

The ABC News division covered the Voice to Parliament referendum extensively leading up to the vote on October 14. The ABC canvassed opinions from all sectors of the community and across the country, as well as interrogating what the proposed Voice would mean for Australia. As one of the reviewers noted, there were challenges in clearly and comprehensively explaining the process, partly due to each campaign keeping the discussion quite general.

Teams across the ABC expressed concern about the lack of engagement from the “No” side on programs and platforms throughout the campaign, which contributed to some teams feeling they at times struggled to achieve the right balance. For example, leading “No” campaigner Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price declined 52 requests for an interview on ABC platforms. It became clear early on there was a strategy to focus on third party platforms to get the message out rather than rely on traditional media outlets.

The News division in collaboration with the Bonner Committee established a Voice Referendum Advisory Group in July 2023. Managers from the Content division later joined the group and the Referendum Coverage Review Committee meetings were combined and jointly chaired by News and Editorial Policies.

The cross-divisional group provided information and resources to teams covering the referendum across the ABC, principally through a SharePoint site that brought together relevant information and news.

The reviewers recommended less reliance on ‘elite sources’ and ‘horse-race’ reporting as a way to combat misinformation, and a greater emphasis on speaking to people with practical relevant experience on key issues. It’s important to note, the politics of the campaign dominated the debate and could not be ignored.

Constructive or solutions journalism was also noted as an approach that could help engage with audiences. Throughout the campaign, legal experts, architects of the Uluru statement and people with practical relevant experience on key issues were involved in the coverage, but not on every platform at every juncture. For example, if a 7PM story was about the politics of the day of the campaign, there might not be the scope that day for more coverage. However, across the campaign those stories were told and interviews conducted with those key voices.

Commenting on the 7PM on the night the referendum date was announced), Lousie Yaxley said ‘... a more useful editorial choice would have been to focus less on polling, and instead explain more about the cases for and against the referendum.’ Her review also talks about ‘each campaign keeping the argument quite general’ and the need to explain the Voice’s history and what it would do. Given the scope of the review, it doesn’t appear to capture the [explainer](#) that was commissioned and produced well

before the date was announced, given the audience was confused about what a Voice would address, and repurposed throughout the campaign across platforms.

News also created the role of Voice Correspondent, held by Dan Bourchier, and ensured explainers were regularly included in the 7PM bulletins.

The review suggests that a number of shorter explainers would have assisted the audience. Although not captured in the review's scope, a series of explainers were produced by Canberra Parliament House which also ran on the ABC NEWS Channel and were in some cases embedded in digital articles. The Indigenous Affairs Team also produced explainers for a digital audience in collaboration with ABC Indigenous. This was a targeted approach to reach audiences on all platforms including social media, as it became clear the audience was confused, particularly with the misinformation spread predominantly on those platforms.

The 'Voices of Australia' series also focused on explainers, packages and key interviews which were repurposed for other platforms.

One reviewer questioned whether Warren Mundine should have been profiled to give the audience a clearer understanding of his complex political history, given he succeeded Barry Jones as ALP National President in 2006, and several times after that sought ALP Senate positions, but subsequently ran as a Federal Liberal candidate. Mundine is on the record supporting a Treaty and changing the date of Australia Day but ran a conservative 'No' case against the Voice.

In fact the News division did profile Warren Mundine on multiple platforms and programs where he was questioned about his background, advocacy and political background. The Drum, Insiders, 7.30, Radio National and the Fact Check team canvassed his views and historical comments.

Another reviewer asked about the ABC's coverage that 'goes beyond the scope of the evaluation, as well as beyond the terms of reference' and said: 'It is important to note that this report does not seek to evaluate how the coverage represented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, whether the coverage was fair and impartial in providing voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, or whether coverage supported the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in advocating for the Voice. The research team acknowledges that we—as a group of academics who are descendent from settler-colonists—do not have the right or remit to speak on these matters. Additionally, while such an analysis does have merit, we also believe that an analysis that focuses on the democratic functions of the coverage has merit in understanding different issues.'

A large focus of the ABC's coverage was ensuring the voices and views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were canvassed across the country. Early on, the ABC

established a partnership with ICTV to produce a series of vox pops profiling remote communities. The content ran on News Channel, web and app and news breakfast.

Overall, the ABC produced 243 digital articles accumulating more than 30 million page views and almost a million engagement minutes. Audiences also engaged with ABC News social content, with ABC News Instagram accumulating 1 million views across the referendum weekend alone.

The digital coverage on News Online focussed on covering the news, presenting explainers and providing analysis by our experienced political and Indigenous reporters: Bridget Brennan, David Speers, Brett Worthington, Linton Besser, Laura Tingle, Dana Morse and Annabel Crabb.