

# Are commercial current affairs programs 'dumbing down' public discourse in austra...

[Entertainment](#), [Journalism](#)



Are commercial current affairs programs 'dumbing down' public discourse in Australia? Written by Callum Boaden 'Television is the most widely used mass media form in Australia and in the world' (Flew & Harrington 2010, p. 155). Introduction There has been much speculation about the increasing diminishment of television news audiences and the rising prevalence of Internet news consumers. Despite the claims that the Internet will one day overthrow the dominance of television, presently it remains as the 'most consumed form of journalism' (Cushion 2012, p. 5). The power and influence that television exerts over our lives as Errington and Miragliotta argue is due to its 'ubiquity, the limited obstacles to access and usage, the high level of intimacy with the viewer and its large scale reach' rendering it 'one of the most powerful media' (2011, p. 44). Given the pervasiveness of television in our everyday lives and its dominant role in telling people the news; we should examine how effectively the mass media serve the public interest by informing the population of the important issues outside of their immediate personal experience. Commentators and politicians alike have raised concerns regarding the practices of contemporary media organizations, particularly within broadcast journalism. Over the past decade many people have claimed to have observed a perceived decline in quality journalism, especially through the medium of television. Just last year on the 28th December, the Federal Shadow Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull spoke at the Woodford Folk Festival on this issue. He claimed that journalists and broadcasters are not respecting the public interest, rather 'they are treating them with contempt' by 'dumbing down' important political issues into 'one-liners' and 'sound bites' (NewsOnABC 2012). If these observations

are in fact the case within Australia's contemporary media landscape then a critical examination of the process that underlies this phenomenon should be undertaken to test their validity. This is even more pertinent when we take into account what Henningham believes is that 'most people trust the news on television more than that of other media' (1988 p. 1). This invites a critique of the performance of television broadcasters in providing news and current affairs to the public. Thus opening up a particular line of inquiry: are commercial current affairs programs 'dumbing down' public discourse in Australia? Nguyen defines the phrase 'dumbing down' as 'the increasing prevalence of entertainment-orientated news and the marginalization and trivialisation of public affairs' and believes it to be a 'perennial problem of many...advanced democracies of the world (2012 p. 706). Theoretical Foundation Agenda-setting theory, first propounded by McCombs and Shaw (1972) can provide insights into how the mass media prioritize and highlight particular issues that have the potential to influence people's understanding of the world outside of their immediate personal experience. Beyond focusing audience's attention on particular issues, media play a central role in influencing 'our understanding and perspective on the topics in the news' (McCombs & Valenzuela 2007: 47). This demonstrates that there is a direct link between an audience's absorption and interpretation of information received through the medium of television and the impact on our society's articulation of certain issues. McCombs and Valenzuela (2007) outline the main components of the media agenda that consist of 'objects' and 'attributes'. An 'object' could be defined as a political issue, public figure or any topic that is the focus of attention. These 'objects' are made up of '

attributes', that are characteristics and traits that describe and define an object. Each of these components vary in salience, although whatever attributes are given the most credence will determine what 'members of the public have in mind when they think and talk about news objects' (McCombs and Valenzuela 2007: 47). When undertaking a critical examination of commercial news programs, focusing on the transmission of attribute salience will inevitably reveal how the public view particular objects and consequently how these are formulated into discourse. Dearing and Rogers (1996) elucidate this conceptualization moreover: 'Agenda-setting offers an explanation of why information about certain issues, and not other issues, is available to the public in a democracy; how public opinion is shaped; and why certain issues are addressed through policy actions while other issues are not' (pp. 1-2). Frame theory has been found to complement a theoretical analysis of the media agenda with an explicit focus on the attributes that make up the constructed media frame. Tankard et al. define a media frame as a 'central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration' (1991 p. 3). Each of these components vary in salience although whatever attributes are given the most credence will ultimately determine what 'members of the public have in mind when they think and talk about news objects' (McCombs & Valenzuela 2007, p. 47). A comprehensive analysis of the media agenda should interrogate the salient attributes that are embedded within news topics as well as the content that is excluded. This is especially pertinent given that a particular frame is constructed and imparted to the public with the consequences of influencing

people's thoughts and opinions on a particular issue. Tewkesbery & Scheufele (2009) highlight that 'journalists choose images and words that have the power to influence how audiences interpret and evaluate issues and policies' (p. 17) and at their 'most powerful, frames can invite people to think about an issue in a particular way' (p. 19).

### Research Methodology

#### Research strategy and method

The most appropriate course of action was to first conduct a literature review. This would serve as a foundation on which to base the research into this area. There are a number of advantages of literature reviews, such as those emphasised by Monash University (CALT: LearningSupport 2006):

- Justifies your choice of research question,
- theoretical/conceptual framework and method
- Establishes the importance of the topic
- Provides background information needed to understand the study
- Establishes your study as one link in a chain of research that is developing knowledge in your field

Furthermore, a content analysis was subsequently undertaken in an attempt to reveal how the theoretical concepts as previously outlined apply to contemporary examples within commercial television news programs. The approach adopted for the content analysis was informed by Krippendorff (2004) and aimed to employ his conceptual framework, consisting of the following components:

- A body of text (starting point of analysis)
- A research question (derived from a review of the literature)
- A context (what the texts mean and what they can tell or do)
- An analytical construct (theoretical foundation informed by agenda-setting and framing theory)
- Inferences that are intended to answer the research question

- Validating evidence (pp. 29-30)

#### Data collection and analysis

The data that will be collected for the purposes of the content

analysis will be sourced from primarily the Internet video-sharing website YouTube, as well as the website operated by Channel 9's A Current Affair (aca.ninemsn.com.au). Focusing on a significant issue that has been recently covered in the media can provide interesting insights into how commercial networks have framed the issue in such a manner as to influence people's attitudes and opinions. The chosen topic will consist be the 'carbon tax' because of its high degree of relevance to Australian civil society. In order to determine whether commercial current affairs programs can be seen to reduce the intellectual substance of public debate on these issues in Australia, the most popular programs, Channel 9's A Current Affair and Seven's Today Tonight will be compared and contrasted against the public broadcaster's current affairs program, The 7.30 Report. Literature Review There is a considerable amount of literature and research into news and current affairs within Australia. One reason for this as Turner points out is that most people recognize that 'news and current affairs programs serve functions that are fundamentally important to a civilized democracy' (2005, p. ix) and act as facilitators for responsible public discussion. This could be attributed to their capacity to 'cut through the media ruckus' (Raschke 2006, p. 94) by reporting on significant social, political and cultural issues in a more comprehensive manner whilst still retaining a certain level of accessibility for the average viewer. Pearson et al. found in their analysis of the literature that the term 'current affairs' seems to go beyond the 'news' to imply 'a depth of coverage, including commentary and analysis, which probes into the broader implications of events and issues' (2001, p. 54). Similarly, Raschke views current affairs programs as 'contemplative

space(s) for analysis and reflection' (2006, p. 94). While the terms 'news' and 'current affairs' are somewhat blurred, Pearson et al. (2001) carried out in-depth interviews that revealed distinguishing characteristics, such as the length of a particular segment, depth of analysis and opportunity for comment. Typical news coverage tends to focus on 'the immediate fact of stories and the explanation of a story' (Speers, cited in Pearson et al. 2001, p. 56) which usually contains a minimal amount of analysis and is carried out in a much shorter time-frame. Despite all the favorable characteristics of current affairs programs over that of traditional news programs, do they really embody these features? Raschke contends that some programs are what they ought to be, 'while others could only be considered mere reformulations of news as entertainment' (2006, p. 94). Henningham supports this by observing a tendency to 'concentrate on action rather than ideas' and 'on what moves rather than what is still' (1988 p. 4).

Understandably the format must include some aspects that are entertaining and engaging. Postman & Powers argue these programs adopt a 'rhythm and pace designed to hold interest and viewership' but still acknowledge the 'public service element' is supplemented for the 'profit motive' (1992, p. 6). What arises from this is whether this is true of all current affairs programs in Australia or only some. Harrington suggests that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Australia's public broadcaster, is considered the 'last bastion of quality news and current affairs' although it dwarfs in comparison to the amount of viewers of commercial television networks (2008, p. 267). The networks Channel 9 and Seven have the largest average audience for TV news and current affairs (Young, S. 2009) despite as Harrington points out '

they are hardly the epitome of exceptional journalistic practices' due to their heavy reliance on ' quintessentially " tabloid" stories' (2008, p. 267). The ABC is a non-profit organization whereas it seems the commercial media organizations are as Langer says ' in the business of entertainment' and are focused on attracting audiences ' for commercial not journalistic reasons' (1998 p. 1). Postman & Powers remark on the essence of journalism and how it should exist particularly in broadcasting by stating that ' news is not entertainment' in fact, ' it is a necessity in a democratic society' (1992, p. 10). Considering the powerful position television holds and the space for influence that commercial current affairs programs occupy, are concerns that these programs are ' dumbing down' public discourse legitimate? The research conducted by Turner suggests that ' audiences for television current affairs are not only declining, they are also ageing' revealing that the younger demographic are ' alienated from prime-time current affairs' (2005, p. 3). Stockwell has uncovered a similar trend by observing that ' traditional TV news and current affairs programs are shrinking in terms of audience' and contends that the implications of which reduce ' significance to public discourse' (2004, p. 1). Conversely, Pearson et al. argue that ' news and current affairs shape the beliefs of a population and construct the agenda of public discourse' (2001, p. 302). This is supported by Pariser who posits that ' news (and current affairs) shape our sense of the world, of what's important, of the scale, colour and character of our problems' (2011, p. 50). If we consider that the majority of Australian's get their news from commercial news and current affairs programs which are categorized under the ' tabloid' format and explicitly known for using ' sensationalism and



scandal to generate audience interest' (Raschke 2006, p. 96) there is a strong assumption that this would cause some flow-on effects. Alexander and Jacobs (1998) have found that: 'The media plays a central role in our understanding of civil society, not only as a space where information is circulated so that citizens can be well-informed voters...but rather as a cultural space where actors and events become typified into more general codes' (p. 29). Findings The issue of the 'carbon tax' was the first 'object' of interest scrutinized for the content analysis. Its presence in Australian news media was and still is ever-present, making it a primary focus for the public agenda. Interestingly it has been covered rather extensively on traditional news programs and been somewhat neglected on current affairs programs, particularly on commercial networks. To illustrate its overwhelming absence, after searching the Channel 9 website with the terms 'carbon tax' only two results returned that were segments on the program A Current Affair. The segment used for this comparative analysis was reported exactly a week after the introduction of the tax, whereas both The 7.30 Report and Today Tonight released their stories on the day of its inception. Each of the stories are framed in terms of the consequences and economic impacts that the tax will bring to both large and small business, and ordinary Australians. A Current Affair's segment titled 'Too poor to battle the cold' focuses almost exclusively on an elderly pensioner who is fearful of the rising cost of electricity. The 'carbon tax' is not a salient issue within this story, however it is inferred from the brief introduction and the comments made by the pensioner that the issue of electricity prices is linked to the 'carbon tax'. There is minimal explicit mention of the tax throughout the segment, instead

there is an over reliance on images and voiceover depicting the pensioner going to extreme lengths to conserve electricity. At one point he claims he might have to ' get rid of the fridge and get an esky instead'. It is clear from this report that the agenda put forth has little to do with the tax and more to do with the uncertainty surrounding its introduction. The 7. 30 Report and Today Tonight report on the issue in a similar manner by focusing on the uncertainty surrounding its implications for the economy. Today Tonight in comparison to The 7. 30 Report does not feature any interviews with politicians about the issue but rather use one of their own reporters, David Koch, for political and economic comment. Although other external sources are featured such as a professor, grocer and shop keeper the analysis they provide besides the academic professional lacks understanding of the details of the tax and provides more personal comment rather than analysis. Today Tonight's segment is framed in terms of what the issue will mean for most ordinary Australians, where The 7. 30 Report focuses on the uncertainty surrounding the economic impacts for the economy, particularly small and large businesses. In addition there is a much more time allocated to the political argument by including commentary from both sides of politics. It could be said that The 7. 30 Report aims to provide a balanced view of the broader issues at stake. Today Tonight's report is very similar to A Current Affair's in terms of presentation. Unlike The 7. 30 Report the interviewees are only seen for a short time before a series of images related to what they are discussing fills the screen. Today Tonight uses a great deal of images and sound effects to reinforce and highlight particular aspects of what the reporter is saying. For instance, when the reporter mentions the price

charged on carbon, a big weight enters to the left of the screen with a large thud. This could be viewed as somewhat sensational. Images are also taken out of context and used to create meanings for audiences that don't seem relevant to the issue. When the reporter David Koch is providing opinion on the tax, remarking on what he believes to be an inappropriate time for introducing it, in the background, pictures from the London riots are seen behind him whilst being interviewed. As Koch says ' I think the timing is wrong' a flare is shown to be fired into a group of riot police and as it explodes the sound is featured in the soundtrack of the segment. This invites the audience to think about the issue in a particular way that can only be inferred to have negative connotations attached to it. Conclusion There is no denying that current affairs programs have the power to influence people's understanding of particular issues. What has been uncovered in this research only scratches the surface of the possible implications of this format on the substance of public debate, especially politics, in Australia. The findings support what Turner (1996, cited in Pearson et al. 2001) found through a comparative content analysis of news and current affairs offered by the ABC and the commercial sector. Turner's findings suggest that the ABC was more balanced, impartial and accurate in its treatment of stories, whereas A Current Affair present stories with entertainment value. This is often attributed to the changing structures of the format, forced by commercial competition that conceives of the ' provision of entertainment rather than of merely accurate and useful information' (Turner 2005, p. 14). The limitations of the study make it difficult to determine whether public discourse in Australia has suffered because of the journalistic practices of commercial

current affairs programs. There is a relatively strong argument that the concerns relating specifically to commercial current affairs programs are not worth worrying about because of the transformation of news consumption patterns (Young 2009) coupled with the cynicism that the format is viewed with (Turner 2005). However, Pearson et al. conducted focus groups and surveys and found that 'nearly all Australian's believe that their preferred source of news and current affairs has at least some influence on public opinion' (2001, p. 377). Although it may be difficult to measure exactly how far reaching the impacts are into public discourse, many recognize that current affairs programs are able to influence people's attitudes, ideas, opinions and behaviors in relation to particular issues. This is concerning given that the majority of people do get their news from commercial sources. But, if current trends persist and people gradually drift towards the Internet for their news and current affairs, then the format may have to be reconfigured once again to meet audience's demands. Turner is optimistic that the format still has the capacity to 'generate a national, public, conversation about what are regarded the important issues of the day' (2005, p. 153). This observation may be overly optimistic but one can only assume the commercial sector has a long way to go before it will endeavor to inform rather than merely entertain. References A Current Affair 2012, Too poor to battle the cold, viewed 21 January 2013, Alexander, J. C., Jacobs, R. N. 1998, 'Communication, ritual and society', in T. Liebes & J. Curran (eds), Media, ritual and identity, Routledge, London, pp. 23-41. Boaden, C. 2013, 'Progress report', Media, mediation and power, Sydney, NSW. Flew, T. & Harrington, S. 2010, 'Television', in S. Cunningham & G. Turner (eds), The

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