

Briefing Paper: The next era of news media

Part 3 - Ownership and media bias ([full paper](#))

Concentration and centralisation

In Australia, the concentration of media ownership is among the highest in the world, particularly for newspapersⁱ. This was intensified with the Nine-Fairfax deal in 2018ⁱⁱ, which followed the repeal of two anti-concentration laws – the ‘75% reach rule’ and the ‘two-out-of-three rule’ - in 2017ⁱⁱⁱ. This allowed media companies to own stakes in radio, commercial TV and newspapers, and control commercial television reaching more than 75% of the population. The deal has led to job losses and the sale of 170 regional papers to former Domain CEO, Antony Catalano^{iv}.

The Australian media landscape is also undergoing a process of centralisation with the gradual closure of regional newsrooms around the country^v. The most recent is Win News’ announcement to cut four commercial TV newsrooms in Orange, Wagga Wagga, Albury and Bundaberg due to “the commercial viability of funding news in these areas”. This was in addition to its Tasmanian news bulletin, which was cut last August. Sky News will now broadcast across Win TV’s regional network.

Partisan political reporting

The most dominant media group in Australia is Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, which publishes about 200 newspapers and magazines around the country, including *The Australian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Courier Mail* and *The Herald Sun*. It bought Sky News, Punters.com.au and ARM in 2016^{vi}. Murdoch’s media empire has been criticised for partisan reporting and influencing politics in Australia, the US and the UK^{vii}. The criticism was particularly prominent in the last year during the leadership coup against Malcolm Turnbull^{viii}, the election campaign of Bill Shorten and on the issue of climate change^{ix}. Since NewsCorp’s acquisition of Sky News, programming after 6pm became known as “Sky after dark” to mark the switch from panel-style shows to more right-wing commentary^x.

Media bias is currently addressed through self-regulatory codes of conduct administered by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) and the Australian Press Council (APC). Following the recent federal election, there have been calls for stricter legal and regulatory measures to prevent further concentration of ownership^{xi}.

▶ Who said what?

The Australian journalist Rick Morton, 10 May 2019^{xii}:

People will tell you going back a decade it used to be a very great paper, and in many ways it still is, but some of the craziness has been dialled up... We know what the empire is, we know what the papers do, but something has changed in the last six months. I don't know what it is. Death rattles or loss of relevance? And journos pretty much spend all day talking about it.

Former News Corp employee and Walkley Award winner Tony Koch, 9 May 2019^{xiii}:

Gone is the requirement for balance. One has only to look at the story selection and headlines on the front pages of the papers each day to see that an anti-Labor angle has been taken, however contorted had been the literary gymnastics required to finally arrive at that particular bit of stupidity... These newspapers are, in my opinion, avoiding their prime responsibility to be a fearless watchdog on government and society, and to work to ensure that wrongs are exposed and fairness is invoked for all. I cannot see that they are anything other than misguided lapdogs – and toothless ones at that.

Former editor of *The Australian* Chris Mitchell, 18 April 2019^{xiv}:

I think that what's happened in the digital age is people are identifying with newspapers that reflect their political position... You have seen this increase in partisanship in the old media.

University of Sydney's Professor Tim Dwyer, 5 June 2019^{xv}:

Australia needs to develop a "thermometer" to measure media pluralism via an initial benchmark study followed by periodic reviews. We also need a robust, independent, public interest test that can be applied in merger environments.

Federal Department of Communications and the Arts, 1 March 2016^{xvi}:

These reforms are needed because technology is changing the way we access media. In the digital era, these regulations unfairly restrict Australian-based broadcast or publishing companies from optimising the scale and scope of their operations and from accessing resources, capital and management expertise available to other media operators.

Prepared by Sarah Parkes sarah.parkes@daymark.com.au

ⁱ Dwyer, T and Muller, D 2016, 'FactCheck: is Australia's level of media ownership concentration one of the highest in the world?', *The Conversation*, 12 December, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://theconversation.com/factcheck-is-australias-level-of-media-ownership-concentration-one-of-the-highest-in-the-world-68437>

ⁱⁱ Barker, A 2018, 'Fairfax and Nine are merging. Here's what the deal involves and what it will mean for you', *ABC News Online*, 26 July, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-26/what-the-fairfax-and-nine-merger-means-for-you/10039236>

ⁱⁱⁱ Grattan, M 2017, 'Government set to win Senate support for media deregulation', *The Conversation*, 14 September, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://theconversation.com/government-set-to-win-senate-support-for-media-deregulation-84017>

^{iv} Duke, J 2019, 'Antony Catalano buys Nine's regional newspapers for \$125m', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/antony-catalano-buys-nine-s-regional-newspapers-for-115m-20190430-p51ih0.html>

^v King, R, Ferguson, K and Thackray, L 2019, 'WIN News to cut four commercial TV newsrooms in Orange, Wagga Wagga, Albury and Bundaberg', *ABC News*, 20 June, accessed 1 July 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-06-20/win-news-job-cuts-in-regional-nsw-and-queensland/11226820>

^{vi} Battersby, L 2017, 'News Corp and the Murdochs starting 2017 with more news and influence than before', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 January, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/news-corp-and-the-murdochs-starting-2017-with-more-news-and-influence-than-before-20170110-gtoo2a.html>

^{vii} Muller, D 2019, 'Mounting evidence the tide is turning on News Corp, and its owner', *The Conversation*, 13 May, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://theconversation.com/mounting-evidence-the-tide-is-turning-on-news-corp-and-its-owner-116892>

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- ^{viii} Davies, A 2018, 'A very Australian coup: Murdoch, Turnbull and the power of News Corp', *The Guardian*, 20 September, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/sep/20/very-australian-coup-murdoch-turnbull-political-death-news-corps>
- ^{ix} Lidberg, J 2019, 'New low' for journalism? Why News Corp's partisan campaign coverage is harmful to democracy', *The Conversation*, 9 May, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://theconversation.com/new-low-for-journalism-why-news-corps-partisan-campaign-coverage-is-harmful-to-democracy-116796>
- ^x Stapleton, J 2019, 'Dark side of Sky at night: Analysis of Murdoch TV network reveals extent of anti-Labor comments', *The New Daily*, 14 May, accessed 1 July 2019, <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/election-2019/2019/05/14/andrew-bolt-sky-news-labor/>
- ^{xi} Dwyer, T and Koskie, T 2019, 'Press, platforms and power: mapping out a stronger Australian media landscape', *The Conversation*, 5 June, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://theconversation.com/press-platforms-and-power-mapping-out-a-stronger-australian-media-landscape-117987>
- ^{xii} Meade, A 2019, 'Craziness has been dialled up': News Corp journalist unloads on his own paper', *The Guardian*, 10 May, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/may/10/news-corp-rick-morton-australian>
- ^{xiii} Koch, T 2019, 'For 30 years I worked for News Corp papers. Now all I see is shameful bias', *The Guardian*, 9 May, accessed 27 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/09/for-30-years-i-worked-for-news-corp-papers-now-all-i-see-is-shameful-bias>
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