

EDITORIAL REVIEW 17

Live Media Conferences

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September 2018

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Background

The ABC News Channel (formerly known as ABC News 24) is a rolling news channel that promotes itself as providing “around the clock coverage of news events as they break, at home and abroad”.

It provides both a broadcast and a streaming service, allowing audiences to watch breaking news via TV, online and mobile platforms.

As well as providing regular news bulletins across the day, one of the key objectives of any news channel is to bring live, breaking news to audiences as it happens, rather than recording, editing and turning around content.

News channels (including ABC News) will typically cross to major breaking stories to show live vision or to talk to their own reporters or other key talent in the field. Similarly, they will cross live as often as possible to media conferences by politicians and other newsmakers.

In recent times, this practice of running political media conferences live has been the subject of some discussion and criticism. As Editorial Director of the ABC, I have been contacted (both directly and via social media) by members of the public concerned about the media being manipulated or ‘used’ by politicians.

The concerns are that increasingly, rather than calling media conferences to announce significant or newsworthy matters, media conferences are being used simply to mount political attacks on opponents. The increasing presence of rolling news outlets (principally ABC News and Sky News) means these attacks are regularly covered live, at length and without editing, providing opportunities for politicians to engage in partisan campaigning with, arguably, little scrutiny. Material which, in the past, might have been scrutinised, assessed and included in an edited package based on impartial news judgement, is now being broadcast unedited and without significant editorial scrutiny.

Given those concerns, and the ongoing importance of providing live coverage of major news events including media conferences held by senior politicians, it seemed useful to review selected recent coverage of live media conferences by politicians and analyse their content. The aim of this review is to consider whether the editorial significance of the content of live media conferences justifies their prominence in terms of the amount of time devoted to them, and whether impartiality is being maintained.

Scope

The review examined all political media conferences broadcast live on the ABC News Channel from midnight on Friday 20th July until midnight on Friday 27th July 2018. This was the week leading up to a number of Federal by-elections, and so there was likely to be a higher than usual number of political media conferences.

A total of 25 political media conferences were identified by ABC News as having been broadcast live on ABC News channel during this period. Upon review, some were found not to have actually been live, and this is noted later in the review.

Methodology

Each media conference was viewed, and its contents assessed and summarised.

Consideration was given to the newsworthiness and substance of each media conference, the length at which it was run, the extent to which challenging questions were posed and included, and whether any party benefitted more than others from the opportunities afforded.

News approach

News has advised that it has traditionally aimed to *always* broadcast live what it calls ‘tier one’ media conferences, which is those held by the Prime Minister, the Opposition Leader, the Treasurer and the Foreign Minister.

Other media conferences are taken live based on their news value, but as a general rule the news channel tries to take as many significant and potentially newsworthy media conferences live as it can.

However, in responding to this review, News has noted that it is aware that media conferences, including those called by both the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader, have sought to use live news channels like ABC News and Sky News as unedited campaigning platforms, where political points can be made without being adequately questioned or challenged.

As a result, News will often take the initial announcement that is the subject of a media conference live, and then return later to broadcast the ‘question and answer’ segment of a conference.

In addition, media conferences with other politicians are often taken live only after consultation and advice from the ABC’s Parliamentary Bureau in Canberra.

Managing Director’s comments

Live coverage of significant political media conferences is an important part of the remit of rolling news channels, and audiences expect to get access to such occasions.

However, in covering these media conferences it is important that the ABC strikes the right balance between covering our politician’s comments and holding them appropriately to account.

The recommendations and observations in this review provide a timely opportunity to ensure the ABC continues to strike the right balance.

The Content

*Media Conferences that include campaigning on the Federal by-elections are highlighted in yellow

	Politician		Topics Covered	Date	Duration
1	Malcolm Turnbull	LIB	By-election campaigning	Sat 21/7	12.40
2	Gladys Berejiklian	LIB	Announcing a NSW by-election	Sat 21/7	5.20
3	Murray Watt	ALP	NOT LIVE – by-election campaigning	Sat 21/7	0.50
4	Luke Foley	ALP	NOT LIVE – response to NSW by-election	Sat 21/7	0.40
5	Malcolm Turnbull	LIB	By-election campaigning	Sun 22/7	16.40
6	Malcolm Turnbull	LIB	Indigenous issues	Sun 22/7	4.00
7	Bill Shorten	ALP	NOT LIVE – by-election campaigning	Sun 22/7	0.50
8	Malcolm Turnbull	LIB	Indigenous issues, but with questions on by-elections	Mon 23/7	23.00
9	Anthony Albanese	ALP	By-election campaigning	Mon 23/7	12.00
10	Dan Tehan	LIB	NDIS fraud taskforce	Tue 24/7	10.00
11	Peter Dutton	LIB	By-election campaigning	Tue 24/7	15.00
12	Bill Shorten	ALP	By-election campaigning	Tue 24/7	13.00
13	Simon Birmingham	LIB	By-election campaigning	Tue 24/7	12.00
14	Bill Shorten	ALP	By-election campaigning	Tue 24/7	10.30
15	Scott Morrison	LIB	Budget, energy policy	Wed 25/7	7.00
16	Bill Shorten & Tanya Plibersek	ALP	By-election campaigning	Wed 25/7	25.40
17	Christopher Pyne	LIB	New military equipment contract	Wed 25/7	2.30
18	Mitch Fifield	LIB	Media laws and Nine/Fairfax merger	Thu 26/7	12.00
19	Bill Shorten	ALP	By-election campaigning	Thu 26/7	14.00
20	Malcolm Turnbull	LIB	By-election campaigning	Thu 26/7	13.30
21	Christopher Pyne	LIB	New naval system	Fri 27/7	1.20
22	Georgina Downer	LIB	By-election campaigning	Fri 27/7	2.20
23	Will Hodgman	LIB	By-election campaigning	Fri 27/7	7.00
24	Penny Wong	ALP	By-election campaigning	Fri 27/7	9.30
25	Malcolm Turnbull	LIB	By-election campaigning	Fri 27/7	9.00

Observations

I viewed and summarised the content day-by-day, considering the overall impact on viewers.

SATURDAY 21 JULY

Just before 10.00am, ABC News broadcast live a 12 minute and 40 second media conference featuring the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, on the campaign trail in Queensland. The first 3-4 minutes were taken up by the Prime Minister making all his key campaign points: the Government's

achievements in jobs and growth, its tax reforms and broader policies, and then contrasting that with Bill Shorten who he claims stands for higher taxes, attacks on retirees, weak border protection and higher energy prices.

The rest of the media conference consisted of questions from journalists on the need for a population policy, skilled migrants in regional areas, Adani, Archbishop Wilson, and then finally questions on the by-election, whether it was a leadership test for Mr Turnbull and whether the Liberal candidate's issue about a military medal might cost him the seat.

There was no similar Labor media conference that day. There was a short excerpt (less than a minute) from Queensland Labor Senator Murray Watt talking about by-election issues and referring to Labor's plans for extra funding for schools and education instead of the Government's tax cuts for banks and hospital funding cuts.

In relation to NSW politics, there was a five-minute media conference from the Premier, Gladys Berejiklian, announcing the Wagga by-election and answering a series of questions about that and other issues, followed by a 40 second response by Opposition Leader Luke Foley, which was not taken live.

The overall story of the day was that the Government took advantage of an opportunity to campaign at length live on ABC News, but Labor did not. However, the Turnbull media conference involved some close and at times challenging questions for the Government on a range of topics.

SUNDAY 22 JULY

Once again (this time just before 11.00am), ABC News broadcast live a media conference from the Prime Minister on the by-election campaign trail in Queensland. This one was 16 minutes and 40 seconds, and Mr Turnbull spoke for about six minutes before taking questions. He once again stressed his key campaign points: border protection, keeping Australians free and safe, lower taxes, more investment, more jobs, higher wages and economic growth. He contrasted that with Labor's higher taxes, weaker border protection and attacks on business.

The ten minutes of questions that followed from journalists at the media conference sought more details on energy policy and water policy, and discussed the state of the polls for the by-election, which provided further opportunity for Mr Turnbull to attack Mr Shorten and Labor.

There was no similar live Labor media conference broadcast by ABC News that day. Instead, the news channel ran a short (less than a minute) recorded excerpt from a Bill Shorten speech launching Labor's by-election campaign for the Longman by-election, where he said Labor would deliver better jobs, funding and more apprenticeships.

The only other media conference that day was a live, four-minute conference with the Prime Minister during his meeting with Indigenous community representatives in Tennant Creek. However, this did not deal with any political campaigning and was focussed solely on confronting community issues related to domestic violence.

In summary, the overall impression of the day based on the live media conferences broadcast was that, for the second time over the weekend, the Government took advantage of an opportunity to campaign at length live on ABC News, but Labor did not.

MONDAY 23 JULY

Late in the morning, ABC News ran a live media conference with the Prime Minister from Tennant Creek, where he was continuing to look at issues of community safety. Although this was a very long live conference (around 23 minutes), the vast majority of it was apolitical and unrelated to the by-elections or any partisan matters. However, there were a couple of minutes at the end where the Prime Minister was asked about how confident he was ahead of the looming by-elections, which allowed him to return to his key campaign talking points about lower taxes and more growth compared to Mr Shorten's anti-business agenda.

Early in the afternoon, the channel then broadcast a 12-minute-long live media conference featuring Opposition Transport and Infrastructure Spokesman Anthony Albanese, who was on the campaign trail in Perth. Mr Albanese spent about three minutes criticising the Prime Minister, saying the by-elections were a critical test for him and he had already failed in WA by not even running candidates. He contrasted this with Labor's commitments for funding and services. The rest of the media conference was taken up with questions, which focussed strongly on Mr Albanese being more popular than Mr Shorten and whether Mr Shorten's leadership might be under threat if Labor performed poorly at the by-elections. In response, Mr Albanese stepped up his attacks on the Government for giving \$17billion in tax cuts to the big banks and neglecting real community needs.

The overall impression left was that this time Labor took advantage of an opportunity to campaign at length live on ABC News, while the Government were restricted to a brief comment at the end of a more general media conference.

TUESDAY 24 JULY

This was a busy day on the by-election campaign trail, with both the Government and the Opposition calling media conferences and participating in an election forum. A total of four events were taken live and at length on ABC News.

For the Government, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton was on the campaign trail in the South Australian seat of Mayo in the morning, while Education Minister Simon Birmingham spoke at a live election forum in the seat of Longman in the evening.

Mr Dutton's media conference was taken live and ran for around 15 minutes. He focussed strongly on the Government's record on strong border protection and stopping the boats, and criticised leading independent candidate Rebekah Sharkie for siding with Labor and being "Bill Shorten's candidate". The Liberal candidate, Georgina Downer, was with him and took a range of questions about her campaign and suggestions she was certain to lose. Mr Dutton also answered a range of questions about immigration policy and African gangs.

Mr Birmingham was attending a forum on the Longman by-election in Brisbane. ABC News took his entire speech to the forum live – about 12 minutes. The speech largely avoided partisan attacks and

he did not criticise Labor. Instead, he focussed on explaining the Government's approach to education and in particular to funding the Catholic sector.

For Labor, Opposition Leader Bill Shorten was on the campaign trail in the seat of Braddon in Tasmania in the morning and then he spoke at the same election forum as Mr Birmingham in the evening. ABC News took the morning media conference live for around thirteen minutes, and then at the evening forum they took Mr Shorten's comments live as well (for around ten and a half minutes).

In the morning media conference, Mr Shorten spoke for about 2 and a half minutes on Labor's commitments to improve health and hospital funding in Tasmania and contrasted that with Mr Turnbull's approach. He then took questions about whether his leadership would be under threat if Labor lost any by-elections and about a number of other political issues. In his responses, he shifted the issue regularly back to the Government's failings, including low wages, high energy bills, cuts to health and tax cuts to banks.

In the evening forum, Mr Shorten focussed on education policy and the Catholic sector, which was clearly the focus of the forum. However, Mr Shorten's speech was much more political and partisan than Mr Birmingham's, with a strong focus on the Government's cuts to education.

The only other live political media conference that day involved the Social Services Minister, Dan Tehan, but it related to a crackdown on NDIS fraud and was not political or partisan.

The overall impression was that both the Government and the Opposition took advantage of two separate opportunities to speak at length about their by-election campaign and criticise their opponents. However, both were subjected to rigorous questioning by reporters in the ground, and this questioning was included in our live coverage (although the perennial problem occurred that questions were often off-mic and difficult to hear).

WEDNESDAY 25 JULY

At around 9.30am, Treasurer Scott Morrison held a media conference to discuss the budget, and this was taken live by ABC News. He spoke for just one minute before taking questions, and the focus of the questions was on a range of policy challenges including aged care, energy, health care and school funding, as well as a question about Labor MP Emma Husar. There were no references to the by-elections and no overt campaigning.

About two hours later, ABC News took another live media conference, this time by Opposition Leader Bill Shorten and his Deputy, Tanya Plibersek, who were on the by-election campaign trail in the Queensland seat of Longman. This was almost 27 minutes long and provided an opportunity for Labor to push all of its key election messages and slogans – their commitment to health funding instead of big corporate tax cuts. Mr Shorten and Ms Plibersek spoke uninterrupted for about seven minutes before taking questions. The questions essentially covered two key areas – the forthcoming by-elections and the controversy surrounding Labor MP Emma Husar. In response to the first issue, Mr Shorten essentially repeated his key campaign talking points. In response to the second, he repeatedly stressed that there was an independent investigation underway and this should be allowed to take its course.

There was one particularly noteworthy moment in the media conference where, in response to some challenging questioning from journalists about health policy, Mr Shorten said “I want to sort of speak almost past the press journalists here to people in this electorate and to Australians generally”, before going on to repeat his key campaign talking points once more. Such a statement only makes sense in the context of a live broadcast, where the opportunity exists for politicians to by-pass journalists and speak directly to target audiences.

Early in the afternoon, there was a relatively short (2 and a half minutes) live excerpt from a media conference by the Minister for Defence Industry, Christopher Pyne, to announce a new \$1.9 billion project to replace military vehicles. There was no reference to the by-elections and no overt campaigning.

The overall impression of the day was that this time it was Labor who took advantage of an opportunity to run its campaign messages extensively and criticise their political opponents in a live media conference.

THURSDAY 26 JULY

At around 11.30am, ABC News ran a 12-minute-long live media conference with Communications Minister Mitch Fifield. This dealt with the Nine-Fairfax merger and media regulation generally. Mr Fifield spoke for about two minutes and then took questions, which covered a range of relevant policy matters surrounding the merger. There was no partisan campaigning and no references to the by-elections.

In the afternoon there were two by-election related campaigning media conferences – one by the Opposition Leader just after 12 noon and one by the Prime Minister just before 2pm. Both were taken live. Mr Shorten’s media conference ran for 14 minutes and Mr Turnbull’s for 13-and-a-half minutes.

The Opposition Leader was in Devonport, and after just thirty seconds of opening remarks about the Nine-Fairfax merger, he went straight to questions from the local media contingent. Questions about the by-elections dominated and followed a familiar pattern – whether Labor had done enough to woo business, whether Tasmania needed a bigger share of GST, their policies on health and education, his own leadership, and attacks on the Government’s economic and social policies.

The Prime Minister’s media conference was also in Devonport, but he took a very different approach. He was accompanied by a local couple who ran a small business, and he started by effectively interviewing them about their support for the Government, what Government policy had delivered for their business and how pleased they were. This ‘interview’ went on for almost three minutes before the Prime Minister then took over again and began to make his usual campaign talking points about jobs and growth, and to warn about the risks from both Labor and the Greens.

The rest of the media conference was taken up with questions from local journalists about the Nine-Fairfax merger, Emma Husar, My Health and then a series of questions about the by-elections.

The overall impression of the day was that both major parties took advantage of extensive live media conferences to reiterate their key campaigning talking points and criticise their political opponents.

FRIDAY 27 JULY

Around 11.30am, ABC News crossed to a live Christopher Pyne media conference to announce a new naval system. However, this was cut short after only 1 minute and 20 seconds. It contained no by-election campaigning or partisan attacks.

Shortly after 11.30am, the channel crossed to another live media conference involving the Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, campaigning for the Mayo by-election with candidate Georgina Downer. However, although it may have been the presence of the Education Minister that prompted the ABC to take the event live, it was the candidate, Georgina Downer, who spoke first, and we cut away from the conference after about 2 minutes before the Minister had an opportunity to speak. During that time, Ms Downer spoke about local by-election promises and policies.

Almost immediately, the channel cut across to another live media conference, this time involving the Tasmanian Liberal Premier, Will Hodgman, who was campaigning with the Liberal candidate for the seat of Braddon. This ran for seven minutes and dealt primarily with campaigning issues. It provided an opportunity to once again focus on the key political campaigning points and criticise Labor and the Greens.

Just minutes later, the channel cut to another live media conference. This one featured Labor Senator Penny Wong, who was campaigning in Tasmania. The conference ran for 9-and-a-half minutes and began with the Labor candidate, Justine Keay, pressing her campaign talking points and focussing on health as the number one issue. She spoke for 3-and-a-half minutes and then handed over to Senator Wong who spoke for another two minutes before herself handing over to local Labor MP Julie Collins. In all, the three politicians spoke uninterrupted for seven minutes before pausing to take questions, and the seven minutes were taken up with repeating key campaigning points and attacking Government policy.

The questions covered criticisms Bill Shorten's absence, threats to his leadership and a general lack of trust in politicians.

The final live media conference of the day on ABC News was at 1 pm, a nine-minute-long media conference with the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, who was campaigning in Queensland with the Liberal candidate for Longman, Trevor Ruthenberg. Mr Turnbull spoke for about 1 minute and 30 seconds at the start, re-iterating key campaign points and praising his candidate, before taking questions. The questions covered by-election issues and provided an opportunity for the Prime Minister to criticise both Labor and One Nation and push his campaign talking points once more. The candidate also faced questioning over his medal controversy.

The overall impression was that, on the eve of polling day for the five crucial by-elections, both of the major parties had opportunities (2-3 for the Government and one for the Opposition) to conduct extensive campaigning via live media appearances.

Conclusions

I do not propose to discuss further those interviews that did not involve by-election campaigning. That's because they were (apart from the Berejiklian/Foley ones) clearly focussed on the announcement of new initiatives or on relevant policy discussions. I am satisfied that they were newsworthy and appropriate for live broadcast and fulfil the brief of a rolling news channel to carry such matters of substance live on a regular basis. They included announcements of substance followed by relevant questioning. In relation to the NSW live media conferences about the Wagga by-election, these were also clearly in a different category as they involved the actual announcement of a new by-election and the immediate reaction to it.

That leaves seventeen items that partly or wholly dealt with Federal By-Election issues. I am eliminating from my considerations a further three items:

- The Murray Watt media conference on Saturday 21 July as it was not taken live;
- The Bill Shorten speech grab on Sunday 22 July as it was not taken live; and
- The Malcolm Turnbull media conference on Monday 23 July as it was almost wholly devoted to indigenous policy issues and the decision to run it would have been made on that basis. Although there were some brief party-political issues raised towards the end that exchange was not initiated by the Prime Minister and was incidental to the substance of the conference.

Therefore, my considerations and conclusions in this review are based on the following live coverage:

Government interviews	Date	Dur	Opposition interviews	Date	Dur
Malcolm Turnbull	21/7	12:40			
Malcolm Turnbull	22/7	16:40			
Malcolm Turnbull	23/7	23:00	Anthony Albanese	23/7	12:00
Peter Dutton	24/7	15:00	Bill Shorten	24/7	13:00
Simon Birmingham	24/7	12:00	Bill Shorten	24/7	10:30
			Bill Shorten/Tanya Plibersek	25/7	25:40
Malcolm Turnbull	26/7	13:30	Bill Shorten	26/7	14:00
Georgina Downer	27/7	2:30			
Will Hodgman	27/7	7:00			
Malcolm Turnbull	27/7	9:00	Penny Wong	27/7	9:30
Nine Government live events		111:20	Six Opposition live events		84:40

The raw numbers indicate that the Opposition only received about 75% of the time provided to the Government to campaign on the by-elections by the means of live media conferences on the ABC News channel, and no independents or smaller parties appear to have received any live coverage of their campaign events.

It is important to keep in mind that this was not the only means whereby the parties got their messages across on the news channel. Live media conferences are only a small proportion of the overall output of the channel, and the normal news coverage provides ample opportunities for policies, issues, candidates and key campaign themes to be covered. This is not a review of balance in the ABC's overall coverage of the by-elections.

Nevertheless, the difference between the number of live events broadcast on the channel that directly involved by-election campaigning is worth noting. I requested feedback from News as to whether, in their view one side was simply more active than the other and called more media conferences, or technical or timing issues dictated which events ABC News was in a position to take live. For example, I note that the only appearances by senior Labor figures over the weekend of July 21 and 22 (by Senator Murray Watt and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten) were not taken live and only relatively brief excerpts of less than a minute were run. If both of these events had been taken live and at length, they would have had the effect of balancing the Government content in the first two days of the review period and evening up the output over the entire week. In response, News advised that, particularly in the first weekend of the period under review, the Government was simply more active than the Opposition in calling live media conferences, and this was reflected appropriately in our broadcasts.

In the final week leading up to the by-elections, the News channel advised that it kept a rough tally of live media conferences to monitor the number of events taken live for the major parties. News also advised that more detailed and rigorous tallies are kept during general election campaigns. I endorse this approach and would encourage live media conferences to be generally tracked and monitored over time to consider and evaluate issues of impartiality and an appropriate diversity of views.

In doing so, it would be important to distinguish between announcements of major decisions and projects (where you would expect the Government of the day to dominate) and overtly political arguments and criticisms, where more balance might be warranted, and opportunities to respond provided.

Turning to the content of the material, it is useful to consider the value of the content being broadcast, both the audience value and the editorial value.

One noteworthy element of the material reviewed was the level of repetition of key messages, campaign slogans and attacks on political opponents. The Government repeatedly emphasised its focus on jobs and growth, and attacked the Opposition for being anti-business, anti-growth and in favour of weaker border protection. The Opposition emphasised its focus on health, education and employment, and attacked the Government for ignoring families and giving big tax cuts to banks. While all of these assertions are part and parcel of a by-election campaign and need to be included in ABC coverage, their repetition at length, day after day, in often quite long media conferences is not necessarily something that serves ABC audiences well, particularly when it can occur at the expense of other news content. When viewed together (as I did), the media conferences took on a predictable and one-dimensional quality. The same slogans were repeated over a number of days, and politicians often spoke uninterrupted for several minutes before taking questions, providing quite extended opportunities to deliver what were essentially campaign stump speeches.

This highlights a significant editorial dilemma for those broadcasting live media conferences which are called not to make major policy announcements or announce important decisions but simply (or predominantly) to engage in campaigning. Where in the past, journalists would attend such events and decide for themselves, using their editorial judgement, what to include in their reporting, the live coverage of those events means it is the politicians themselves who have greater control over how extensively and in what manner their comments are broadcast.

In the material reviewed, there were three interesting examples pointing to the way in which politicians now appear to understand and exploit this shift in editorial control.

1. On Wednesday 25 July, during a very long media conference broadcast live, Leader Bill Shorten was asked about whether his assertion that the Government had cut spending in health was true. During the course of his response, he effectively shifted focus away from answering the question by saying “I want to sort of speak almost past the press journalists here to people in this electorate and to Australians generally...” and then he went on to discuss his broader campaign talking points and avoid the substance of the original question. While this technique is familiar in most political media conferences, it is only possible to carry out effectively when the media conference is live and there is not the opportunity to make editorial decisions on what to include and what to omit.
2. On Thursday 26 July, during a media conference in the campaign trail in Devonport, the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull chose to open his media conference by effectively interviewing two local business people himself, asking them about their businesses and how the Government’s policies were helping them. It was by no means clear to me that this was a piece of content – almost three minutes in length – that the ABC would have decided on merit to broadcast, and as the Prime Minister himself organised and conducted the interview, the questions were his and not those of a journalist. Once again, this was only possible in the context of a live media conference where the ABC had made the editorial decision to roll live on what they expected to be a media conference by the Prime Minister but were instead delivered something different over which they had limited control.
3. On Friday 27 July, a live media conference was listed in the log provided to me by ABC News as a conference featuring the Education Minister, Simon Birmingham. However, Mr Birmingham was accompanied by the Liberal candidate in the Mayo by-election, Georgina Downer, and it was Ms Downer who spoke first. As it happens, ABC News cut away from that media conference after just two minutes to another event, and so what began live as a Simon Birmingham media conference became, in fact, a Georgina Downer media conference. While the views of the candidate were clearly newsworthy and were included elsewhere in our coverage, it is not clear that the ABC, under different circumstances, would have decided that they warranted live rolling coverage on our news channel.

These three examples reinforce the broader point, which is that politicians from all sides are increasingly exploiting live media conferences to take editorial control of the media and fashion their messages accordingly.

The counter argument, of course, is that it is the presence of journalists from a wide range of media outlets at these conferences that provides the opportunity for scrutiny and editorial control. Journalists have an opportunity to raise matters of public importance and steer the content towards

newsworthy matters. Two problems were evident in this approach in the media conferences I reviewed. First of all, when the questions finally came, they were often hard for television audiences to hear (effectively miking such media appearances is notoriously difficult). Secondly, the questions more often than not provided little more than opportunities for politicians to avoid or dismiss the question and then return to their prepared talking points. When campaign appearances are recorded and included in edited news packages, the extended or repeated comments are, of course, edited out for appropriate editorial reasons. In live coverage, this is not possible.

I would suggest that, on any reasonable editorial assessment, much of the content in the live media conferences I reviewed would not have merited such extensive coverage based on their news value or importance. While there is undoubted value in covering by-election campaigns and reporting on the key promises, claims and counter claims of the candidates and the major parties, there is less apparent value in broadcasting long live slabs of repetitive campaigning in the form of media conferences.

The counter argument, of course, is that there is no way of knowing when political leaders may say something newsworthy, slip up on the campaign trail and make a mistake, or be subjected to a telling question that elicits a newsworthy response. There is a balancing act involved in ensuring audiences are provided with live access to potentially significant events, particularly those involving the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader, while not providing 'free kicks' to those same politicians to spend excessive ABC air time on repetitive and partisan campaigning.

Recommendations

Based on my examination of the material contained in this review, I saw no evidence that ABC News, on its rolling news channel, breached any editorial standards. The logic for broadcasting live media conferences by senior politicians is compelling and the practice should continue.

However, to minimise the risk of this practice leading to poor content outcomes for audiences and insufficient editorial scrutiny of political statements, I recommend the following:

1. Care should be taken to ascertain as far as possible the reason for a media conference being called, and in particular whether it is conducted for the purpose of announcing a new project, policy or decision.
2. Where there is no clear policy or announcement reason for the media conference, it should be closely monitored as it is being broadcast, and active consideration should be given to cutting it short as a live broadcast if it appears to be repetitive, inconsequential, or too heavily focussed on simply scoring political points.
3. In particular, care should be taken during election campaigns, by-election campaigns and other periods of overt campaigning (for example, during the lead up to a referendum, a plebiscite or a major parliamentary debate) not to provide disproportionate opportunities for politicians to engage in live, unedited campaigning on ABC channels.
4. Further attention should be given to any possible technical or procedural improvements which might allow the audio from questions to be heard more clearly. I know that this has been a perennial problem and control over the environment of many media conferences is

limited, but it should be a priority to explore any possible ways of improving this critical area, which would go a long way towards ensuring greater editorial over the content.

5. The ABC News channel should keep an ongoing simple log of live political media conferences it broadcasts, so that it can regularly review the extent and balance of these events – not to provide false balance or artificially even ‘share of voice’ outcomes, but in order to examine and reflect on the regularity, nature and news value of such events.