

Politics in Australian media



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Essay Prompt: Politics is badly reported to the public because the Australian print media is highly concentrated and lacks adequate accountability.

Critically assess this statement with examples to support your argument.

In the Australian print media, a significant issue is continuing to hold a common place in relevant debate. This is in regards to company ownership becoming excessively concentrated with minimal accountability; that is, colossal media corporations such as Fairfax Media are continuing to grow and take over the smaller companies within the industry. Consequences of this (amongst other things) will be discussed in this essay biased political information with minimal diversity being provided to the public, and damage to the Australian democracy due to the deteriorating 'watchdog' function of the media. Additionally, the poor accountability of the Australian print media will be explored including its ramifications and possible solution. In this essay these key areas will be discussed through referencing relevant theories and examples.

The current state of the Australian print media being extremely concentrated is leading to published political information being full of biases. This can be depicted through examining the Chomsky and Herman propaganda model (Chomsky & Herman 2002). One of this theory's primary focuses is on the size, ownership, and profit orientation of large media corporations and the role they play in manipulating information portrayed to the public. Such corporations in Australia (e. g. News Corporation) have grown over time to such sizes that they have taken over most smaller companies. With such domination, it is only expected that information presented by these giants will be fundamentally biased (e. g. certain information that may damage the

company's financial interests would be likely to receive high censorship) (Tiffen 2006). For instance, during the 2013 Australian election, a significant majority of Australia's newspapers supported the liberal party. As would be expected, their publications were heavily biased and were likely to have had a significant impact upon the election results. The Chomsky and Herman model has received a large amount of criticism; Eli Lehrer (2004 p. 67-87) argued against the supposed corporate bias of the media, asserting that media organisations report on corporate and political corruption all the time. However, Lehrer overlooked Chomsky and Herman's (2002 p. ix) point which stated that the media in fact *represents* corporate and political deliberations, however it is the views that challenge the 'fundamental premises' of these deliberations that are intentionally ignored (Chomsky & Herman 2002). The role of the media in keeping the government in check by not only informing but also involving the public in the Australian political sphere is also being compromised.

Democratic societies (like that which exists in Australia) depend upon the public being reasonably informed about the current political sphere. As the concentration of media ownership in Australia continues to become more intense, this role of the media is fading and the threads of our democracy are tearing. It is important to understand that politics cannot exist without the media in the modern era; it creates a reality for us in which we are told what to think. This can be best explored through the liberal idea known as the 'Fourth Estate' (Schultz 1998). This traditional role of the media as the 'Fourth Estate' was to provide society with a diverse and un-biased array of information on the current political sphere. Worryingly, Habermas found in

his studies that by the 20th century newspapers had become so controlled by commercial interest that they no longer served the public sphere (Habermas 1989). For example, the media will often inform us with popular news (e. g. celebrity-related) that will attract more views, however this information is likely to not be in the public interest (Tiffen 2006). Democracy depends upon the State accepting criticism of its power; if the public are not provided with information regarding current political issues, political participation will be limited (or tainted) and thus the whole notion of a democratic society becomes almost redundant (Schultz 1998). The 'power, commercial ambitions and ethical weakness' (Schultz 1998 p. 1) of these large media corporations gives an accurate depiction of the media's failure in the modern age to perform its role as the Fourth Estate. As a result, the negative effects of the highly concentrated Australian print media are evident. In addition, the corporate giants that dominate the media industry lack adequate accountability.

Media giants such as Fairfax Media and News Corporation are not being held liable for many of their actions that would have (in the past) attracted prosecution. As their size has grown, so has their influence and power to avoid such accountability. Journalists wield the power to portray people/ideas/events etc; the way these are portrayed creates the reality within which we all live (Schultz 1998). In other words, we rely primarily on the media for the info and imagery out of which we construct our reality of current political circumstances. Large powers such as this are often unacknowledged by the practitioners of the media due to its implication of the necessity for accountability; they want maximum power and minimal

regulation (Noam 2009). However, protections (e. g. the implied right to the freedom of political communication) conferred on the media in Australia create a dilemma when it comes to holding it to account. It is inconsistent with the general principle of freedom of the press to have laws that, for example, allow Parliament to censor media content prior to publication (prior censorship) (Noam 2009). Nonetheless, it is equally as inconsistent with this general principle to have laws that would allow parliament to punish the media after publication for general infringements of a government-invented standard. The Finkelstein enquiry (Steward 2012) proposed a solution that could have great potential in alleviating this regulatory issue. Currently, Australian print media (i. e. newspapers) is regulated by the Australian Press Council. However, this body is self-regulated and has no actual legal power. The Finkelstein review recommended an independent statutory authority funded by the Commonwealth - this would cover all media and would have the power to enforce its decisions through the courts (Steward 2012). Such a proposition may very well be the answer to ensuring the media is held accountable for its actions.

This essay discussed a variety of areas stemming from the issue of the high concentration of the Australian print media and its minimal accountability. As a result of this, political matters of importance are being very badly reported (if at all) to the public. The large corporations that now dominate the industry are heavily biased in their political views and tend to pursue profit-related endeavours over ensuring legitimate, high quality political news is provided to the public. Furthermore, the media is failing in its role as the Fourth Estate (that is, keeping the government in check through being a 'watchdog' for

the public). And lastly, reform (such as a new independent statutory authority) is needed in order to address the growing issue of the Australian print media's minimal accountability.

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