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Chapter 1

ELECTION REPORTING IN THE 2000s

When the 2001 election was held, the *Bulletin* was still published. *Nightline*, *Sunday* and John Laws were still on air. The ABC website consisted of a string of text articles – no interactive maps, no video and no live vote-counting. The Packer family – with Kerry Packer in charge – still owned Channel Nine and the station was the undisputed ratings winner of the previous year. Only about 20 per cent of homes had pay TV (AFC 2005:62). Sky News existed but had not broadcast a dedicated election channel yet. Stephen Mayne's email newsletter *Crikey* had only begun the previous year. The *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* websites were updated irregularly. Wikipedia had only been in operation for a year. There was no YouTube and no Twitter. (They began in 2005 and 2006 respectively.) Blogging had begun in 1994 but 'was not a recognised force in the political world' and there was no social networking site 'until Friendster in 2002, MySpace in 2003, and FaceBook in 2004' (Schudson 2009:368).

It is not only media and technology that have been transformed. Reporting styles, journalism practice, audiences and the way politics is conducted have also changed. It will be a very different political reporting environment in another ten years' time. While we cannot anticipate all that will occur in the future, we can learn much by examining the recent past and thinking about how political reporting works, how it has changed and what we have both lost and gained in recent times. This book focuses on election reporting in the first decade of the 21st century – a decade marked by great expectations for journalism as well as grave concerns.

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The concerns stemmed from fears about the repercussions of massive change that was occurring in news production and news access, including technological change and the search for an economic model that could sustain journalism in an era of declining mass audiences, the rise of free content and shifting concepts of what was 'news'. In the period between the elections of 2001 and 2007, every traditional news medium lost market share, including newspapers and television (the most dominant and accessed news sources over the past 30 years), but at the same time there was much more 'news' floating around, including through pay TV, websites, social networking, blogs, instant messaging, free commuter newspapers, radio news bulletins and comedy shows with a topical bent.

Even the traditional media increased their news output, if not their audience size. Newspapers went online but also produced more supplements, sections and newspaper-inserted magazines. On television there were more news bulletins; longer morning programs focused around news as well as panel-style commentary shows; and live breaking news broadcasts and news specials on a variety of topics. Richard A. Posner (2005) noted: 'The public's consumption of news used to be like sucking a straw; now it's like being sprayed by a fire hose.'

Audiences became more fluid, 'nomadic' and mobile in the 2000s. They were no longer the '"sitting ducks" of mass media communication', but were now 'splintering across ever more platforms', both harder to reach and to measure, simultaneously 'everywhere and nowhere' (Dahlgren 2009:45). This made an interesting paradox: there were fewer fixed news audiences, but there was far more news around. These factors were challenging many of the fundamentals of traditional journalism, especially its audience base and business models. So dramatic were the changes that commentators feared that a 'crisis' in journalism was at hand (see MEAA 2008; Young 2010).

However, if there were new concerns about journalism, there were also still old ideals and high expectations. The Media Alliance (formerly the Australian Journalists' Association) code of ethics encapsulated these in describing what journalists do:

> Journalists describe society to itself. They convey information, ideas and opinions . . . They search, disclose, record, question, entertain, suggest and remember. They inform citizens and animate democracy. They give a practical form to freedom of expression . . . scrutinise power, but also exercise it (Alliance Online 2009).

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News outlets continued to promise a great deal. They promised to provide 'agenda-setting journalism that is accurate, independent, compelling, trustworthy, and of the highest quality' (*The Age* Online), 'in-depth coverage and analysis' (*The 7:30 Report*) and 'a provocative, challenging and intelligent window on today's world' (*Lateline*); to tell 'the big stories of the world' (*60 Minutes*), to cover 'the issues that affect you and your family' (*Today Tonight*), to have 'the nation's leaders discussing the big news stories of the day' (*Meet the Press*), to 'improve the lives of our readers with campaigns, exclusive stories and in-depth investigations' (*Daily Telegraph*) and reveal 'the inside word on what's really going on in politics, government, media' (*Crikey*).

Yet despite – or perhaps because of – these promises, the litany of complaints about political reporting was very long. And because election campaigns are seen as the ultimate test of traditional journalism and of how the media fulfil their role in a democracy, for many critics, election reporting in the 2000s was strong evidence of how the media fail to provide either what they promise or what is needed for a well-functioning democracy. Others strongly defended journalism, but even they didn't deny that the media are powerful and that whether they are working well or not matters.

Elections

Elections in Australia are highly mediated events. Most Australians don't have any direct contact with election candidates. Instead they rely on information from television, newspapers, radio and, increasingly, from the internet. These media have been described as 'the major sites, the privileged scenes, of politics' today (Dahlgren 2009:35). During elections, this takes on special significance because media reports provide information on which people might ultimately base their vote. This assumption is so powerful and so widely held that, for decades, politicians have been centring their election campaigns around obtaining favourable media coverage – especially television coverage (Denemark, Ward and Bean 2007:90; Tiffen 1989:138; Ward 1995:202).

Less convinced, academics have been testing the thesis of media effects on voting behaviour in earnest since the 1940s. There have been many conflicting findings because media effects are notoriously difficult to isolate, but the weight of evidence suggests that election campaigns *do* matter to the

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behaviour of citizens at elections, even if their impact varies for different voters in different circumstances and even if they are but one influence among many on voting decisions (Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2002; Iyengar and Simon 2000; Weaver and Drew 2006). Media content seems to play an especially important role in encouraging or discouraging awareness of particular issues and in 'priming' people's evaluations of parties, leaders and candidates (see Chapter 5). Media content seems to have the greatest influence on undecided voters. This means that, in the past three decades, there has been a renewed interest in its effects because a diminishing number of Australians identify themselves with a particular party and more are entering election campaigns unsure about their vote (Denemark, Ward and Bean 2007; McAllister 2002).

There are estimates that between 35 and 40 per cent of Australian voters now decide their vote *during* the election campaign (McAllister 2002:24–5; McCarthy 1993:206; Young 2004:45). In 2007 pollsters were reporting that, with only four days to go until polling day, one in five voters had still not made up their minds and were only likely to decide who to vote for on election day ('Pollsters point to many undecided voters' 2007). Given that Australian elections 'are regularly won by [only] 2–3% of votes', this makes media content potentially very powerful in shaping election outcomes (Denemark, Ward and Bean 2007:107). The impact is likely to be particularly sharp in Australia because compulsory voting ensures that a high proportion of voters, including the less interested, participate on polling day and make some form of voting decision. Between the 1990 and 2007 elections, an average of 95 per cent of registered voters cast a vote (AEC 2009). Most relied on media content for information and impressions of national politics.

Media power and responsibilities

A capacity to influence election results is not something that media outlets usually promote overtly. There are exceptions, though. Most famously, in 1992 the British tabloid the *Sun* claimed 'It's the *Sun* wot won it' on its front page after it had run an anti-Labour Party campaign and the Conservative Party unexpectedly won the general election. In Australia, the *Daily Telegraph* (also owned by Rupert Murdoch) claims that its readers 'are the people who decide federal elections'. However, it states this on its website aimed at advertisers – including political parties and governments, which are big advertisers – rather than in its general content, which is aimed at readers (Newsspace 2009b).

It is more traditional for media outlets to draw upon the journalistic ideals of a 'fourth estate' and an impartial 'watchdog' role, and to claim a mandate to represent 'the people' and uphold democracy. In this view, based on classic democratic theory, reporting an election campaign is considered one of the most significant activities the media can ever perform in a democracy. Through effective reporting, media outlets are thought to increase transparency and accountability; deter fraud, illegal activities and corruption; make citizens more knowledgeable and better informed about elections, candidates and current issues; analyse candidate platforms; and provide voters with the information they need to make an informed choice on election day. At the most elementary level, they inform voters about the basic mechanisms of formal politics including the date of the election, voting hours and polling site locations.

Box 1.1

The role of the media in elections: 'classic' democratic theory

The traditional, and still widely held, view of the role of the media in elections is that the media 'play an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy' including:

- a 'watchdog' role, providing 'unfettered scrutiny and discussion of the successes and failures of governments, [to] inform the public of how effectively its representatives have performed and help to hold them to account';
- 'enabling full public participation in elections by:
  - educating the voters on how to exercise their democratic rights.
  - reporting on the development of the election campaign.
  - providing a platform for the political parties to communicate their message to the electorate.
  - allowing the parties to debate with each other.
  - reporting results and monitoring vote counting.
  - scrutinising the electoral process itself in order to evaluate its fairness, efficiency, and probity' (ACE 2009).

Whether media reports affect the way people vote is therefore only one measure of influence (although it has tended to be the central preoccupation of those who study election media effects). There are broader impacts. These include influencing how people feel about politics and their

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society, including whether they are interested in the election and its outcome and whether they think their own participation matters. Significantly, the international literature suggests that many voters can 'be either engaged or "turned off"' elections by 'the quality of the campaign communications they receive' (Blumler 1987). Although an average of 95 per cent of registered voters voted between 1990 and 2007, there were an estimated 1.2 million who were eligible to vote but were not on the electoral roll (JSCEM 2009:23, 81). How many of these Australians were not registered because they did not believe their vote mattered or because they were 'turned off' politics?

Political reporters themselves acknowledge the great responsibility of the many democratic roles that are assumed. Veteran political reporter Laurie Oakes has said that political reporters must have:

> a commitment to accuracy, a determination to get the facts right . . . an obligation to inform the public to the best of their ability about issues, policies and actions of government, the political parties and people involved in the political process. And because we are in a sense, proxies for the voters, we have a duty to hold politicians accountable, and we also have a credo of objectivity. We're supposed to present things fairly. (ABC Radio National, *Background Briefing*, 15 August 1999).

However, politics is not only communicated by political reporters with a specific journalistic creed. There are also a multitude of other sources that report 'news' and contribute to political communication, including comedy shows, talkback radio hosts and callers, websites, blogs, YouTube clips, social networking comments, emails and electronic newsletters. Not all of these forms ascribe to journalistic principles but, in conjunction with news media, they contribute to making 'the media' the central arena through which politics are conducted and communicated.

Election reporting: the debate

Despite all of the important functions expected of (and claimed by) the media, many critics have expressed serious concerns about how politics and elections are reported. It is not surprising that politicians have been among

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the most vocal critics. Politicians are in close contact with media reporters, care passionately about politics and have a personal stake in it and first-hand experience. They are frequently on the receiving end of unflattering representations and unwanted intrusions. Politicians have argued that Australian political reporting is too influenced by commercial concerns and political vendettas (Keating 2000), too obsessed with gossip and scandal (Evans 1998) and too focused on trivia and 'sound bites' at the expense of reporting serious issues. Former Prime Minister Paul Keating (2000) stated more broadly that the Australian media were 'an industry that operates behind a cloak of secrecy and insider knowledge. It is riddled with nepotism, back-scratching and interlocking interests.'

In 2002, federal Liberal Party president Shane Stone said political reporting in Australia was biased and out of touch. He accused reporters of relying on gossip and rumours, and of using each other as sources of news rather than conducting interviews with people involved in news events. He argued that political reporters existed 'in isolation from the mainstream of their fellow Australians' and wrote and spoke 'in a language that most Australians don't relate to' (Grubel and Cole 2002). Former Labor leader Mark Latham (2005:58) claimed in his notorious 2005 diaries: 'There is no quality journalism in Australia, only the pretence of it.'

Concerns are not of course new, nor are they confined to Australia. Famously, Tony Blair outlined his views in an important speech in which he said that a fragmenting media system was causing media outlets to lose audiences and to seek 'impact' above understanding. In Blair's view, this had changed the nature of political reporting so that:

> . . . scandal or controversy beats ordinary reporting hands down. News is rarely news unless it generates heat . . . today's media, more than ever before, hunts in a pack. In these modes it is like a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits . . . rather than just report news, even if sensational or controversial, the new technique is commentary on the news being as, if not more important than the news itself. So – for example – there will often be as much interpretation of what a politician is saying as there is coverage of them actually saying it . . . Things, people, issues, stories, are all black and white. Life's usual grey is almost entirely absent . . . It's a triumph or a disaster. A problem is 'a crisis'. A setback is a policy 'in tatters'. A criticism, 'a savage attack' (Blair 2007).

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Concerns were also voiced by experienced political reporters. Laurie Oakes argued that ‘political reporting has become too negative, and based too much on personalities’ (ABC Radio National, *Background Briefing*, 15 August 1999) and Paul Kelly (2001) said that political reporting in the early 2000s was ‘obsessed with tactics and there’s not enough focus on issues . . .’. Both Margo Kingston (2001) and Michelle Grattan (1998; 2005) expressed concern about how relationships between journalists, politicians and their advisers were influencing political reporting. Grattan (2005) also claimed that ‘political investigative journalism [was] not strong’ in Australia.

There was also some evidence to suggest that the Australian public was dissatisfied. Journalists were frequently ranked among the least admired of the professions. In 2007, they ranked below politicians (and only just above estate agents, advertisers and car salespeople) in a survey of the most trusted occupations (RMR 2008). In a 2000 AC Nielsen AgePoll, 37 per cent of respondents said they were dissatisfied with the media and an amazing 96 per cent said they thought journalists ‘distort[ed] their reports in order to sell newspapers or boost ratings’ (Colebatch 2000). Public complaints to the Australian Press Council increased every year between 2005–06 and 2008–09 (APC 2009b). Newspaper circulation and television news and current affairs ratings all declined between 2001 and 2007 (see Chapters 3 and 4).

The horse-race

Academics are also frequently critical about the news values and frames that shape coverage of politics. One of the most common criticisms is that the media report elections as if they are a horse-race with a focus on who’s winning, who’s losing and the competitive stakes, including an obsessive focus on opinion polls (see Chapter 9). Elections are also reported using the metaphors of games or sporting contests (Lichter and Smith 1996) or as ‘battles’, complete with military terms such as ‘ad blitz’, ‘poll fight’, ‘battle’, ‘campaign headquarters’ or ‘war-room’. These narrative frames position conflict between the party leaders as the central focus, and attract criticisms that political reporting has become too adversarial and too cynical (see Tiffen 1999:2). A former politician argued: ‘Conflict is the basis for news coverage. It is exaggerated where it exists and created or simulated when it

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does not' (Greiner 1992 quoted in Latham 2005:99). Laurie Oakes (2008:iv) observed that a 'sneering tone creeps into much . . . political commentary.' According to some studies, this negativity can lead the public to disengage from politics (Cappella and Hall Jamieson 1996).

A focus upon leaders was also widely held to have personalised politics. Television in particular was said to focus upon the 'star qualities' of individuals and party leaders (Ward 1995:188), leading to a 'presidentialisation' of politics and a tendency to ignore broader factors such as parties, policies, ideas and institutions. This frame is especially misleading in Australia, where prime ministers are not directly elected. When politics is seen through a prism of individual self-interest, the reporting of tactics tends to dominate and critics fear that personalisation reduces elections to a form of 'beauty contest' in which superficial matters – such as gaffes and personal appearance – play an inordinate role.

Dumbing down, entertainment and interpretation

Almost as common as the claim of 'horse-race' journalism is the lament by critics that a more entertainment-focused approach to reporting politics has led to a 'dumbing down' of content. These claims have been made of public broadcasters as well as commercial broadcasters and newspapers, but are more often associated with commercial media organisations that, it is argued, focus on politicians as celebrities and politics as entertainment in order to simplify politics and attract a mass audience that is profitable. 'Infotainment' and 'soft news' are now said to be the dominant modes of reporting (Thussu 2007). For many critics, these modes are disappointing because they are not about journalism, research or detailed reports on 'serious' topics, but about 'human interest' stories, lifestyle, consumerism and celebrity marketed in a way that fits with advertising and commercial imperatives (Barnhurst 1998:202).

For some critics, the entertainment values are not just about commercial media, but are more medium-specific and associated with television. Neil Postman (1985) famously stated that television was leading us to 'amuse ourselves to death' and that it promoted 'incoherence and triviality' (see also Kellner 1990). Journalist Paul Kelly also blamed television for making 'entertainment the dominant format for the representation of life' including political life (ABC *Media Report* 27 December 2001). Others, by contrast, have defended television. Oakes, who is well known for his televised political interviews, argued that: 'Quality is not necessarily equated with boredom' and that television is very valuable as it 'gives an extended look at a politician . . . [their] character . . . what [the politician] stands for, and what his [sic] intentions are' (ABC *Media Report* 7 September 2006; Wilson 2000).

Similar allegations centred around claims that a 'straight' reporting style focused upon 'the facts' had declined and that instead there had arisen an 'interpretive', commentary style. Newspapers certainly gave more space and prominence to op-eds – opinion pieces written by staff writers, regular columnists or external contributors. The rise of chat-style news and political commentary programs on television also reflected this changed style. For some, this 'interpretive turn' represented 'an excess of interpretation' and 'empty pontification' (McNair 2000:5). Yet defenders claimed that the changes had made journalism far more accessible, interesting and honest than older styles of reporting (Lumby 1999; McNair 2000, 2006; Chapter 13).

The media: too strong or too weak?

For some critics, the media were no longer acting as a watchdog before the powerful but had instead become too weak and too complicit (e.g. Hewson 2006). British political reporters following the 1996 election remarked that their Australian counterparts were noticeably timid and complicit in acquiescing to political candidates' conditions (*Media Rules* 1996). For those inside journalism, this trend is often seen as the result of declining access to politicians and information and the greater degree to which election campaigns are today controlled, choreographed and stage-managed by politicians.

In the 1990s, politicians began to favour talkback radio interviews, political advertising and direct mail and the press conferences of bygone years declined. Politicians argued that they wanted more direct ways of communicating with voters. However, the changes were seen by journalists as manoeuvres by politicians to evade scrutiny and the 'Gallery heavyweights' knowledge of history, context and policy, and their propensity to upset the leaders with brusque, unfawning questions' (Suich 2004a). Journalists increasingly