

ABC Editorial Review

Coverage of the Voice to Parliament referendum

October 2024

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Background

The Voice to Parliament referendum was held on 14 October 2023. Voters were asked to approve a proposed alteration to the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Behind this proposal lay a host of issues, arguments and details. The referendum campaign was marked by claims and counterclaims from advocates on each side of the proposal, including claims of misinformation and disinformation.

As the national public broadcaster the ABC had an obligation to facilitate the democratic process and help Australians make an informed decision. It sought to do so by providing context and analysis, interviewing advocates, and addressing misinformation where appropriate.

This was the first Australian referendum since 1999. According to the Australian Electoral Commission, almost half of the people on the electoral roll had never voted in a referendum before. For many who had, the process was a distant memory. In this context the ABC had a particular duty to provide accurate information about an important democratic process that was unfamiliar to most Australians.

The ABC engaged three external reviews to sample ABC content relating to the referendum and produce a report addressing the following questions:

- How well did the sampled content achieve the aim of helping Australians make an informed decision when they voted? Could the sampled content have done this better? If so, how?
- Did the sampled content exhibit an appropriate approach to dealing with misinformation and disputed claims?
- Were interviews conducted in an appropriately probing manner?

The focus of the review was on the ABC's role in explaining the issues and aiding in people's understanding. It was not a review of the impartiality of the coverage, or the diversity of perspectives presented; those matters have been separately considered by the ABC's Referendum Coverage Review Committee (full report available [here](#)).

The reviewers took account of the ABC's [Editorial Policies](#) but the review was not an assessment of the sampled content's compliance with those policies.

The reviewers were chosen to bring different expertise to assessing the questions. Each reviewer had autonomy to choose which content – from the content provided – to sample. While there was some consistency to their findings, each had different insights. These have been summarised. However, to fully understand the review it is important to read the full findings. The full reviews are attached.

The reviewers were,

Jason Ardler, a Yuin man and the founder and director of the strategy and change management consultancy agency Thirriwirri.

Louise Yaxley, a journalist and former ABC Canberra Parliament House bureau chief.

Kieran McGuinness, Sora Park & Caroline Fisher from the University of Canberra's News and Media Research Centre.

The ABC thanks the reviewers for their participation and their thoughtful analysis.

Gavin Fang, Editorial Director

Summary

Content for the review was selected with the aim of giving the reviewers a reasonably wide snapshot of prominent programs and stories covered across the referendum period. The content is included as Appendix 1.

In particular, the sample provided to the reviewers included explainer content and interviews with key advocates, as this type of content was relevant to the questions under consideration by the reviewers.

Each reviewer was not expected to review all the content. Instead, they were given autonomy to choose which content to specifically sample and focus on.

In addition to this summary, each review should be read independently for full context and understanding.

On the key question the reviewers were asked – ‘How well did the sampled content achieve the aim of helping Australians make an informed decision when they voted? – the answer was largely positive.

The reviewers made the following overall comments about the ABC’s coverage.

Jason Ardler, *‘... the sampled content was appropriate and fit for the purpose of helping Australians make an informed decision when they voted on the Voice to Parliament Referendum.’*

‘Overall, the sampled content did exhibit an appropriate approach to dealing with misinformation and disputed claims, and interviews were conducted in an appropriately probing manner.’

‘... There were some outliers in which views and perspectives were not adequately probed, challenged or fact checked. Also, some interviewees had more relevant experiences and knowledge for the interviewers to draw on than others.’

Louise Yaxley, *‘The sampled content showed the ABC created material in a wide variety of formats for the audience to find and engage with.’*

‘... The referendum process including dates, the question and the rules determining the result was thoroughly explained. Examples enhanced the coverage and gave the audience ways to understand how a Voice could improve Indigenous lives or create extra problems.’

‘The specific arguments for and against the Voice itself were generally not spelled out as clearly and comprehensively as the process... This was partly due to each campaign keeping the argument quite general...’

Kieran McGuinness (and the News and Media Research Centre), *‘The sampled content was overall successful in providing information required for a reasonable person to understand the voting process, how YES or NO vote would change the Constitution, the legislative process that was required to follow a successful YES outcome, and the broader social and historic context that instigated the referendum.’*

‘Important to consider, however, is that the ABC conducted its reporting with notable informational constraints. The Government, as well as other major political parties, did not develop a policy platform informing the public about their preference for how the Voice would be legislated. Therefore, the ABC was unable to fully inform the public about what would likely follow a successful YES vote and what the likely composition, powers, function and procedures of the Voice would be.’

‘Additionally, while the sampled content was overall successful in informing voters, it did at times foreground coverage of campaign strategy, political tactics and discourse about ‘winners or losers’ in the Voice referendum.’

Across the three reviews, there were many similar themes identified. These themes have been summarised below but for full context should be read with the full reviews.

1. Interviews

The reviewers found that interviewees were effectively challenged and probed. Contested claims were questioned in a ‘polite but firm manner’.

It was noted that putting ambiguous or contradictory past statements to interviewees was an effective way of probing claims.

Relevant background was included in most interviews. However, at times there was a high level of assumed knowledge, and some speculative claims went unchallenged or unexplained.

Jason Ardler, *‘Across the sampled content, assertions were in the main probed, challenged and contested respectfully, even robustly on occasion. ... However, probing did vary at times. Discussion style programs like Late Night Live and Between the Lines were sometimes less contested focusing more on the interviewee’s interests and perspectives, with conversational and leading questions tending to drill further into those perspectives.’*

Louise Yaxley, *‘Some suggestions (for interviews) - Add as much background information as possible in questions, Craft questions clearly to give audiences the best chance of keeping up, Bear in mind the balance between challenging subjects on daily stories and the need to explore underlying referendum issues’.*

Kieran McGuinness (and the News and Media Research Centre) *‘Interviews were conducted appropriately. Interviewers were consistently professional, fair, polite and honest in their conduct, questions to interviewees were generally based on verifiable, accurate or complete information, interviewers provided adequate context or were responsive to questions when asked for additional context, and contestations were made in a polite but firm manner, meeting standards that are acceptable within contemporary political journalism.’*

2. Perspectives and political coverage

The reviewers noted that at times coverage of polling, politics and campaign strategy was given more weight than the substantive discussion of policy and ‘affected stakeholder groups’.

The reviewers recommended less reliance on ‘elite sources’ and ‘horse-race’ reporting, and as a way to combat misinformation, a greater emphasis on speaking to people with practical relevant experience on key issues.

Constructive or solutions journalism was also noted as an approach that could help engage with audiences.

Louise Yaxley (commenting on the 7PM on the night the referendum date was announced), *‘... 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.’*

Kieran McGuinness (and the News and Media Research Centre), *‘... referendum coverage should aim to ensure that elite sources – particularly politicians – are not overrepresented as source of context and information. Elections and referendums are democratic processes that involve all Australians; therefore, all voices need to be heard.’*

‘More attention needs to be given to how journalists can incorporate the views of community leaders, heads of small support or advocacy groups, and other non-elite sources who have a stake in policy outcomes.’

Jason Ardler, *‘In some instances, a focus on behaviours and events around the politics of the debate, diverted attention from (and likely impacted the clarity of) the purpose, benefits, and risks of the referendum proposal itself – and the cases for and against.’*

3. Misinformation - Explainers & Fact Checks

Explainers were highlighted as a strength of the ABC’s coverage. The reviewers noted the ABC put considerable resources into explainer style content across all platforms.

These were well regarded and an important tool in the ABC's coverage in providing necessary information and also to combat misinformation.

The reviewers noted some possible improvements to the format of explainers and questioned the efficacy of 'Fact-check' content particularly whether or not voters likely to engage with and believe misinformation would seek out and see an ABC fact-check.

One key suggestion from the reviewers was the need to foreground correct information in any explainer or fact-check content ahead of any misinformation. This is because readers often recall the first part of an article, as such misinformation should be avoided in headlines, lead paragraphs and key points.

Kieran McGuinness (and the News and Media Research Centre), *'Fact-check and explainer articles should always ensure that factual information is placed before discussion of disputed claims. Within and across media items, disputed claims should be dealt with infrequently to avoid continuous repetition of potentially false or misleading claims.'*

'The first part of an article is generally the easiest to recall... Better recall of disputed claims is also likely if they are repeated again and again in the same piece of across articles... It is recommended that disputed claims are foregrounded by factual information and repeated infrequently so as not to inadvertently reinforce recall of those claims at the expense of verifiable and factual information.'

Louise Yaxley, *"Those who see and believe misinformation are, often, not the same as those who see and believe the subsequent fact-checks" is the way the Conversation explains the dilemma with the factcheck approach. As noted previously, many Australians do not keep up with developments in Indigenous affairs and there is a danger of a disconnect between the ABC's fact checks and the reader who may find the tone dismissive... Fact checks set themselves up as independent arbiters and should stick to simple and neutral language.'*

Jason Ardler,

'... The sample content showed appropriate and reasonable approaches to dealing with misinformation and disputed claims, with consistent attempts to do live fact-checking...

Arguments for the yes and no cases were routinely aired or put to interviewees across various programs/episodes allowing assertions to be fact checked, tested, rebutted, and challenged.

This increased exposure on the range of facts, arguments, and depth of perspectives.'

Other Observations

There were some observations unique to each review that are useful to highlight.

Louise Yaxley identified the ABC's breadth of analysis and in particular the value to the audience of having the ability to draw on journalists with long personal experience of an issue.

'Laura Tingle gave context using her deep personal reporting history going back to Wik and Mabo... Annable Crab is an exceptional writer who drew on historical context to analyse the referendum debate...

Bridget Brennan's engaging analysis was released on the day the referendum date was announced. It comprehensively set out the issues and history for those turning to the ABC for information once they knew when they would go to the polling booth.

These insightful analysis pieces from experienced journalists were an important part of helping Australians make an informed decision.

Identifying and mentoring the next generation of journalists to write at this level will be important.'

Jason Ardler

'... Scenariorising might have been an effective way of explaining how the Voice would operate in practice and where its role would start and end relative to that of the Government.

When the issue of youth crime was raised, there was no probing or exploring how the Voice could operate in addressing such an issue, how that differs from what happens now, and why it might lead to a more successful response.'

Kieran McGuinness (and the News and Media Research Centre),

'For online users with lower levels of digital literacy, links to external sources could be made clearer and more accessible.

ABC should consider that some audiences have a much lower level of media literacy when it comes to accessing online content. Click-through options and hyperlinks are often included as a way for audiences to find out more about the facts. Consideration should be given to how these can be adapted for audiences that are less familiar with these affordances.'

Appendix 1 – Content Sample

Each reviewer was given autonomy to choose to sample from the content included below.

7pm News (referendum stories only):

- 30 August
- 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 October

Insiders:

- 10 September (feature interview: Noel Pearson)
- 17 September (feature interview: Warren Mundine)
- 8 October (feature interview: Anthony Albanese)

The Voice Referendum Explained podcast (all ten episodes):

<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/the-voice-referendum-explained>

The Drum:

- 30 August
- 14 September (Warren Mundine)
- 21 September (SA Voice special)

7.30:

- 30 August (entire program on voice)
- 14 September (Kerryn Liddle)
- 4 October (Black sovereign movement story)
- 11 October (Noel Pearson & Torres Strait visit)
- 12 October (entire program on voice)

Q+A:

- 7 August (Garma Festival) <https://www.abc.net.au/qanda/monday-07-august-2023/102359246>
- 2 October <https://www.abc.net.au/qanda/the-voice-voting-visions-for-australia/102889808> (Voice - 10:00 to 42:32)
- 9 October <https://www.abc.net.au/qanda/q-a-live-from-adelaide/102698368> (Voice - 7:30 to 54:42)

RN Breakfast:

- 30 Aug – Fred Hooper & Warren Mundine
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/-the-voice-of-no-choice-first-nations-no-campaigner/102791880>
- 8 Sep – Peter Dutton
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/peter-dutton-voice-referendum-/102827322>

- 13 Sep – Marcia Langton
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/marcia-langton-says-no-campaign-are-using-fear-over-fact-/102848462>
- 25 Sep – Lidia Thorpe
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/lidia-thorpe-referendum-the-voice-deaths-in-custody/102895440>
- 29 Sep – Thomas Mayo
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/thomas-mayo-yes-campaign-push-/102913240>
- 11 Oct – Noel Pearson
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/-we-can-win-this-noel-pearson-s-final-push-for-the-voice/102958298>
- 5 Oct – Tony Abbott
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/tony-abbott-on-the-referendum/102936108>
- 5 Oct – Julian Leaser
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/julian-leaser-the-voice-to-parliament-/102936514>

Between the Lines:

- 8 Sep – Interview w Shireen Morris & Alexander Downer
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/betweenthelines/between-the-lines/102753646>
- 21 Jul – Interview w Geoffrey Blainey
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/betweenthelines/between-the-lines/102554394>

Late Night Live:

- 25 Jul – ‘Why the Voice – and the Constitution – matter, with Megan Davis and George Williams’
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/latenightlive/the-voice-and-the-constitution-megan-davis-george-williams/102646210>
- 18 Sep – Amy Remeikis’ Canberra less than 4 weeks to go until referendum day
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/latenightlive/amy-remeikis-canberra/102871984>
- 9 Oct – Laura Tingle’s Canberra on the last week of Voice campaigning
<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/latenightlive/tingle-voice-referendum-final-week/102953884>

ABC News Online:

ABC Fact Check:

- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-29/fact-check-voice-to-parliament-misinformation/102913680>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-13/fact-check-jacinta-nampijinpa-price-closing-the-gap-place-race/102966826>

- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-11/fact-check-uluru-statement-one-page-26/102714792>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-02/fact-check-indigenous-australians-support-for-the-voice/102673042>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-19/fact-check-yes-no-campaign-pamphlets-aec/102614710>

Analysis:

- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-14/the-unloving-message-of-the-voice-referendum/102975718>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-02/voice-referendum-appeal-to-people-not-politics/102169850>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-30/voice-referendum-looms-other-question-heart-debate-love-win/102917584>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-30/voice-referendum-date-with-destiny-october-14/102792418>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-03/voice-referendum-vote-on-92-words-stay-out-of-weeds/102800166>

Explainers:

- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-03/the-voice-referendum-everything-you-need-to-know/102895238>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-11/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-voice/102208504>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-30/voice-to-parliament-yes-no-cases/102788518>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-05/voice-to-parliament-referendum-2023-most-asked-questions/102878560>

Appendix 2 – Voice Referendum Review Report Attachments

[Yaxley - Voice Referendum Review Report](#)

[Ardler - Voice to Parliament Review Report](#)

[McGuinness & UC - Voice to Parliament Review Report](#)

[ABC News Referendum review response](#)

Appendix 3 - Biographies

Jason Ardler

Jason Ardler is a Yuin man and the founder and director of the Indigenous owned strategy and change management consultancy agency Thirriwirri.

Mr Ardler worked in senior executive roles in the NSW public and university sectors for two decades and for 8 years was the Head of Aboriginal Affairs NSW.

He is currently also Chair of the National Indigenous Australians Agency's Indigenous Evaluation Committee.

Louise Yaxley

Louise Yaxley is a former ABC journalist who specialised in Federal politics for nearly 30 years, focussing mainly on broadcasting for radio news, audio current affairs and ABC online. She is known for navigating complex stories and a commitment to fairness, fact-checking and balanced reporting with the aim of ensuring the audience is informed and engaged.

Her early journalism included several years at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, CAAMA, which gave her an insight into Indigenous issues, particularly the High Court's Mabo Native Title ruling.

Beyond her reporting, Louise Yaxley is recognized as a mentor and advocate for emerging journalists. She has a commitment to promoting diversity and integrity. Her current work includes passing on her experience in political reporting by training journalists in several Pacific nations.

University of Canberra, News and Media Research Centre

Kieran McGuinness is a Postdoctoral research fellow in the News & Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra. They are a mixed-methods researcher focused on diversity and inclusion, audience studies, journalistic role performance and health communication research. They were the co-lead of the Understanding Gambling Harm in the Digital Age project which overviewed the challenges and opportunities for public health communication about gambling harm in the ACT. They are also co-author and lead data analyst for the N&MRC's long running *Digital News Report: Australia* project, which reports on longitudinal news and media consumption across 47 countries.

Dr Sora Park is Professor of Communication and Professorial Research Fellow at the News & Media Research Centre, Faculty of Arts & Design, University of Canberra. Her research focuses on digital media users, media markets and media policy. She is the project lead of the annual Digital News Report: Australia.

Caroline Fisher is an Associate Professor of Journalism and a former reporter and producer for ABC News and Radio National and former ministerial media adviser to Anna Bligh.