

EDITORIAL POLICIES

Quality Assurance
Project 9:

Impartiality (Election Coverage)

Final Report
June 2009

Advise. **Verify.** Review



ABC
Australian
Broadcasting
Corporation

Editorial Policies

The Editorial Policies of the ABC are its leading standards and a day-to-day reference for makers of ABC content. The [Editorial Policies](#) –

- give practical shape to statutory obligations in the ABC Act;
- set out the ABC's self-regulatory standards and how to enforce them; and
- describe and explain to staff and the community the editorial and ethical principles fundamental to the ABC.

The role of Director Editorial Policies was established in 2007 and comprises three main functions: to advise, verify and review.

The verification function principally involves the design and implementation of quality assurance projects to allow the ABC to assess whether it is meeting the standards required of it and to contribute to continuous improvement of the national public broadcaster and its content.

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Foreword

Seen in the perspective of history and judged against many other nations today, Australia is good at elections.

Here, elections are routine in the best sense of that word. They occur with the requisite frequency; the campaigns are hard fought, but only verbally; the rolls are generally well kept; polling days are a rather relaxed community ritual; the conduct of the count is scrutinised; the results – even when close – have legitimacy; and transfers of power are smooth.

One of the safeguards of all this is a free and responsible media, and covering elections is one of the core editorial functions of the ABC. It represents a sustained test of the public broadcaster's commitment to impartiality.

The objective of this Quality Assurance (QA) project is to design a fair and rigorous way to assess ABC impartiality in covering elections on Local Radio, and at the same time to create a methodology capable of being scaled up to assess much larger amounts of content drawn from platforms other than radio.

The aim is to ensure that assessments of impartiality of election coverage are reliable and meaningful, so that any judgments made and any changes deemed necessary to improve quality have a solid base.

The work has been broken into two parts. Devising and building the model is this project, QA9. The trial of that model, using a sample of ABC Radio content, is QA11.

This QA9 report:

- puts the concept of impartiality in the context of election coverage and ABC standards;
- provides a test for impartiality that can be applied to a qualitatively assessed sample of election coverage content;
- sets out a procedure for sampling election coverage content for qualitative analysis;
- explains the analytical and reporting system;
- proposes a way to scale the methodology so that it can be used regularly by the ABC to assess coverage of elections at territory, state and federal levels; and
- suggests how the methodology may be applied to television content (although these suggestions are qualified because a separate QA project currently underway into a sample of TV News content is likely to provide relevant knowledge and experience).

In QA Project 11, being carried out in June and July 2009, the methodology described in this report will be tested on a sample of election coverage drawn from ABC Local Radio coverage of State and Territory elections held in Queensland in 2009 and the Australian Capital Territory in 2008.

The development of a way to qualitatively assess election coverage by reference to impartiality is an innovation by the ABC. Elections are moments of decision by democratic communities about who will govern. At these times audiences are also participants in an electorate actively considering how they will cast their vote. Although the internet is changing contemporary election campaigning, the coverage by the large traditional print and broadcasting organisations remains central to the flow of information and debate.

Commercial media are not bound by statutory duties of impartiality. Unlike the ABC the commercial media can be as partisan as they choose. However, the commercial media generally adopt standards for their news content that require fairness, balance and other traits associated with impartiality.

Academic studies which qualitatively assess media coverage of elections are described in the literature. They tend to be large scale, specific to one media platform and designed with a particular electoral system in mind. They have the virtues and the drawbacks of their origins in academia. They are not readily able to be plucked from a journal to be replicated regularly at reasonable cost as a routine aspect of the accountability and quality-improvement efforts of a breathing, producing-every-day media organisation such as the ABC.

The approach described in this report is comprehensive and based on best available practice, recognising the ABC's need for a model that will yield useful data within a reasonable time and budget.

The model is not a machine. It will not give a fixed-point measure of impartiality, like the needle on a set of scales. It will allow the ABC to sample its content, generate meaningful data, and apply to that data the following test for impartiality:

Would the sample content equip reasonable persons to make up their own minds about the issues covered in the sample content during the election period?

PAUL CHADWICK
Director Editorial Policies

The designers of the qualitative assessment model

Dr Denis Muller

This project and the pilot of the methodology are being managed by Dr Denis Muller. He has 25 years' experience in qualitative and quantitative social research methodology, and teaches these techniques at the University of Melbourne and Swinburne University. Specifically he has taught content-analysis techniques at the University of Melbourne for the past 11 years and is also a practitioner in the field. He is an accredited member of the Australian Market and Social Research Society. He also practised as a journalist for 27 years, during which he specialised in analysing and reporting on qualitative and quantitative poll data, and election analysis. He was "fairness editor" of *The Sydney Morning Herald* for the federal elections of 1977, 1980 and 1983. He received a University of Melbourne Research Scholarship in 2002-2006. His doctoral thesis (2005) was on the subject of media ethics and accountability.

Dr Josephine Muir

Working with Dr Muller on this QA9 project and the pilot, QA11, is Dr Josephine Muir. From 1996 to 1998, Dr Muir was Senior Policy Researcher for Senator the Hon Helen Coonan. From 1998 to 2002 she taught content-analysis techniques with Dr Muller in the Masters of Public Policy program at the University of Melbourne. Her doctoral thesis (2002), *Aerial Bombardment and Guerrilla Warfare: A Communications Audit of the 1998 Australian Federal Election*, was based on extensive content analysis of media coverage in that election, looked at from the perspective of each of the candidates in the marginal Victorian seat of McEwen. She won a Research Fellowship to the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton in 1999, where she conducted further research into political communication, and was the recipient of a University of Melbourne Research Scholarship 1998-2002.

Quality Assurance Project 9

Impartiality (Election Coverage) – Final Report

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I. Qualitative assessment of media coverage of elections

The first question to answer is: Why can't impartiality be measured adequately by simply counting the minutes and seconds of airtime on radio and TV that the contending political voices are given? Why is a qualitative, not just quantitative, assessment necessary?

"Share-of-voice" is the usual term for the amount of time on-air, or space in print or online, given to various political entities in an election campaign. This data is a useful management tool for any media entity to use when covering a hectic campaign. Those closest to the action may miss the overall pattern of coverage during what is an intense but limited period. The tight timeframe ends on polling day when the audience/voters choose who will govern. It means that during the campaign any imbalance in the voices being heard needs swift attention. Share-of-voice data, gathered and analysed week by week during the campaign, can help. It indicates who is perhaps being under-covered and who over-covered relative to others in the electoral contest. But it is just that, an indicator.

The practical circumstances and deadline-affected decisions that lead to the minutes-and-seconds data totals can vary greatly and matter significantly in judging the data. Share-of-voice data is not a reliable measure of impartiality. It says nothing about content other than its duration; nothing about whether the content was positive, negative or neutral for the entity whose share-of-voice it was; nothing about tone; nothing about prominence; and nothing about the nature of the opportunity to be heard.¹

Qualitative assessments that do say something about these characteristics give a much more meaningful assessment of impartiality.

For the ABC, qualitative assessment must not only be fair and rigorous – so that it is credible for those outside and inside the ABC – but also workable and cost-effective.

II. Testing for impartiality of ABC coverage of elections

"Impartiality" means different things to different people in different circumstances², never more so than in the heat of election campaigns.

"Impartiality" has several meanings in the ABC's Editorial Policies, depending on the category of content under consideration: news and current affairs, topical and factual, or opinion.³ Local Radio typically involves "flow programming" in which content from the various categories can change rapidly, blending into each other. This is the practical experience of ABC staff and the audience as they make and listen to radio.

To make any system of qualitative assessment practicable, a common and workable test for impartiality needs to be developed.

In this section of the report, a test for impartiality is arrived at by reference to the ABC's core obligations, the experience of previous Quality Assurance Projects, and the results of reviewing them.⁴

¹ These limitations of share-of-voice data as a measure of impartiality were explained by the Chairman of the ABC Election Coverage Review Committee (ECRC) in the report on ABC coverage of the 2007 Federal Election at pp 3-7, http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/ABC_Coverage_of_the_2007_Federal_Election.pdf.

² ABC Editorial Policies Division, *Elements of Impartiality*, Discussion Paper, (September 2007, updated November 2007), http://abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/200806_reformatted_elements_of_impartiality.pdf.

³ These several meanings were addressed in the context of a sample of TV news in QA3 *Impartiality (News Content)*, July 2008, pp 5-7 and 29-31, a sample of radio content in QA4 *Impartiality (Topical and Factual Content)*, June 2008, pp 3-5 and 19-24, and in the context of online content in QA5 *Impartiality (Opinion Content)*, July 2008, pp 31-35. The projects were reviewed independently in a separate report available at http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/QA3to5-reviews-Dec_2008.pdf

⁴ QAs 2 and 6 developed and applied a test for accuracy, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/edpols.htm>. QAs 3, 4 and 5, dealing with impartiality, were reviewed in *Independent reviews of QA projects 3, 4 and 5, with responses by the projects' manager*, (December 2008), http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/QA3to5-reviews-Dec_2008.pdf.

A. Elections, relevant standards, and the ABC

To be fair and rigorous, any assessment of the impartiality of ABC election coverage must be based on the requirements of the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 (Cth)* (the ABC Act) and the Editorial Policies which give the statutory duties practical form. These are the standards Parliament established for the national broadcaster on behalf of the public, and the standards by which its staff are expected to work and can expect to be judged.

Among other things, section 6 of the ABC Act confers functions to inform and to educate. Section 8 requires, among other things, independence, integrity and news and information that is accurate and impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism.

In the Preamble to the Editorial Policies in 2007 the Board expressly committed the ABC to fundamental democratic principles including parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, and equality of opportunity.

To make these ideals and broad requirements practical, what the Editorial Policies say about impartiality is the starting point.

Section 5 of the Editorial Policies requires news and current affairs content to be accurate, impartial, balanced and questioning. The section does not elaborate very much on what these qualities might consist of; in particular the qualities of impartiality and balance are dealt with briefly:

Section 5.2.2 (d) states:

Be impartial. Editorial judgements are based on news values, not for example on political, commercial or sectional interests or personal views. Do not unduly favour one perspective over others.

Section 5.2.2 (e) states:

Be balanced. Balance will be sought but may not always be achieved within a single program or publication; it will be achieved as soon as reasonably practicable and in an appropriate manner. It is not essential to give all sides equal time. As far as possible, present principal relevant views on matters of importance.

Of course, ABC election coverage is not confined to News and Current Affairs content. It includes material that clearly falls within the content categories of Topical and Factual (most Local Radio content, for instance), and Opinion (invited commentary, for instance). The definition of impartiality is different for each of these content categories, and both are different from the News and Current Affairs definition.

Section 6 of the Editorial Policies deals with Opinion content. It states at para 6.6.3:

The ABC is committed to impartiality and must demonstrate this in its Opinion content through the presentation of a diversity of perspectives....

Section 7 of the Editorial Policies deals with Topical and Factual content. It states at para 7.4.1:

The ABC is committed to impartiality: where topical and factual content deals with a matter of contention or public debate, a diversity of principal relevant perspectives should be demonstrated ...

Section 12 of the Editorial Policies specifically deals with political and election broadcasts.

Section 12.1.3 states:

12.1.3 For the proper functioning of representative government in a democracy, it is essential that the public are fully informed of the issues of current debate and of the position and policies of those parties competing for political office. There are some basic assumptions underlying this view:

(a) The public is entitled to hear the principal points of view on all questions of importance

- (b) *The right to hear alternative policies and points of view is inherent in the concepts of objective reporting and impartiality, which are part of the ABC's statutory duty*
- (c) *The full exchange of opinion is one of the safeguards of free institutions and of democracy itself.*

Section 79A states that the ABC may determine to what extent and in what manner political matter or controversial matter will be broadcast. Section 12 of the Editorial Policies guides the way the ABC makes available to political participants time on ABC platforms for the political participants to put their own material directly to audiences. This activity is completely separate from the ABC's other election coverage in news and current affairs, topical and factual, and opinion. These free-time party political broadcasts do not form any part of this quality assurance project.⁵

In all these ways of covering the election processes of Australia, the ABC is not permitted to have its own opinions and express them in the way, for example, newspapers will typically editorialise towards the end of election campaigns about which political party, in the newspaper's opinion, is the most fit to govern. As the Preamble to the Editorial Policies makes clear:

Across the range of ABC content, audiences must not be able to reasonably conclude that the ABC has taken an editorial stand on matters of contention and public debate.

In its *Guidelines and Interpretation* for the 2007 Federal Election, the ABC's Election Coverage Review Committee identified three main services that the ABC, as the national broadcaster, performs for the Australian people during election campaigns:

The main elements of ABC service to Australians during federal elections

The ABC must always be mindful of the primacy of the audience. It is they who will vote. It is they who, during a campaign especially, are making up their minds. It is they whom we serve. The Parliament created us under law for them. They pay for us.

The three main services that the ABC, the national public broadcaster, provides to Australians during federal election campaigns can be distilled as follows –

We inform –

In an election period, when spin and exhortation and persuasion abound, it is a fine thing to serve people simply by informing fairly and accurately, as best you can with the time and resources available.

We scrutinise –

It is a legitimate role firmly and impartially to scrutinise the records and the promises of those who want elective office at the time they are directly seeking the electors' nod. The audience does not have personal access to the participants, so our scrutiny assists them. They can reasonably expect to be able to hear and consider the scrutiny and the answers to it from those who seek to govern them.

For the ABC to apply this scrutiny is one of the purposes for which it is guaranteed independence. Scrutinising those who seek and use power is one of the recognised standards of objective journalism. How independently and how accurately and impartially the ABC does it is part of what determines the ABC's integrity. All these key terms – independence, integrity, accuracy, impartiality, recognised standards – are to be found in section 8 of the ABC Act. For the ABC, they are not optional in the way they are optional for a commercial media entity whose owner and/or staff may choose to be partisan in an election campaign.

We host –

This humble but immensely valuable role is often overlooked. A good host makes it possible for the protagonists in the campaign, the contenders, to explain, debate, and try to persuade and engage with voters, who comprise the viewing or listening or online audience. We are not protagonists or contenders, but as a host the ABC is important to the protagonists and to audiences.⁶

⁵ ABC, *Allocation of Free Broadcasting Time to Political Parties During Election Campaigns*, Fact sheet, 2007, http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/election_campaigns.pdf.

⁶ Appendix 3, in the Report of the Chairman, ABC Election Coverage Review Committee (ECRC) on ABC coverage of the 2007 Federal Election, http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/ABC_Coverage_of_the_2007_Federal_Election.pdf.

From all of the above, the following can be distilled:

- The ABC is committed to parliamentary democracy.
- Parliamentary democracy depends on an informed public.
- The public is entitled to hear alternative policies and points of view, in particular the principal points of view on all questions of importance.
- In carrying out its functions, in the context of elections as in other contexts, the ABC provides various categories of content.
- It must do so independently and impartially.
- The ABC must not take editorial stands.

These propositions inform the test for impartiality developed for this QA9 project and will inform the application of it.

B. Two key aspects of impartiality in election contexts

“Fairness” and “balance” turn up in almost every discussion of what impartiality means.⁷ Whatever else comprises impartiality in media, there seems to be consensus that these two elements are essential. They are also essential to the conduct of elections themselves.

1. Fairness

Fairness is a key value in the ABC, as stated in Section 2 of the Editorial Policies. Fairness is also a key value in electoral processes. We speak routinely of free *and fair* elections, for instance.

The centrality of fairness to elections in a properly functioning parliamentary democracy justifies some elaboration here of the concept as it applies in recognised standards of objective journalism.

Several aspects of journalists’ professional codes are directed towards ensuring fairness, for example by requiring that journalists:

- avoid influences that undermine independence;
- avoid distortion;
- correct errors;
- avoid misrepresentation;
- avoid suppression of relevant available facts;
- offer people an “opportunity to reply”, and
- distinguish opinion from fact.

⁷ See, for examples from amongst an enormous literature, BBC, *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel – Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century* (June 2007), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/research/impartiality.html>; ABC Editorial Policies Division, *Elements of Impartiality*, Discussion Paper, (September 2007, updated November 2007), p 3, http://abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/200806_reformatted_elements_of_impartiality.pdf; and Mason, Sir Anthony, “Impartiality” in *Key Words 1: Short looks at some big concepts that govern the ABC*, An occasional series, (March 2008), http://abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/200806_reformatted_key_words.pdf.

The BBC's Fairness editorial principles include opportunity to reply and two other factors: consent where contributions are made; and open, honest and straightforward dealing unless clear public interest to the contrary.⁸

Fairness is not to be confused with politeness or euphemism. It is entirely fair to describe as a criminal someone who has been convicted of a crime.

Fairness can be affected by what journalists make of the facts: how they construct meaning and how they frame issues. Choice of language and story structure both play a part. Choices that are indefensible by reference to the available facts and context may be considered distortion. Such decisions may indicate that independence has been undermined, perhaps by the effects of a conflict of interest.

Fairness may not always require that people or organisations or arguments are given exposure. News values and timing play valid parts, especially in election coverage. Events can move fast during campaigns. Every editorial decision must be judged by reference to the circumstances in which it was made. Judgments made with time and hindsight must also be fair.

In applying the concept of impartiality in an election context, fairness is central.

2. Balance

Typically in Australian election campaigns two parties have a chance of forming government. Sometimes one side is comprised of a coalition, but the point for present purposes is that these contests between two main political groupings vying for the single prize of government naturally brings up notions of balance. It is easy to think of a seesaw (occupied at either end by the two main parties) rather than a wagon wheel with many spokes (that is, contending shades of opinion) emanating from its hub out to its rim.

Balance is more complex than the image of the seesaw allows.

Section 5.2.2 (e) of the Editorial Policies applies to news and current affairs content and states –

Be balanced. Balance will be sought but may not always be achieved within a single program or publication; it will be achieved as soon as reasonably practicable and in an appropriate manner. It is not essential to give all sides equal time. As far as possible, present principal relevant views on matters of importance.

So the Editorial Policies recognise that balance does not necessarily mean giving all sides equal time. As discussed in Part I of this report, this kind of mathematical equilibrium is a false measure of balance.

An analysis of the Editorial Policies, journalistic codes and the literature, provides a more nuanced understanding of balance as part of assessing media content for its impartiality.

Balance can be said to comprise four factors:

- Relevance
- Breadth
- Proportionality
- Weight of evidence.

a. Relevance

Balance does not require that in all cases *all* sides of the story are told. It is commonly the case that there are as many “sides of the story” as there are people affected by a matter, and telling them all is neither

⁸ BBC, “Fairness editorial principles, in Section 5, “Fairness, Contributors & Consent” of *Editorial Guidelines*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/fairness/fairnesseditorial.shtml>.

practicable nor necessary to balanced coverage. Some finer test is required, and the Editorial Policies refer to “principal relevant views”.

In considering content across the three content categories under discussion, the four most probable sources or “principal relevant views” in relation to any matter of contention and public debate may be grouped as follows:

Authority: The actions or words of persons or entities with legitimate power to decide the outcome or substantial elements of the outcome of a matter.

Expertise: The actions or words of persons or entities with recognised expertise in a matter. This is even more the case where the expert is in a position formally to advise the decision-making authorities in relation to the outcome, a common state of affairs in the development of public policy in Australia.⁹

Influencers: The actions or words of persons or entities who by virtue of public standing, public following, social, political or economic positioning establish a voice in a matter.

Affected interests: The actions or words of persons or entities whose interests will be affected by the resolution of a matter, whether those interests are directly material or more general. An interest might be public or private, financial or otherwise.

These four categories were developed for QA4, *Impartiality (Topical and Factual Content)*. In that project they worked well, were well received, and were well reviewed by the two experts who assessed QAs 3, 4 and 5.

b. Breadth

Another factor in balance is diversity. As section 12.1.3 of the Editorial Policies states, the public is entitled to hear the principal points of view, alternative policies, full exchange of opinion. As John Bridcut observed in his analysis of impartiality for the BBC, “impartiality involves breadth of view, and can be breached by omission. It is not necessarily to be found on the centre ground.”¹⁰

This diversity is rarely attainable in a single item, but over a number of items and a period of time, especially the duration of an election campaign, it should be.

It is not necessary to include *all* perspectives in order to meet the test for balance, or to give equal prominence to all. At the same time, balance is likely to be enhanced if the net is cast widely.

Providing breadth does not mean waiting until the last word has been uttered or the last deed concluded on any given matter of contention. The function of journalism as the conveyor of immediate and approximate truth would be paralysed if it were otherwise.

Breadth requires judgments to be made on the basis of the most comprehensive available information, looking at the matter as a whole as it is known at the time. This means not cherry-picking aspects of a matter that suit journalistic story-telling convenience or a particular point of view to the exclusion of material just because it is inconvenient or contradicts a particular view.

Where – as in Australia – the number of traditional media voices is limited by a high concentration of ownership, the responsibility on the ABC to provide breadth is especially heavy.

⁹ See, for example, Muller, D. and Headey, B, “Agenda-Setters and Policy Influentials: Results from the Victorian Agendas Project” (July 2996) Vol 3 No 2 *Australian Journal of Political Science*, pp135-152.

¹⁰ BBC, *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel – Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century* (June 2007), pp 7 and 37, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/research/impartiality.html>.

c. Proportionality

Balance requires language and scale of coverage to be proportional. It means giving a matter the prominence that news values dictate and using language of appropriate strength and tenor. Not every misfortune is a tragedy, not every success heroic, not every problem a crisis. This factor of balance is a guard against sensationalism. Sensationalist language is especially pernicious when it is allied with stereotypical references: not every Muslim is a fundamentalist; not every private school is wealthy. To keep coverage proportional, to achieve balance in this sense, it is vital to choose adjectives and adverbs with particular care.

This is not an admonition to go lightly, or turn beige. Politics in democracies, especially at election times, are full of color, and good journalism conveys that color. Where the evidence or the occasion calls for it, balance equally requires language to be strong, urgent, dramatic, evocative.

Proportionality requires judgments about the amount of time and prominence devoted to different views, and those judgments can often be guided by the fourth factor, weight of evidence.

d. Weight of evidence

Balance follows the weight of evidence. It does not require equal treatment to be given to competing arguments when the evidence clearly shows that one point of view is clearly more supported than competing ones. The term “treatment” does not apply only to exposure or prominence. It applies to the proper use of scepticism and of qualifications on what is said when there are reasonable grounds for doing so.

When there is doubt about veracity, the requirement for balance demands that attention be drawn to the existence of doubt, and the reasons for it.

The philosopher, Professor Tony Coady, has expressed the point this way:

...a final word on the tricky idea of balance. Many issues are so genuinely contentious that fairness requires that voice be given to a range of diverse, opposing views. For the ABC, this is particularly important in the presentation of news programs. Balance also has a role in commentary and investigative programs, but there the journalist is obliged not merely to present opposing views, but to challenge, explore and criticise where appropriate. The presentation of every view as having equal credibility can be an abnegation of responsible objectivity. When the evidence has been fairly presented and assessed, a judgement that respects the dictates of reason is legitimate. The scales of a proper balance follow the weight of evidence.¹¹

Balance is achieved when due weight is given to all principal relevant views on a given issue in a way that allows people to assess competing claims on their merits. “Due weight” derives from proportionality and weight of evidence.

C. Need for a common test, applicable across all content categories

For this kind of quality assurance test to be practicable, a workable test for impartiality must be devised that transcends the different tests for impartiality in the different content categories of the Editorial Policies while being applicable to them all and faithful to the standards that govern the ABC.

If a common test were not used, the assessment might yield a result that said one content category was impartial by reference to its particular test; another was not impartial by reference to a different test, and so on.

Such findings would not enable a satisfactory answer to the deceptively simple question: was the ABC’s coverage of the election impartial or not?

¹¹ Coady, Professor C.A.J., “Objectivity” in *Key Words 1: Short looks at some big concepts that govern the ABC*, An occasional series, March 2008, http://abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/200806_reformatted_key_words.pdf.

Moreover, such findings would not help the process of continuous improvement.

And the common test must be workable for projects dealing with widely varied amounts of election coverage drawn from different platforms.

D. The test for impartiality

Having regard to the above, the evidence adduced through the methodology (Part III) will be assessed against the following test for impartiality:

Would the sample content equip reasonable persons to make up their own minds about the issues covered in the sample content during the election period?

Points to note about this test:

- It is the *sample content* that is being assessed, not all of the ABC coverage of the election.
- *Equip* seems the clearest of the many verbs that could form this key part of the test. What voters need the media to do for them when they are approaching their periodic opportunity to express a verdict through the ballot box about who governs, is equip them with information and opportunities to hear the policies and points of view on matters of importance of those who are seeking their vote.
- *Reasonable persons* is an objective standard. No practical test for impartiality can rest on the subjective views of individuals, especially when the subject matter is electoral politics.
- *Make up their own minds* is a phrase that gets to the heart of what reasonable persons do when their supply of information and contending points of view on the matter at issue has been impartially gathered and presented to them.
- The assessment relates to the *issues covered in the sample*, not to other issues that may not appear in the sample, even if those issues were part of the election campaign from which the sample content was randomly drawn.
- The assessment considers whether the sample content would equip reasonable persons to make up their own minds *during the election period*. Voters need to be equipped to make up their own minds before polling day. Timing is a factor in applying standards such as balance. While it is understood that balance may not be able to be achieved in a single item or program, in the context of election campaign coverage the period within which balance needs to be achieved to contribute meaningfully to impartiality is finite.

The test is in substance the same as the test for impartiality developed for QA7 Impartiality (TV News), which is currently in progress. The experience of applying the test in QA7 is expected to be of practical value when it is applied in QA11.

III. Methodology

There are two main parts to this section. The first concerns a process of sampling material for assessment. The second concerns the assessment process itself.

The methodology has been devised for assessing ABC Local Radio content. It has the potential to be broadened and scaled up to include samples drawn from television. However, television presents more complex semiotic challenges. The approach to content sampled from television should be informed by the outcome of QA Project 7, which is an assessment of the impartiality of a sample of ABC TV news. It was efficient to consider in this QA project 9 a possible sampling procedure for television election coverage at the same time as developing the one for radio to be piloted in QA11. However, what is proposed here for TV should be understood to be subject to further development before it is ready to be piloted.

Convergence increasingly means that an issue previously thought to affect one platform uniquely, e.g. semiotics and television, affects other platforms. For instance, the semiotics of television may migrate online as television content migrates online, as it has through playback techniques such as iView.

It may also be necessary to adjust the way content created for radio is assessed when it appears on another platform. Radio content that is live streamed and/or podcast online may throw up novel issues that are relevant to quality assurance assessments. The same phenomenon arises for the ABC as it adjusts to the text element of content online. Text and still images are traditionally the province of newspapers and magazines. Techniques for assessing the quality of print media developed in the era in which they appeared in ink on paper. The online platform is likely to pose new questions as these quality assurance projects develop alongside convergence, as QA5 showed when it became necessary to address the issues of linking and tagging online.¹²

A. Sampling ABC election coverage

Reviewing all of ABC Local Radio's coverage of an election is not practicable. The volume is unmanageably large and the costs out of proportion to the purpose. Sampling is therefore necessary.

The time frame from within which the material would be sampled would start with the formal announcement of the election or the issuing of the writs, whichever happened first, and the close of polling on election day. This would make the time frame for the assessment consistent with the time frame within which the Election Coverage Review Committee operates.

1. Sampling size

Sampling from the entire coverage requires, as a first step, some analysis of the scope and contours of the coverage.

In most of the QA projects to date, a sample of 150 items has been found to be large enough to give a good indication of the quality of work under review, and it is considered that this would probably be adequate for Local Radio coverage of a State election. However, in devising the sampling procedure, it became clear that this would be too small to allow a sufficient depth of analysis, and a core sample of 170 items will be needed.

Theoretically, to yield the same level of confidence, the sample size for a federal election could be the same, since confidence levels are a function of sample size, not population size. However, in order to obtain an acceptable depth of analysis at the individual program level, a sample size of perhaps double 170 (340) might be necessary for a federal election. It is also necessary to consider in relation to a federal election, factors beyond population size. The election issues and the manner of ABC coverage across states/territories, metropolitan/regional/rural/remote areas are diverse and the sample will need to take account of that diversity.

2. Sample sources

Output will occur via platforms, networks, stations, programs and items. However, to include all the ABC's points of output would be wasteful and unnecessary because of the amount of overlap and sharing of items. Election items on Classic FM's news bulletins, for example, will invariably be the same as, or closely similar to, election items broadcast on Local Radio. Therefore, it is proposed that the focus be on Local Radio's main sources of election output. These are probably the following:

¹² QA5 *Impartiality (Opinion Content)* July 2008 pp 15-16 and Appendix III.

LOCAL RADIO
07.45 News
AM
Mornings
12.00 News
The World Today
Drive
17.00 Regional News
18.00 capital city News
PM
Evenings
22.00 capital city News

The sample to be assessed should be drawn basically on a random basis, but with the capacity to make some deliberative selections in order to ensure that coverage of major events, issues or developments are included. There also needs to be a way to include coverage of a “defining” or symbolic event, if one should emerge. The Latham handshake in the 2004 election is perhaps an example.

Let us assume a five-week State election campaign, and devise a sample that will provide a credible assessment of the impartiality or otherwise of ABC Local Radio and News & Current Affairs coverage on the programs listed above. Also assume the election is announced on a Sunday.

In devising a way to reliably and validly sample such a large volume of material, the researchers have drawn upon the methodology used by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism in its assessment of media coverage of the 2008 US Presidential election.¹³ This approach has had to be modified to make it suitable for this project, but the following key methodological approaches have been adapted directly from the Pew Center’s work:

1. Use of a rotation system to sample programs.
2. Use of the “top stories” criterion for selecting items within programs.
3. Use of a ratio for assessing item tone as positive, negative or neutral for the entity dealt with in the item. (This is described in detail later.)

From all output sources, only items that were clearly and unambiguously related to the election would be included. In all programs, a maximum of two items would be selected, and if there were more than two, the first two would be selected from News and Current Affairs programs and the two most substantial from Local Radio flow programs. Output sources would be sampled as follows:

a. Radio

The capital city 7.45am, midday and 6pm and 10pm news bulletins are the main bulletins each day. All are included. In regional areas there is usually a main bulletin at 5pm, and these are included on the basis that they would be drawn at random from the regional local radio call signs, of which there are about 50.

The radio current affairs programs, AM, The World Today and PM would be treated as a group, as would the “flow” programs, Mornings, Drive, and Evenings. Radio content would be sampled as follows:

¹³ Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, *Winning the Media Campaign: How the Press Reported the 2008 Presidential General Election*, October 2008, <http://journalism.org/node/13307>. The “Methodology” section is at <http://www.journalism.org/node/13314>. Also see the “Methodology” section in *The Color of News*, October 2008, <http://www.journalism.org/node/13441>.

Week	Local Radio News and Current Affairs programs sampled on these days of the week						
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
1	07.45 News TWT 22.00 News	12.00 News PM Mornings	17.00 News AM Drive	18.00 News TWT Evenings	07.45 News PM 22.00 News	07.45 capital city News	17.00 SERN News
2	12.00 News AM 22.00 News	17.00 News TWT Mornings	18.00 News PM Drive	07.45 News AM Evenings	12.00 News TWT 22.00 News	12.00 capital city News	07.45 capital city News
3	17.00 News PM 22.00 News	18.00 News TWT Evenings	07.45 News AM Drive	12.00 News PM Mornings	17.00 News AM 22.00 News	17.00 SERN News	12.00 capital city News
4	18.00 News TWT 22.00 News	0.745 News PM Drive	12.00 News AM Mornings	17.00 News TWT Evenings	18.00 News AM 22.00 News	07.45 capital city News	17.00 SERN News
5	07.45 News PM 22.00 News	12.00 News TWT Evenings	17.00 News AM Mornings	18.00 News PM Drive	07.45 News TWT 22.00 News	12.00 capital city News	Post- polling day

There are 85 programs in that grid, covering news, current affairs and flow programs. Taking the top two election items from each yields a core sample of 170. If additional items needed to be included, for example, to ensure an assessment of coverage of special events, then they could be added on, or included at the expense of something already in, depending on the budget constraint.

b. Television

This section is tentative, in advance of the findings from QA 7. However, it is included to give some idea of how television content might be sampled.

TELEVISION*
News Breakfast
7pm News
The 7.30 Report
Stateline
Lateline
Insiders

*Also including possible features such as Australian Story or Four Corners if they deal with the election or election issues.

The 7pm television news bulletins could be treated as national for this purpose, as with capital-city radio news. Any capital city bulletin could be chosen.

Current affairs television programs are mostly national, so television news and current affairs could be sampled nationally as follows:

Week	TV news bulletins and current affairs programs sampled on these days of the week				
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	19.00	7.30 Report	19.00	Lateline	News Breakfast
2	7.30 Report	19.00	Lateline	7.30 Report	19.00
3	Lateline	7.30 Report	19.00	7.30 Report	19.00
4	7.30 Report	19.00	7.30 Report	Lateline	19.00
5	19.00	Lateline	7.30 Report	19.00	News Breakfast

Red denotes news bulletins

Ten 19.00 TV news bulletins would be sampled, two in each week of the campaign, with up to two items per bulletin, a maximum of 20 items. Eight 7.30 Reports would be sampled, up to two items per program, a

maximum of 16 items. Five Lateline programs would be sampled, one in each week of the campaign, up to two items per program, a maximum of 10 items. Two News Breakfast programs would be sampled, for a maximum of four items. Stateline would be sampled on the first and third Fridays and Insiders on the second and fourth Sundays, with the same limits applying, a maximum of four items.

This would yield a maximum total of 54 items from television news and current affairs.

Were there to be another program, such as Q&A or Fora, with election content, they would be sampled on the basis that material from two programs would be included.

This methodology can be scaled. For example, if it were decided to assess the election coverage on only one network/platform, say Local Radio, a larger number of items could be used than would be practicable if coverage across all networks/platforms was being assessed. Similarly, if coverage across all networks/platforms, but in one geographic region only, was to be assessed.

c. Set-piece events

In drawing the samples from the various output sources, the usual set-piece events of an election campaign have, to this point, been set aside so that the sampling could be devised on a random basis. However, set pieces are of particular importance, and the ABC's coverage of them would be included in the sample by adding to the total number of items assessed where these events fell outside the sampled programs and otherwise by simply including them as part of the output of the sampled programs.

The usual set-piece events are:

The campaign launches of the Labor and Liberal Parties

The National Press Club appearances by the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition

Any televised debates between the Labor and Liberal leaders.

A judgment would have to be made, at the time the dates were known, about whether the sampled coverage was adequate.

In each State and Territory election context, local equivalents of these federal set piece events will need to be considered in the sampling process.

d. The minor parties and sitting independents

Some minor-party items may get picked up in the general sample. If they don't, how will the project assess whether the ABC's coverage of minor parties and sitting independents was impartial?

Except for the set-piece events, all stories have an equal chance of being in. That is, the stories get into the sample by being about the election, not by being about a particular party or parties or sitting Member of Parliament.

Two options have been considered. One fair way to deal with the minor-party and sitting-Independents issue is to place them on the same footing as the major parties for any set pieces they may stage or be involved in. So coverage of the campaign launches of the Nationals and the Greens, for example, would be included on the same basis as for the majors. Similarly if their leaders were to appear at the National Press Club. It may be necessary to deliberately include major stories concerning sitting Independents if they are not caught in the sample. For example, the position of cross-bench senators might be crucial.

A second option would be to identify a pool of items of coverage specifically about minor parties and sitting Independents and to randomly draw a sample from the pool, then separately apply the methodology to this second sample.

Taking radio and television together, for a state election there would be a core sample of 170 radio items plus 54 television items, a total of 224, plus an allowance for set pieces and other necessary inclusions, say another 10, making a grand total of 234. A federal election might require a sample of double that – 470 or so.

B. The function and techniques of content analysis

Content analysis is a systematic method for analysing media portrayal. It is by no means the only method, but its great strength is that it provides a system of quantification which, if applied intelligently and not mechanistically, will show patterns of portrayal which can be described and assessed.

Its usefulness is attested to by its long pedigree – the earliest uses have been traced to the eighteenth century – and it proved its value in more modern times by providing the Allies with a means of analysing German propaganda broadcast during World War II with such precision that they were able to predict and monitor troop movements, and assemble other forms of intelligence.

The great risk is that if it is applied without regard for context, it simply atomises texts to the point where a word is counted but its contextual meaning is lost.

In devising this methodology for assessing the impartiality of ABC election coverage, the authors begin from the premise that:

- texts do have meaning;
- it is possible to identify the meaning by reference to contemporary usage, and
- assessments can be made about the directive force of a text, that is, its effect in respect of some identified entity such as a political party, a candidate or an issue.

Content analysis is commonly used by companies to keep track of how they are portrayed in the media, or how issues that affect them are being portrayed:

- What adjectives and adverbs are used in describing the company, its key people, its activities?
- What aspect of the company's activities are the media paying attention to?
- What hierarchy of importance are the media creating among those aspects?
- When company representatives appear on the media, what is the nature of the opportunity to be heard? A soundbite? An extended interview?
- What is the tone of the questioning? Supportive? Challenging?

Content analysis is a way of pinpointing and counting characteristics like this. It can be done quite superficially or in considerable depth.

The researchers believe that some depth is necessary to an analysis which is designed to assess the impartiality of ABC election coverage, because this is a matter of great importance to the Australian polity.

The “directive force” (the jargon term is valence) referred to above can be the product of many factors:

- The amount of exposure
- The prominence of the exposure
- The attention given to elements that are favourable or unfavourable to the entity's interests

- The style of questioning
- The language used
- How the item is framed – often determined by the introduction
- The nature of the opportunity to be heard

The researchers have included all these in their design. All can be assessed systematically, one way or another. Without descending into too much detail, here are two examples. The first uses a scale.

Style of questioning:

Supportive

Facilitative

Critical

Challenging

The authors have modified this scale from others' because they think it best captures the likeliest range on ABC outlets. Some of these scales have more points, and some include "hostile", but the authors think these four provide a balanced scale (two positive, two negative), and that "challenging" is better than "hostile" because it is broader. If it turns out from the pilot that "hostile" has to go in, then the scale would be changed to include it.

The second example concerns language, and does not use a scale but a reference list. This is one of the most complex and nuanced techniques in content analysis. The basic approach is to identify "sentiment-bearing" words, words which are not neutral but loaded. They abound in journalism:

Alleged

Backflip

Breakthrough

Claimed

Colourful

Controversial

Defend

Denied

Entrepreneur

Flip-flop

Gaffe

The list is extensive. It is possible to predict many such words, because so many have become the currency of journalism, but it is also necessary to allow the list to grow organically as the texts are sampled. Who knows what word or phrase might turn out to be a mantra or leitmotif in an election? "Ladder of opportunity" or "please explain" come to mind. And they may be used with literal or satirical intent, depending on context.

Content analysis enables the researcher to identify and count the incidence of such words or phrases, then look at the meaning conveyed in the context.

This second step is critical: it is the difference between mechanistic counting (which is meaningless) and an analysis which enables an assessment to be made about valence.

There are six basic steps in carrying out content analysis:

1. Defining the research objective
2. Selecting the sample
3. Defining the analytical categories
4. Constructing the coding schedule
5. Piloting the coding schedule and checking inter-coder reliability
6. Gathering and analysing the data.

The first four steps have been done in EQA 9. The final two will be done in EQA 11.

1. Application of content analysis in this context

The content analysis would be designed to examine the items for:

1. Positive, negative or neutral valence from the point of view of the entity including statements by interviewers or reporters, statements by interviewees or others, and innuendo conveyed by such tonal influences as questioning style, vocal inflexions, and use of sentiment-bearing words.
2. Nature of the opportunity to be heard: whether it was a one-on-one interview; whether it was a short grab or an extended interview; a forum with competing views, a head-to-head encounter, a news report or piece of comment.

The Pew approach to assessing positive/negative/neutral content would be adapted. The default position is neutral. In order for an item to be counted as positive or negative, it must have 1.3 times the amount of positive characteristics to negative characteristics, or 1.3 times the amount of negative characteristics to positive characteristics. The introduction is given double value in this calculation.

Any item where the ratio of positive to negative characteristics or *vice-versa* is less than 1.3:1 is rated neutral for this part of the analysis.

Pew used a ratio of 1.5:1, but this is a high threshold. To illustrate:

Item X is comprised of the following: a negative introduction of 70 words, 150 words where the primary entity puts his or her position in a positive light, a 40-word neutral segue and then 80 words of oppositional material that is negative for the primary entity.

The negative count is 70×2 (double value for the introduction) plus $80 = 220$.

The positive count is 150.

The ratio of negative to positive is 220:150 or 1.46:1.

This item would be rated neutral on the Pew scale, but seems clearly negative. Pew takes what it describes as a conservative approach. For piloting purposes something a little more discriminating is proposed, and a 1.3:1 ratio intuitively appeals because it does represent a sizable differential (being approximately one-third among three possibilities) but is not so demanding as to require the item to be overwhelmingly positive or negative before it registers as anything other than neutral.

The risk with too high a threshold is that nearly everything comes out neutral and discrimination is diluted.

The researchers will measure tone by assessing aural effects and the use of sentiment-bearing words. A vocabulary of these will be built from certain standard journalistic phrases and devices, and will be extended as required based on the devices and phrases used in the sampled material.

These techniques will be tested in the pilot.

Results would be reported individually for each item found to lack impartiality, and aggregated by program, network/platform and the coverage as a whole. Items, programs and networks/platforms are credible units of analysis. It means something to people if the results show that this item lacked impartiality for these reasons; this program had more items lacking impartiality than that program; this platform had fewer items lacking impartiality than that platform.

Overall results would be reported for purposes of completion, but they are likely to be less useful because the whole is likely to disguise underlying differences. Large bodies of data tend to smooth out variations which would show up in a smaller body. For example, if there were three items from the AM program that were found lacking in impartiality, and the total number of items from AM in the sample were 18 (as would be the case using the sample proposed here), then it would be found that 17% of AM's sampled output lacked impartiality. This is a quite considerable proportion. However, as a proportion of the total sample of 170 it is 1.76%, which is negligible.

Reasons for any adverse findings would be given, and the draft findings would be circulated to the relevant Divisions for comment. Those comments would be taken into account in arriving at a final assessment.

C. Piloting the methodology

The methodology described in this report is being piloted using a sample of ABC Local Radio Brisbane's coverage of the 2009 Queensland election and ABC Local Radio Canberra's coverage of the 2008 ACT election. The report is due in July 2009.

The pilot is testing the system of sampling, the code frame and the assessment procedures to ensure that they produce evidence with which to apply to the test for impartiality described in this report.

The pilot is confined to Local Radio. The approach for television should be informed by the results of a separate project (QA7) now under way which is assessing impartiality of a sample of TV news.