HOW AUSTRALIA DECIDES
Election Reporting and the Media

In recent years, the Australian media have come under fire for their reporting of politics and election campaigns. Political reporting is said to be too influenced by commercial concerns, too obsessed with gossip and scandal, and too focused on trivia and 'sound bites' at the expense of serious issues. There are accusations of bias, sensationalism, 'lazy' journalism and 'horse-race' reporting that is obsessed with opinion polls.

How Australia Decides is the first book to put these allegations to the test. Based on a four-year empirical study, Sally Young reports the results of the only systematic, historical and in-depth analysis of Australian election reporting and weighs up the evidence to assess how well Australians are served by those who report and comment on politics. This groundbreaking book shows how election reporting has changed over time, and how political news audiences, news production and shifts in political campaigning are influencing media content – with profound implications for Australian democracy.

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To Jay and Abigail

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In Chapters 8–12 of this book, I quote several media texts – especially newspaper articles – that I was unable to cite in full in the reference list due to space limitations. An online search using the sentences quoted will, in most cases, bring up the reference, but for any reader who requires more details, please contact me at s.young@unimelb.edu.au.

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PREFACE

The 2010 election was the first in Australia to feature a female prime minister. It came only 24 days after Julia Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd in an unprecedented, overnight deposition of a sitting prime minister. It also produced an unusual result – a hung parliament and two weeks of machinations and deliberations before a minority Labor government was formed. Understandably, the more unusual elements of the campaign attracted most attention but there were still familiar patterns including an important paradox, which is explored in this book.

For those interested in following the campaign, more detailed and constantly updated information was available from multiple news sources. Yet there was also a sense that the election was playing out before an unusually disengaged electorate. On this latter point, the signs were mixed. The percentage of people casting an informal (invalid or blank) vote in 2010 went up, but not all of these were deliberate protest votes. Voter turnout only went down slightly, but this masked a bigger problem – declining voter enrolment. Over a million eligible Australians were missing from the electoral roll.

Of those who did vote, over 80 per cent gave their first preference to one of the major parties. However, a 4 per cent swing to the Greens, their success in winning a lower house seat for the first time, and the role four independents played in determining government encouraged claims that a 'new politics' was being forged out of a growing disillusionment with the major parties and 'business-as-usual' politics. Whether the 2010 election was really the beginning of an enduring sea-change in Australian politics remains to be seen but, certainly in the connections between politics and the media, there was much that *was* business-as-usual.

Although there was now a different government from the one that had been in power during the 2001, 2004 and 2007 elections, many of the

same techniques were still evident. Government media advisers continued to outnumber journalists under the Rudd and Gillard governments. Like the Howard government before it, the Rudd government was accused of misusing government advertising to promote a partisan message (in this case, about its ill-fated mining tax) in an election year. Reportedly, the major parties then spent over $60 million on political advertising during the campaign and even the Greens spent around $2.5 million – more than double their 2004 spending.

Just as had happened under the Howard government, there were interventions by media owners and allegations of election-year policies designed to win their support. In February 2010, the Rudd government had given a $250 million hand-out to commercial TV networks in the form of a reduction to their licence fees after the Minister for Communications had been skiing in Colorado with Seven Network chief Kerry Stokes. After a personal meeting with Rupert Murdoch – who had competing interests in pay TV – Liberal leader Tony Abbott blasted the hand-out as 'dodgy' and an election-year bribe to buy favourable coverage.

Conservative critics continued to accuse the ABC of left-wing bias in its news and current affairs broadcasting as well as on its websites. But the most vehement allegations of bias in 2010 were directed at the Murdoch press. Critics described a News Limited 'war on Labor' and even the News Limited-owned *Australian* acknowledged 'talk of [a] News [Limited] bid to get Rudd'. Although there had been similar talk in 2007, the allegations were far more public in 2010 and were made not just by Labor supporters or left-wing bloggers but also by a range of respected journalists in mainstream media outlets.

Allegations of bias were part of a broader perception that the media were unusually active in politics in 2010. Media reporting of opinion polls had played a major part in Rudd's demise – as it had in the downfall of Kim Beazley, Simon Crean, Brendan Nelson and Malcolm Turnbull. However, it was also being reported as credible that a single newspaper article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (which had reported that Rudd's chief of staff had been sounding out caucus members to see if they were going to defect to Gillard) had been the trigger for the 23 June leadership challenge.

Journalist Laurie Oakes, a veteran of four decades of political reporting, played an important role during the campaign. Two days before the election was announced, Oakes dramatically confronted Gillard at her Press Club

address and recounted a leaked insiders' account of the night she deposed
Rudd. Oakes then had another scoop in the second week of the campaign
when he reported damaging Cabinet leaks against Gillard. The extraordinary
leaks – designed to undermine Gillard and hurt Labor's re-election chances –
animated the media with frenzied speculation about the identity of the
leaker.

This temporarily punctuated a general narrative about the uninspiring
nature of the campaign. Australian journalists have been decrying the bor-
ing, stage-managed nature of modern election campaigns in earnest since
1996. But, in 2010 there was a level of intensity about this, a chorus of
complaints that the election was dull and vacuous. Perhaps there is nothing
quite so boring as the media constantly describing how boring an elec-
tion is, though, because disillusionment about the campaign in general also
extended to media reporting of the campaign.

Many of the anti-media complaints were also familiar: that the media
were too focused on the machinations of politics and on horse-race calling
instead of policy. That they didn't explain complex issues well or inves-
tigate matters. That there was too much 'he said, she said' journalism,
commentary-on-commentary and journalists talking to journalists. How-
ever, there was also a backlash against the hypocrisy of journalists who
reported the stage-managed events but then lamented that the campaign
was so staged. Like the complaints against politicians, the criticisms were
amplified by an online environment characterised by ongoing chatter and
feedback.

Critics called for journalists to 'get off the bus', away from the routine
of, as one journalist described it, reporters asking 'polite questions in polite
settings, followed by coffee and a buffet . . . supplied by the political parties'
(Purcell 2010). The bus rolled on with politicians still manufacturing cam-
paign events for the accompanying media, including visits to schools and
factories, but there was a new emphasis on the media manufacturing events
of their own.

One obvious pseudo-event was Channel Nine's hiring of former Labor
leader Mark Latham to file a report for *60 Minutes* (which also raised
questions about who or what was a journalist). Latham confronted Gillard
on the campaign trail and then, during a live TV report about the incident,
Oakes criticised his own employer for hiring Latham. All of the drama fitted
nicely with the way Channel Nine promoted its election coverage, especially

its polling night broadcast. In ads similar to those Nine had used to promote its crime drama series *Underbelly*, the election was described as 'the drama event of the year'.

News Limited engineered an unprecedented degree of control in staging campaign events when it organised two 'People's Forums' through its New South Wales/Victorian tabloids and Sky News at Rooty Hill RSL and Brisbane Broncos League Club. Part of a growing emphasis in political reporting on 'ordinary people', these were billed as a chance for voters in crucial seats to put their questions directly to Gillard and Abbott. News Limited paid Galaxy (one of its favoured pollsters) to conduct the selection process for choosing the audience.

Viewers were told that the audience consisted largely of undecided voters but, after the Rooty Hill event, some commentators argued that the audience and questioners seemed more hostile to Gillard than to Abbott. One man who had asked Abbott a question was later identified as the son of a former Liberal MP and former *Big Brother* contestant who had said he was a Young Liberal. In an era marked by both scepticism and a desire for 'authenticity', like reality TV itself, the 'People's Forums' raised questions about whether the media were really showing 'authentic' glimpses of 'ordinary people' in unscripted situations or were manipulating events for effect. The ABC created two special episodes of its *Q&A* program using a similar format of 'ordinary' people asking the leaders questions and it too was accused of having an unrepresentative audience.

Politics was most newsworthy in 2010 when adapted to fit the 'event' TV model of sporting and reality TV finals. Media organisations were willing to organise and pay for the 'big' events. Nine reportedly paid $10 000 to Latham and Seven reportedly paid $1.5 million for Labor strategist Graham Richardson to join its polling night panel. Polling night was an extravaganza that even Channel Ten – which had eschewed an election night broadcast in 2007 for a repeat of *The Empire Strikes Back* – could not ignore, broadcasting a special edition of its news-focused *7pm Project* and moving between regular programs and updates. Yet even 'big' politics could not compete if it was put up against the 'real' thing. The leaders' debate had to be rescheduled to avoid clashing with Ten's *MasterChef*.

The 2010 election was the first to be reported by two local 24-hour TV news channels after the ABC launched its 24-hour news digital TV channel during the campaign. Reflecting economic models for news production

modelled in the 2000s, the channel was delivered with no new resources. Journalists were being asked to do more, package up existing material, work faster and file for multiple platforms. Politicians also had to feed a more voracious news cycle. The ultimate manifestation of this was Tony Abbott campaigning non-stop and without sleep for 36 hours in a reality TV style *Amazing Race* in the final days of the campaign.

The new ABC news channel was criticised when Sky News beat it to an Abbott policy announcement by half an hour. This showed increased expectations about speed, but the criticism was also part of a larger campaign by commercial media organisations against competition and the increasing strength of public broadcasting. That strength has been especially evident in online media and in the ABC's ability to attract politically interested audiences. For example, in 2010, almost twice as many viewers watched the ABC on polling night as watched Seven.

In 2010, there was a continuation of the blurring between politics and entertainment and between serious and soft news. Politicians appeared on FM radio and TV comedy shows, including Tony Abbott on Nine's *Hey, Hey it's Saturday* and Liberal Julie Bishop's staring contest with a garden gnome on the ABC's Chaser satire *Yes We Canberra!* This was filmed on the *Lateline* set with *Lateline* host Tony Jones switching from good-natured target of satire to serious newsreader when the *Lateline* music started. The ABC's *Gruen Nation* – a panel-style program exposing political advertising tactics – also achieved high ratings.

In news reports, there was a continued focus on major party leaders, on reporting the meta-campaign – the campaign staged for media – and on opinion polls although, this time, predictions of a close race were right! Female candidates – usually marginalised and under-reported in election coverage – received far more attention because of the presence of a female prime minister, but that attention was sometimes accompanied by an intense focus on Gillard's physical appearance and marital status.

There were proclamations in 2010 – as there have been since the 1998 election – that this campaign would be 'the one' to demonstrate the power of the internet, tinged with disappointment that political parties and the media were missing interactive opportunities. There were signs of growth, including a jump in traffic to news websites on polling night, especially to the ABC, Ninemsn and online newspapers. Twitter was to 2010 what YouTube had been to 2007. Viewers' tweets were broadcast during *Q&A*

and journalists – especially Annabel Crabb – built up a popular Twitter following.

However, there were also examples of the fragility of the online business model for smaller, alternative outlets, including the closure of *New Matilda*. Some alternative voices were lured across to mainstream media outlets, such as the psephology blogger *Mumble* (Peter Brent), who was hosted on the *Australian*'s website in 2010 despite being part of an anti-blogger tirade that the *Australian* had run in 2007 (Chapter 10).

Overall, the big media companies were still dominant and continued to show signs of both struggling with, and adapting to, a different media environment. TV was still where most citizens got their news and where the parties focused their attention. The increases in specialist fare accessed by political junkies and the big event-style TV extravaganzas therefore did not negate the need for regular politics coverage in general outlets such as primetime news.

In 2010, the media generally despaired about the stage-managed, pseudo-event style of campaigning but also served it. After the election, reporters were accused of being part of the 'old' system of politics that voters were rejecting, and of being unable to adapt or view politics as anything more than conflict or a two-horse race. There was intense criticism of media-centred politics during and after the election. This book looks at how we got to that point and whether the criticism is fair.