establishment of the Australian Press Council in 1975-76 and the Independent Inquiry into Media and Media Regulation (the Finkelstein inquiry) in 2012-13. While the events were 36 years apart, the paper's stance and rhetoric were remarkably similar. However, its approach to journalism and to providing information to its audience changed in several important respects.*

Newspapers in Australia have historically been viewed as politically and socially powerful however, unlike radio and television broadcasters, newspapers have not faced licensing, content regulation or the type of oversight performed by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) over electronic broadcasters. Historical, technical and cultural reasons lie behind this different approach (see Cunningham, 2010) yet, since the 1940s, there have been proposals to establish accountability mechanisms for scrutinising newspapers and improving standards. When such measures have been proposed, especially proposals involving legislative or statutory systems of accountability, newspaper companies have a tradition of opposing them. This is not unique to Australia. In Britain, newspaper owners have also demonstrated a historical intransigence to accountability mechanisms (Robertson, 1983).

Tom O'Malley and Clive Soley (2000: 51) outlined how, despite public concern about the British press from the 1930s and public support for oversight change, there was 'sustained opposition from proprietors, editors and many politicians [to]… creating a statutory framework for improving standards'. In Australia, we have seen similar sustained and organised newspaper campaigns opposing government proposals to introduce accountability measures. Since its inception in 1964, *The Australian* newspaper has often been at the forefront of such campaigns due to its elite audience and its position as a significant player in inter-elite negotiation.

The Australian's direct audience is relatively small. It has weekday printed sales of around 104,000 (NCA, 2015). Its paywall has largely shut out incidental online traffic (Carson 2015). Its subscriber numbers are not included in its publicly-available sales pitch to advertisers, suggesting they may be nothing to brag about. Its claim that its online website reaches a 'unique audience' of 1.1 million (NCA, 2015) is controversial and, like all claims made by digital publishers using imperfect measures of 'unique' visitors, should be approached with healthy scepticism (Pond, 2013).

However, the size of *The Australian*'s audience has never been as important as its composition. The *Australian*'s audience (especially for the printed version) is skewed towards older, wealthier, university-educated men in professional/managerial occupations (Young, 2011: 44). *The Australian* says its audience includes 'executive influencers' who are informed and inform others (NCA, 2015). The academic literature calls these the 'attentive elite': politically interested but also wealthier and more educated than the general population, they favour broadsheet newspapers (Young, 2011: 42-5). *The Australian* claims its audience is 'Australia's wealthy and powerful' (NCA, 2015). Robert Manne (2011: 5) suggests this has a strong political dimension as it is 'the only newspaper that is read by virtually all members of the… [Australian] political class…politicians, leading public servants, business people and the most politically engaged citizens'.

Aeron Davis (2007) has argued that elite sites of power, such as *The Australian*, require much greater attention because they influence political and policy elites' decision-making. As Davis (2007: 60) notes, 'much elite promotional activity is aimed, not at the mass of consumer-citizens but, rather, at other, rival elites'. In the cases discussed below, *The Australian*'s reporting is strong advocacy, playing out almost as a direct message to politicians, a negotiation between elites within the political class about particular policies.

There are many critics of how *The Australian* uses its influence, particularly on issues affecting Rupert Murdoch's business interests (e.g. Chadwick, 1989: 55, 75). As a well-known critic of the newspaper, Manne (2011: 5, 114) argues *The Australian* has become 'an active player in…politics', with an 'unhealthy' level of influence that 'has offered [Murdoch] the most important means for influencing politics and commerce in [Australia]' (see also Tiffen, 2014; McKnight, 2012.). Connected with these critiques are criticisms that the newspaper has sometimes displayed overt political bias in its reporting, particularly in 1972, 1975 and 2010-13 (see Tiffen, 2014).

While there is debate about how much money *The Australian* loses annually (Chenoweth, 2014), as with other loss-making newspapers owned by Murdoch (such as the

Wall Street Journal and the London *Times*), *The Australian* is designed to 'attract the attention of politicians and other opinion formers whose views around [media regulation] issues… are enormously significant' (Gaber, 2012: 642). *The Australian* campaigned actively against a proposed press council in 1975 and the Finkelstein inquiry and its recommendations for media accountability in 2012-13. Other media outlets and owners were also opposed, however, *The Australian* played a particularly key role in trying to influence media policy due to its audience, its position as a flagship newspaper for the powerful News Corporation group, its mandate as the only general news national newspaper with a strong interest in national politics, and its inter-media agenda-setting role whereby it influences other newspapers' coverage (especially News Corporation newspapers) but also the agenda of commercial radio, television and the ABC (ABA, 2001).

Resistance to media accountability reforms

Similarly to the UK, a press council to oversee newspaper standards had been proposed by Australian journalists since the 1940s but 'was bitterly opposed by newspaper corporations…' until 1976 when the Australian Press Council was established. Press owners finally agreed to establish a council 'largely as a pre-emptive measure' (O'Malley, 1987: 77) because they wanted to head off two bigger potential threats: statutory regulation by government, or the formation of a press council dominated by journalists from the Australian Journalists' Association (AJA).

The first of these options had seemingly been put on the table when the Whitlam Labor Government's Minister for the Media, Dr Moss Cass, released a discussion paper on 8 August 1975 prepared by Henry Rosenbloom (then a 27-year-old adviser to Cass, now publisher of Scribe Publications). The paper 'proposed a *voluntary* press council, with *no government involvement* of any kind at any level' (my italics) but it also listed some of the other 'few options available' worldwide for reforming the press (Rosenbloom, 1978: 92). These included the establishment of a Newspaper Commission; a university research institute to investigate press performance; a royal commission into the media; cross-media ownership restrictions and, most dramatically of all, a system of newspaper licences (*The Australian*, 15 August 1975: 2). These options were originally listed in a 1975 UNESCO report. In Rosenbloom's paper, he commented: 'It would be valuable for the government to investigate these avenues fully' (Rosenbloom, 1978: 92), but Cass (2011) argues that Rosenbloom's paper drew attention to those options for discussion only and insists they 'were not being considered in any way by me or anyone else in the government'.

Relations between newspaper proprietors and the Whitlam government were already tense in August 1975. The government had taken a more interventionist approach to media affairs than its predecessors by establishing a Department of the Media and increasing the powers of the Australian Broadcasting Control Board (ABCB). Within the ALP, there were calls for the government to establish a newspaper commission, hold a Royal Commission into the press and/or introduce cross media ownership limits. Whitlam's government had been beset by a series of scandals in mid-1975 relating to the loans affair and Bridget Griffen-Foley (2003: 215-6) describes the government as 'haemorrhaging' at this point while the media 'was in the grip of a feeding frenzy'.

In this hostile context, the reaction from media outlets in general to the options paper, and not just *The Australian*, was 'violent' and, according to the AJA, included 'deliberate distortion' in reporting (O'Malley 1987: 79). Rosenbloom (1978) notes *The Australian* began on 9 August with an article that was 'well-balanced' with the options reported 'accurately and in perspective'. The next night, its owner Rupert Murdoch was interviewed on Channel 9 and although he severely criticised the options, and especially licensing, in hyperbolic terms, he did not specifically mention the voluntary press council idea, which was the only reform that had actually been proposed.

The next day, 11 August 1975, the coverage shifted. The Murdoch interview was quoted verbatim on page 1 of *The Australian* and there was a strongly-worded editorial headed 'The freedom of the press is under threat'. Demonstrating the perceived influence of *The Australian*, Cass (2011) argued this editorial 'set the pattern for the editorial response…' in other newspapers. Rosenbloom (1978: 95-6) agrees that other papers followed *The Australian*'s lead but also notes that 'newspapers outside the Murdoch group did not seem to understand what they were reporting… [so] They treated Murdoch's attack on [licensing] as an attack on the press council proposal'. This led to some confused (and confusing) articles. Cass put out statements and gave multiple interviews but had trouble convincing newspapers that he was only proposing a voluntary press council.

Putting the more draconian proposals on the table for discussion caused 'panic' (Kirkman, 1996: 11) among the proprietors and created an impetus for them to think about setting up their own press council in order to prevent any other system, outside their control, being introduced. While the proprietors stalled, their hand was eventually forced when the AJA proposed setting up its own council. The Australian Newspapers Council, headed by Ranald Macdonald and representing major publishers except Fairfax (Griffen-Foley 2014), 'caved in' three days later and announced that it would form a press council (O'Malley, 1987:

80). This was five days before the dismissal of the Whitlam government in November 1975 and allegations of media bias during the December 1975 election also played out during negotiations over how the press council would function.

In the press council model agreed to in November/December 1975, proprietors dominated. They provided the funding, had the most representatives and could withdraw at any time. Membership was voluntary, the Press Council's structure meant it had minimal powers to regulate and it was economically vulnerable. The only way it could sanction members was by applying pressure to publish its findings (O'Malley, 1987: 80). The APC commenced in July 1976. Fairfax declined to join until 1982 but did publish adjudications. In 1980, Rupert Murdoch withdrew News Limited from the Council following an unfavourable adjudication (Kirkman, 1996: 12-3) but re-joined in 1986, the same year the AJA withdrew (IIMMR, 2012: 226). Due to the structure of the Australian Press Council, after more than 30 years of operation, a perception of it as ineffective was widely held and there were well-publicised problems with its approach (IIMMR, 2012: 225-44).

In 2012, concern about newspaper accountability came to a head after the Gillard Labor government had already established a Convergence Review to consider how media legislation would deal with the growing 'uncoupling of media content from established delivery mechanisms' (Flew and Swift, 2013), and after the political situation changed dramatically. The UK phone hacking scandal and the Leveson inquiry heightened concerns within the minority Australian government about the reporting of its activities, including a belief that News Corporation newspapers were providing biased coverage aimed at 'regime change' (Murphy, 2010). Greens Senator Bob Brown, referring to 'the hate media', argued for an inquiry into the news media, and Prime Minister Julia Gillard said that News Corporation had 'questions to answer' (Flew and Swift, 2013).

The Independent Inquiry into Media and Media Regulation (the Finkelstein inquiry) had a narrower remit than Senator Brown, and other media critics, had suggested. After six months of hearings, submissions and research, the inquiry reported. Its key recommendation was for the establishment of a News Media Council (NMC) to replace the APC. The NMC would 'set journalistic standards for the news media in consultation with the industry, and handle complaints made by the public when those standards are breached'. The report stated that the NMC 'should have secure funding from government and its decisions made binding, but beyond that government should have no role' (IIMMR, 2012: 8).

As with reporting of the discussion paper in 1975, the press reaction to the Finkelstein recommendations was strong and *The Australian* was at the forefront of the campaign against

any new system of accountability. Similarly to advocates of the press council model in 1975, participants in the Finkelstein inquiry argued their proposals were misrepresented in vitriolic newspaper reporting (Ricketson, 2012; Tiffen, 2012).

Method

This article studies *The Australian*'s reporting of these two key proposed accountability reforms affecting newspapers. In both cases, relations between the Labor government and News Corporation newspapers were hostile and deteriorated. In both cases, there were claims that Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation were seeking 'regime change' and their reporting of events was inflected with strong political bias. In both cases, the opposition Liberal leaders (Malcolm Fraser in 1975 and Tony Abbott in 2012-13) opposed the proposed Labor reforms. However, there were some important contextual differences. The first event, in 1975, was provoked by a discussion paper circulated by a government minister, whereas the other, in 2012-13, related to a formal government inquiry and the government's later ill-fated attempt to legislate certain changes (led by Senator Stephen Conroy in March 2013). To newspaper owners, the second case was a more realistic threat.

The Finkelstein inquiry was also reported over a much longer time period. The Finkelstein inquiry was announced in September 2011, reported in February 2012, and then Conroy's attempts at reform occurred in March 2013 (attempts that even Gillard (2014: 459) described as 'poorly handled'). From *The Australian*'s point of view, the Finkelstein inquiry was a tangible threat that culminated in a (failed) attempt by the government to legislate inappropriate media reforms. By contrast, the key period of reporting around the 1975 'options' paper happened over eight days. It appeared to be more of a misunderstanding and negotiation (perhaps a deliberately manufactured one). On the seventh day, *The Australian* published a clarification that 'Cass wants council, not licensed press' (15 August 1975: 2). And, only three months after the uproar, the newly established Press Council was announced with News Limited (as News Corporation was then known) participating. There was no government attempt to legislate reform.

Despite these important contextual differences, the two events brought up very similar issues around press freedom, media accountability, media diversity, press power and the impact of concentrated media ownership. They provide an opportunity to examine how the newspaper understood – and conveyed to its readers – these complex issues. Given the self-interest involved, the cases are also an opportunity to test *The Australian*'s longstanding claim 'to inform Australians' by reporting 'without favour' (Day, 2014: 16).

I collected editorials and news reports from *The Australian* for both cases and performed quantitative content analysis, and qualitative inductive textual analysis, on the 116 texts (Table 1). Content analysis involved counting a number of different variables including stylistic features, sources and quotations. Qualitative analysis was performed inductively through a careful reading of the texts and analysis of their language, images, metaphors and placement, and through open coding to identify themes and discursive strategies.

Table 1 – Sample of reporting of two case studies in *The Australian*: 9-15 August 1975 and 1 January 2012-1 June 2013

Case	Editorials	Opinion pieces	News articles	Total number of articles
1975 press council proposal	1	1	12	**14**
2012-13 Finkelstein inquiry	13	26	63	**102**

Source: Author.

Negativity, opinion and 'catastrophisation'

In 1975, 29 per cent of articles in *The Australian* on Cass's options paper/press council proposal were negative, 29 per cent were positive and 42 percent were neutral/mixed. By contrast, in 2012-13, a very high 83 per cent of articles were negative about the Finkelstein inquiry, and only 2 per cent were positive (15 per cent were neutral/mixed). Given the Finkelstein case was interpreted as posing the greater threat, heightened negativity might be expected but the extent of the difference is quite pronounced.

Table 1 also highlights one of the other key differences. As Rodney Tiffen (2014: 154) has noted, the 'trend is towards more opinionated and one-sided journalism', and 'not only in the Murdoch press'. Categorising editorials and opinion pieces jointly as 'opinion', 38 per cent of articles in 2012-13 were opinion compared to only 14 per cent in 1975. Opinion was used as a key means of conveying strong opposition to the Finkelstein inquiry.

While the coverage was far more negative in 2012-13, the rhetorical strategies used to explain – and oppose – the two media accountability proposals were remarkably similar. In 1975, the notion of licensing newspapers was described as 'sinister', 'horrifying', 'tricks' [used by] dictators', 'control of the press', 'throttling of the press', 'the prelude to the disappearance of democracy', the government 'would like to see the press gagged, like 'Russia… India… where pressmen have been locked up'. These were all quotes from Rupert Murdoch's television interview published on the front-page of *The Australian* on 11 August 1975. Other articles in the newspaper likened it to 'Dr Goebbels Nazi Germany', 'dictatorship', 'government by blackmail', 'a neo-fascist-left approach', 'sinister' and 'on the slippery slope toward an ordered State'.

In 2012-13, the Finkelstein inquiry's proposals were similarly described as 'sinister', 'a democratic and totalitarian disease', 'deeply flawed', 'totalitarian', 'authoritarian', a 'curb on press freedom', 'journalists can be fined and even jailed, with no appeal rights', 'censorship', 'Stalinist', a 'deliberate act of sabotage of free speech', and 'a campaign against a free press'. Such representations were not confined to *The Australian*. While News Corporation newspapers tended to be the most strident, other newspaper groups – including rival Fairfax Media, publisher of the *Sydney Morning Herald* – sometimes used the same language and concepts. Where News Corporation newspapers described a nightmare scenario of a government-controlled press, a 'muzzled' media under 'attack', Fairfax Media's *Australian Financial Review* (*AFR*) headlined an article 'Labor plan to control the media' (3 March 2012:1). An opinion piece, headlined 'Finkelstein report threatens to muzzle free speech', warned of 'Big Brother' and 'state interference' (*AFR*, 7 March 2012: 63). An *Age* editorial called elements of Finkelstein's proposals 'tantamount to licensing of news media…foster[ing] a mentality inclined to censorship' (6 March 2012: 12).

The discursive strategies were similar in 1975 and 2012-13 but they were also remarkably similar to how British newspapers reported the Leveson inquiry. Ryan J. Thomas and Teri Finneman (2014: 177) observed a 'strategy of catastrophization' in British newspapers' responses, with Leveson's proposals reported by invoking 'nightmarish imagery of a press system governed by state diktat', as a threat to democracy by using 'dramatic language', frequently invoking 'the notion of being "shackled"', and playing up a 'rhetorical fallacy' that the proposed changes were the beginning of a 'slippery slope' down which democracy would disappear. Such reporting 'play[ed] down the complexity of the situation' to prompt 'its readership to settle for the least worst alternative – namely, the status quo' (Thomas and Finneman, 2014: 177-8).

Information

In 1975, *The Australian*'s 11 August editorial and the transcript of Murdoch's television interview were strongly opinionated and fairly dramatic. But other articles were quite reasoned and balanced and there was a determined effort to explain key information about the proposals to readers. Rosenbloom (1978: 97) notes 'the other papers did not bother'. *The Australian* published a text box explaining the finer details of the 'working model' of a press council (11 August 1975: 4). One article compared international press councils. Many articles quoted Cass or Rosenbloom, sometimes at length.

The Australian in 1975 was also responsive when Cass explained and defended himself, publishing his explanations quickly and prominently, even to the extent of using Cass's own words, critical of the media reporting, in its headlines such as: 'Press barons twist my idea-Cass' and 'Proprietors' reactions "bewildering"' (next to Murdoch's critique). *The Australian* also published Cass's defence that the list of options was based upon UNESCO reports. On 15 August, The *Australian* set the record straight with a headline that 'Cass wants council, not licensed press'.

By contrast, in 2012-13, there was surprisingly little detail provided about what the Finkelstein inquiry's 468 page report actually contained. This was noted by those involved, including Ricketson (2012) and Tiffen: 'While the commentary has been extravagant, the actual reporting of the report's contents was not extensive' (Tiffen 2012). Jonathan Holmes (2013: 9) argued similarly that 'Not one prominent media outlet bothered actually to outline, dispassionately, the findings and the arguments of the Finkelstein report'. The very same criticism was made of British newspaper reporting of the Leveson inquiry, with Barnett (2013: 355) asserting that anyone reading 'would have had little understanding of [Leveson's] proposals or their underlying rationale'.

Balance and sources

Unlike in 1975, there was minimal balance in reporting in 2012-13. News Corporation had a strong corporate view of the Finkelstein proposals and used much space to promote that view, including extensively quoting its own managers and executives. While Rupert Murdoch had been given a page one spot to argue against licensing in 1975, in 2012-13, *The Australian* published a speech as an opinion piece by News chief executive Kim Williams. Williams was also quoted in 18 of the other 102 articles, sometimes in two articles on the one day. *The Australian*'s coverage also quoted News Limited group editorial director Campbell Reid, *The Australian*'s editor-in-chief Chris Mitchell (twice), 'a News Limited spokesman', a

'spokesman for News Limited' (unnamed, quoted twice), a 'media executive' (not named), 'industry figures' (not named), as well as News Corp affiliates' Foxtel chief executive Richard Freudenstein (four times) and Sky News Australia chief executive Angelos Frangopolous (twice). Michael Reede, partner at law firm Allen & Overy, was also quoted twice. Although Allen & Overy represents News Corporation, that was not disclosed in the articles.

Other media executives were also quoted prominently, including from West Australian Newspapers, the Ten Network and APN News & Media, along with other opponents of the proposals including key conservative commentators such as John Roskam, cited as 'head of freedom-loving think tank the Institute of Public Affairs' (Albrechtsen 2012), Sydney Institute Director Gerard Henderson and Keith Windschuttle (who also had two opinion pieces).

While Cass had been given an opportunity to defend himself and clarify his proposal in 1975, Senator Stephen Conroy, the architect of the inquiry and the minister responsible for media in 2012-13, was quoted directly in only six of the 102 articles (a third of those quoting News chief Kim Williams). It was remarkable how rarely and briefly Conroy was quoted. His opponent shadow minister, Malcolm Turnbull, appeared in twice as many articles (12) and *The Australian* published a full opinion piece from Turnbull as well as opinion pieces by Opposition leader Tony Abbott and Liberal Senator George Brandis. All of these opposed the proposals. On the Labor side, only one opinion piece was published – by Labor MP Craig Emerson. It was one of only two positive articles about Finkelstein in the 102 articles studied.

The representation of News Corporation's corporate view on Finkelstein was unabashed. In 1975, 70 per cent of articles quoted the author of the policy proposal (either Cass and/or Rosenbloom). This at least allowed readers to hear a rationale for why the proposals were being recommended. In 2012-13, only 3 per cent of *The Australian*'s articles quoted Finkelstein or his report directly, whereas 31 per cent quoted News Corp spokespeople.

Attack

The Australian did not just represent the Finkelstein proposal as anti-democratic and state-controlled gagging of a free press. This was, for *The Australian*, personal. It claimed the proposals were a Labor government 'stitch up to settle scores in the media' and 'Conroy's… revenge' (16 September 2011). An editorial on 30 June 2012 declared that: 'For holding a

mirror up to government failures, the media has incurred the wrath of Labor and Greens politicians… they are eager to "shoot the messengers"'.

Compared to the reporting of Cass in 1975, the Finkelstein proposal's architects and supporters were represented in a disrespectful way. Conroy was described as a 'rank opportunist' (1 May 2012), one of 'the worst ministers' (13 March 2013) and 'shameless' (Paterson 2013: 12), while Finkelstein was often disrespectfully referred to 'The Fink'. An anonymous lawyer was quoted in one article as saying that Finkelstein 'has a bit of an ego…he seems to like publicity' (Day, 2013). There was an implication that he was a 'show pony' out of his depth, and photographs selected to represent Conroy and Finkelstein were unflattering. For example, one showed Conroy, mouth grimacing, wearing a t-shirt playing sport and one showed Finkelstein with mouth open and eyebrows raised comically. This is a tactic which has been observed in News Corporation's reporting of politicians in the UK that it considers opposed to its interests including Tom Watson and Gordon Brown.

In opposing the Finkelstein report, academics who had been associated with the inquiry, and even the study of journalism itself, also came under attack. The Finkelstein inquiry was described as 'an academic wank' (Day, 2012). Cameron Stewart's (2012) piece, heavily quoting his editor-in-chief and editor at *The Australian*, was particularly critical of the role of academics. In reporting Finkelstein, Denis Cryle (2012: 44) described 'a concerted campaign by *The Australian* against its academic critics'. It seemed both a red herring to divert attention from key issues surrounding media reform and also fully consistent with the 'sheer ruthlessness that Murdoch's papers have displayed against those they regard as their political enemies' (Gaber, 2012: 643).

The Australian's reporting influenced not only its stablemate newspapers but also rival Fairfax newspaper the *AFR*, a paper with an even more elite audience (Young, 2011: 44). *AFR* articles also quoted News Corporation chief Kim Williams approvingly and, following *The Australian*'s lead, some *AFR* articles represented the inquiry as being motivated by political malice, and as influenced by a 'gaggle of legal and left-wing media academics' (e.g. 'Media inquiry a case of bad regulation', *AFR*, 5 March 2012: 54; see also 'Media academics out of touch', *AFR*, 21 March 2012: 63).

Attitude to a press council

In 1975, *The Australian* argued strongly against a press council, arguing it 'would be only a façade' (11 August 1975:6). The paper claimed that 'by encouraging people to complain to a Press Council Dr Cass would merely start a new blood sport and institutionalise a process

that is already well conducted. This newspaper's Letters section on Saturday is an example' (editorial, 11 August 1975: 6). But News Limited participated in the Australian Press Council from when it was established in 1976 although, as noted, it withdrew between 1980-87.

By 2012, when faced again with the more concerning spectre of statutory regulation via Finkelstein, News Corporation again demonstrated flexibility in the face of historical intransigence and became one of the Press Council's key defenders: 'News is committed to a beefed-up, better funded press council to… manage and enforce standards of conduct for the industry' (Leys 2012). This was not to last. By August 2014, News Corporation was again dissatisfied with the 'beefed-up' Council after it was critical of News Corporation reporting. In August-September 2014, 16 articles in *The Australian* variously described the Press Council or its chairman, Julian Disney, as venturing too far 'from its brief', 'off the rails', 'Australia's chief censor', 'captive', 'out of touch' and 'Finkelstein by stealth'.

Conclusion: *The Australian* and media policy

In both 1975 and 2012-13, *The Australian* played the role of a tool of inter-elite negotiation and political influence, providing an example of how newspaper owners and executives use news media to have a political impact and to influence public policy outcomes. In both media policy case studies, there was a very similar framing of accountability proposals as media censorship, a 'curb on free speech' and a step to dictatorship. This was also remarkably similar to the discursive strategies Thomas and Finneman (2014) observed in British newspaper reporting of the Leveson inquiry. While this is a consistent discursive strategy that newspaper owners have used over time and across different countries to head off accountability measures, there were striking differences in the way this strategy was executed in *The Australian*'s reporting style in 2012-13 compared to 1975.

In 1975, *The Australian* was widely considered to be deeply biased against the Whitlam Labor government to the extent that its own journalists went on strike during the election campaign (Tiffen, 2014: 114-6). However, *The Australian*'s 1975 coverage of the press council proposal was far more balanced than its reporting of the 2012-13 Finkelstein inquiry. This reflected the newspaper's evolution, by the 2010s, into an outlet renowned for using its news pages to campaign for editorial and policy goals (Manne, 2011; see also various quotes cited in Young 2011: 243-4; Tiffen, 2014: 152-4). In 1975, information about the detail of the proposed policy, and opponent views explaining or defending it, had been given far more space. By contrast, *The Australian*'s coverage of the Finkelstein inquiry in 2012-13 was marked by extreme self-reference and representation of its owner's views.

Coverage was not only less informative and less balanced, but also more opinionated, personal and aggressive.

There is always a dilemma for an organisation when it reports on matters affecting its own interests but, even if objectionable to the newspaper, its staff and owners, at the very least, the proposals in the Finkelstein inquiry should have been reported in such a way that *The Australian*'s audience could understand what was being proposed. Even during Murdoch's attempts to take over the Herald and Weekly Times in 1979 and 1987, *The Australian*'s coverage, although self-interested and controversial in some respects, was still notable for what Cryle (2008: 289) characterised as its 'depth and breadth'.

Information and analysis are crucial to elite news audiences. Back in 1975 when Rupert Murdoch was interviewed on Channel 9 and was disputing the need for a press council, he said: 'The only test of community satisfaction is whether a newspaper can produce a viable circulation'. In 2013, *The Australian* published an editorial which had a similar refrain that: 'Australians will purchase… [newspapers] or they won't. That is how they advocate their own public interest media… people choose to engage, agree, complain or cancel their subscriptions…. It is known as the free market. This newspaper is existentially reliant on it and philosophically committed to it' (*The Australian*, 19 March 2013:15). However, from what we know, *The Australian* would not exist if it were based purely on the free market standards it espouses.

The Australian has confirmed that it posted a loss of $27 million in 2012-13 (Davidson 2015) and that it has not been profitable since the GFC in 2008 (Mumbrella 2014; see also Chenoweth 2014). Mark Day, *The Australian*'s first publisher, has said *The Australian* made its first (modest) profit in 1985—twenty-one years after it was launched—which grew to a peak of $20 million in the late 1990s. Along with other newspapers, it then saw key 'revenue streams migrate quickly to the internet around the millennium' (TNW 2014). If *The Australian*'s purpose is not about success in a free market, these two case studies suggest it may be about its ability to act as a tool of political influence. However, if that is the case, the newspaper is speaking to a decreasing audience in an increasingly strident and self-interested tone, and media accountability policies may therefore be the least of its concerns. *The Australian* is not a tabloid. It has an educated readership that it leads to expect fair reporting, detailed information and translation of complex material into comprehensible information. It promises its readers the 'best news, insight and analysis' (*The Australian,* 2015). It was launched in 1964 with 'Rupert Murdoch promising it would be a newspaper of impartial information…' and *The Australian* claimed in 2014 that it 'continues to deliver on

this promise' (NCA 2014). But *The Australian*'s reporting of the Finkelstein inquiry compared to its reporting of the press council in 1975 shows that it found it increasingly difficult in the 2010s to deliver either information or balance in a case where it had a commercial self-interest. Rather than government intervention or censorship supressing the paper (as it feared with both media accountability policies), what we may be witnessing instead is that a paper that lives by the free market may indeed die by the free market as its affluent and educated audience stops buying, or subscribing to, a newspaper which fails to fulfil its promise of providing quality information for a discerning news audience. That would be a sad end to what was such a promising start five decades ago and remains such an important thing – a national daily newspaper focused upon national affairs.

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