# 'SPOT AUDIT' OF CONTENT SAME SEX MARRIAGE DEBATE August 7 and 8, 2017

Conducted by:

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### **Background:**

On Monday 7 August, the parliamentary Liberal Party held a special meeting to discuss the same-sex marriage issue. The meeting was called by the Prime Minister following a push by a small number of equality advocates to proceed to a vote on the floor of Parliament and thereby jettison the election promise to canvass the views of the population via a plebiscite. There was almost continuous reporting prior to the meeting on Monday afternoon and blanket coverage of the outcome (a postal survey to be conducted by the ABS).

The Editorial Policies team has been discussing the value of 'spot audits', in which all coverage of a politically contentious issue is identified, and talent and angles briefly summarised. While lacking the depth of other review methodologies, a spot audit has the benefit of speed and allows for any problems to be quickly identified.

The postal survey issue appealed for a pilot project, as the coverage was intense, a defined period of peak interest could be identified, and the ABC has been frequently accused of either being overly sympathetic to same sex marriage campaigners, or of paying the issue more attention than it intrinsically deserves (or both).

### Scope & Method:

Across two days, more than 60 items were broadcast on national television and local and national radio. Many of these stories were made available for catch up viewing or listening online, and some converted into text. Two articles have also been included in this survey: one 'explainer' on the same sex marriage debate (News Online) and another featuring a marriage ceremony performed in the British High Commission in Canberra (Hack).

Information on stories has been gleaned from ABC program websites and from the rundown database of Local and Regional radio. While the information from national radio and television services is comprehensive, it is possible that some content on local (particularly Regional) radio is missing. The edpols team is confident that the gaps could not be many and that the 60 items sourced are sufficient to gain a useful picture of total output. It should be noted that the duration of individual items has not been included, but given their placement within magazine and rolling news programs, it is reasonable to assume that the range was limited to stories between 5-10 minutes in length.

The aim of the audit was to determine whether an appropriate diversity of perspectives had been included in initial coverage and that impartiality had been achieved. The reviewer did not listen to, watch or read all elements of all coverage but monitored sufficient content to get a clear sense of the contents, and produced summaries of the main talent interviewed.

# Comments and analysis:

This particular iteration of the same-sex marriage issue was focussed on debate within the Government party room and on the mechanics of the postal survey process. For this reason, the range and number of speakers was particularly (but appropriately) focussed on protagonists within the Liberal Party, supplemented by a number of independents, a small number from the ALP and a selection of academic commentators and journalists. Rather than defining people by their support or opposition to same sex marriage per se, they have been categorised according to their support for

the plebiscite/survey process chosen by the Government. In practice, much of the opposition to the process came from those who support same sex marriage and vice versa, but the distinction is important to note.

The overall guest list was not very imaginative (with the exception of Geoffrey Winter on The Drum), but again, this is reasonable when the key elements of the story were an internecine debate and an unusual form of polling that required technical explanation. Only ABC Adelaide's Mornings program included vox pops from the public, and only a small number of outlets incorporated personal stories into their coverage.

Speakers included in our coverage have been roughly allocated into the following categories, based on the key points they were making:

**FACTUAL/PROCESS:** Talent who were principally explaining how the proposed process would work. This group consisted largely of politicians.

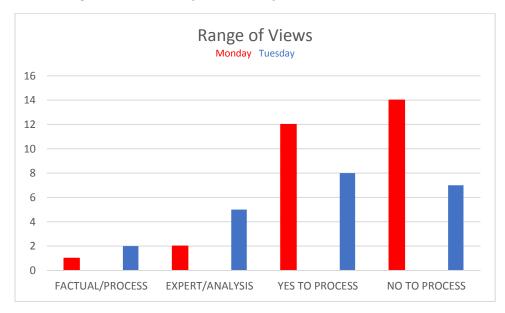
**EXPERT ANALYSIS:** Talent who were legal or constitutional experts exploring the process in more detail

**YES TO PROCESS:** Talent who supported the decision to proceed with a public plebiscite/survey

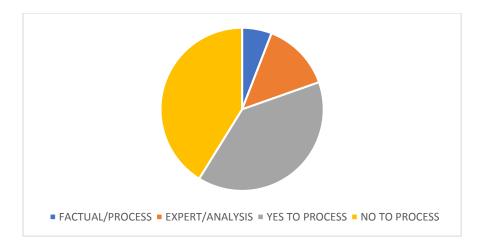
**NO TO PROCESS:** Talent who opposed the decision to proceed with a public plebiscite/survey

The proportions of talent in each category are represented on the graphs on the following page.

# This graph summarises the number of voices in each category (not the amount of time) included in our coverage on both Monday and Tuesday



# This graph looks at the overall proportions across both days).



It is apparent from the first graph that there was a subtle shift in focus between the two days.

On Monday, the slightly more dominant voice was from those opposed to the plebiscite. This is understandable and appropriate considering that those who were campaigning for a direct parliamentary vote were particularly active and vocal in the lead-up to the party room meeting. The ABC sought to speak to as many as possible from this small group of MPs, and this is reflected in the number of voices included in our coverage.

On Tuesday, the focus shifted to the postal survey, and advocates for this process came to the fore, to explain how it would work and to argue for its validity.

However, it is also clear that on the Tuesday the overall number of speakers still arguing over the merits of the plebiscite proposal was noticeably lower than on Monday. They were replaced by a significantly higher number of legal and political experts explaining and analysing the decision. This, again, is an editorially sensible and appropriate outcome.

Taken overall, the second graph indicates a broadly even number of voices both in favour and against the plebiscite.

### Other observations:

Although the spreadsheet gives the impression of intensive coverage, the ABC currently has no answer as to how many stories are 'too many'. In theory, a dedicated (or obsessive) ABC listener/viewer in a capital city could have consumed up to 22 separate items within a two-day period, and this number could be even higher in some of the regional markets. However, very few people live that way, and in reality, on each individual service, the issue was given a very small proportion of total air time.

The spreadsheet suggests that the national programs and outlets took a broader, more generic approach to this story, concentrating on the bigger picture, while the local outlets were more likely to speak to local members of Parliament and local activists. This is how we imagine things to be, and

this exercise therefore offers reassurance that the national/local divide is working pretty much as it should.

On the surface, there do not appear to be issues with impartiality. This assessment is based partly on the assumption that the many interviews with journalists reporting on events in Canberra and academics discussing legal and statistical aspects of the postal survey were appropriately neutral. In almost all cases where protagonists to same-sex marriage were featured (in most cases, coalition politicians) they were balanced on either the same or the following day by equality advocates.

An article published on triple j's Hack website (<a href="http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/uk-high-commission-holding-same-sex-marriages/8780656">http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/uk-high-commission-holding-same-sex-marriages/8780656</a>) was the most obviously partisan item to emanate from the ABC. While the introduction provides a balanced account of the political state of play around SSM, the bulk of the article offers a sympathetic account of the wedding of two gay men, performed in Canberra by the British High Commissioner. The story is truthful and contains nothing unfair to the positions of others and is a perfectly appropriate piece of content. Other stories on this topic on the triple j website at the moment are confined to the necessity of enrolling with the AEC in order to vote, and do not take any political position.