Review of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's News & Current Affairs Coverage of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum

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N&MRC—ABC VOICE REFERENDUM COVERAGE EVALUATION

Acknowledgement of Country

The research team would like to acknowledge that this report was prepared on the lands of the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of the land on which the Bruce campus of the University of Canberra is situated. We acknowledge their historic and continuing contribution to the University and pay our respects to Ngunnawal elders, their ancestors, as well as their culture, philosophy, laws and traditions.

1 Introduction

1.1 Academic Context

The research team took an approach to the evaluation that was informed by theories of constructive journalism (Bro, 2019; 2024; Gyldensted, 2015) and journalistic role performance (Mellado, 2015; Mellado, Hellmueller & Donsbach, 2017), as well as scholarship that has focused on the informational role of journalism in everyday life (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). Australia's media system can be characterised as a Liberal media system with relatively low levels of polarisation when compared to some other Western markets (Nolan et al., 2024). And though Liberal media systems tend toward high levels of journalistic professionalism, and values of public service, impartiality, and objectivity, journalism in Australia is hardly a monolithic profession.

As Mellado (2015) notes, rather than being homogenous in its characteristics, journalism adapts itself to the social and political context in which it is practiced. Journalistic roles range from the purely informational *disseminator* to more advocacy focused *interventionist* approaches. Journalists can act as *watchdogs* holding elites to account, or as *loyal facilitators* advancing the goals of those very same elites. Journalists are also oriented towards their audience and this manifests itself in the performance of the *civic* and *service* roles, as well as through *infotainment.* This complexity exists from a macro- to micro-journalistic scale. Sometimes different roles are being performed by a journalist within the confines of a single news item.

The disseminator, civic, and watchdog roles are often considered most relevant to reporting in the context of democratic elections. As Hanitzsch & Vos (2018) note, while journalism is not dependent on democracy for its identity or purpose, there are many roles that journalism performs that make it central and essential to the functions of democracy. However, as Hanitzsch & Vos also point out, there is more than one way that journalists can *inform* the public in this regard. Beyond simply acting as neutral disseminators of information, informative and educative journalism must still engage through entertaining content, provide a voice for the voiceless, curate and analyse complex facts, and act as an adversary to challenge positions put forward by politicians and elites.

It is with this in mind that the research team considers the ABC's coverage of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum.

Providing coverage of an election or referendum is a complex and multifaceted task. Journalists must offer informative, engaging and educational coverage across different mediums, to a range of different audiences with sometimes competing interests and needs. Australian audiences are also increasingly aware of and concerned about misinformation online (Park et al., 2024). At a time when news avoidance and fatigue are rising, audiences look to trusted broadcasters to help them make sense of the deluge of online news and information of variable quality.

This evaluation therefore cannot answer every question about the ABC's coverage of the Voice to Parliament Referendum. It can, however, focus on some aspects that are most relevant to understanding whether the coverage achieved primary goals associated with informing and educating the public about the referendum as a democratic process.

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

The following sections will outline the Terms of Reference that this evaluation has focused on. It will then draw out findings of the evaluation that address the three main issues for consideration: the informative or educational function of the coverage; the handling of misinformation; and the conduct of interviews.

1.2 Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for this evaluation were as follows:

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

1.3 Evaluation Methodology

The research team conducted a two-phase analysis using a combination of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) and applied thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). This data analysis was based on established, systematic and widely used methodologies in news and media research.

The **unit of analysis** was set as a single contiguous segment of written or broadcast news, current affairs or analysis that related to a single topic or issue.[1] For the purposes of this analysis we define this as a **media item.** We conducted an analysis of 67 media items provided by the ABC that were published between 2 April 2023 and 15 October 2023: including audio/visual packages ranging from one to two minutes to program episodes of around one hour in length, as well as written items ranging from 500 words to many thousands. The full details of the sample are contained in Appendix A.

In phase one, the researchers developed a codebook to guide the analysis of media items. This codebook was approved by the ABC prior to conducting the analysis. The codebook provided the primary criteria for the evaluation as well as instructions for how to interpret whether a media item contained evidence of a criteria being met. These criteria are detailed below and will be further explained throughout this report. Each researcher in the research team met for two training sessions wherein interpretation of evidence for the criteria was discussed. A pilot test was conducted to ensure that members of the research team agreed on how to systematically code for certain criteria. We then conducted the analysis and entered copious notes relating to each media item into a shared document.

In phase two, the researchers met to interpret patterns across the sample of 67 media items and begin formulating our findings. In this phase, a further applied thematic analysis was conducted. Media items were analysed iteratively, with thematic codes being developed through an inductive process. The insights from this process were used to group elements of the media items into themes based on their textual, subtextual and interpretive qualities. The findings from this analysis were used to assist in evaluating whether the phase one analysis had missed any important evidence.

For the purposes of this evaluation, we have chosen not to employ a purely deductive or quantitative approach. That is, we have not identified the frequency or prominence of quantifiable phenomena such as criteria met, sources used, themes articulated, or specified YES or NO arguments etc. The reason for this is that the sample size is too small to provide meaningful, reliable or repeatable insights in this regard. If the analysis were repeated using different media items, it is likely we would find variations in frequencies and prominences. Small sample evaluations are better

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[1] Continuous televised segments of news were generally divided at points where one package ended, and the anchor or presenter introduced the next package.

suited to qualitative analysis. In this analysis, we have focused on a systematic approach to interpreting the content of the news items with guidance from the terms of reference.

1.4 Criteria for Evaluation

Prior to conducting the analysis of media items, the research team met to formulate a codebook. The codebook approved by the ABC contained a set of primary criteria for evaluation derived from the terms of reference. **Table 1** below provides an overview of the criteria and how they relate to the terms of reference:

TABLE 1: PRIMARY CRITERIA FOR EVALUTION

Terms of reference	Primary criteria
How well did the sampled content achieve the aim of helping Australians make an informed decision when they voted?	Adequacy of Information about the Referendum Process
	Adequacy of Information about Referendum Outcomes
	Fair Comparison Between Differing Positions
	Use of External Sources of Information
	Communication Style and Transparency
Did the sampled content exhibit an appropriate approach to dealing with misinformation and disputed claims?	Mitigation of Unverifiable Claims
	Foregrounding of Facts over Misinformation
	Rebuttal of Verifiable Claims
	Verification and Accuracy
Were interviews conducted in an appropriately probing manner?	Professionalism in Interviewing
	Accurate and Complete Questioning
	Relevant Questioning
	Appropriate Contextualisation
	Appropriate Contestation

Terms of reference 4 and 5 were not considered appropriate for analysis at the level of individual media items. This is because those terms of reference asked about ways future coverage could be improved. Therefore, these were excluded from this phase of the evaluation and addressed in phase two.

The following sections will provide additional details about how evidence for each criterion was assessed. It will also provide a qualitative assessment as to whether the sampled content met, approached or did not meet each criterion.

2 Informational Reporting and Coverage

2.1 Information about the Referendum Process

About the criterion

We evaluated whether each media item provided **adequate background and context about the referendum as a democratic process**. This included evaluating the presence or absence of knowledge and information required for a reasonable person to understand the voting process, when they would vote, how they would cast a ballot, and the procedural effects of casting a YES or NO vote on the outcome of the referendum. **Evidence of this** included explanation of the referendum question wording; enrolment processes and requirements; voting options; polling booth hours, the YES/NO response requirement; double-majority requirement for the referendum's success etc.

Observations

1. The sampled content provided sufficient information for an ordinary Australian to understand the process of voting in the referendum.

Evidence of this included information about the referendum question wording, the YES/NO nature of the question, voting options, the double-majority requirement, polling station opening and closing times etc. This information was detailed in a number of the sampled media items. Where it was detailed, voting information was provided in a simple and easy to understand format using clear communication, often alongside links to external resources such as the Australian Electoral Commission website

2. The sampled content provided voting information that was well tailored to the referendum as a distinct political process, as compared with a state, territory or federal election.

Where voting information was provided, journalists made clear how and in what ways the referendum differed to more frequently held votes such as federal elections. This included highlighting that the response requirement on the ballot paper was to mark a YES or NO in the box rather than writing in numbers.

Examples

Content analysis	Observations
Australia's Big Decision ABC News Online 03/10/2023 • Contains comprehensive 'How do I vote?' section. • Information provided is more than adequate for audiences	This media item provides a good example of the delivery of information about the referendum process. The clear sub-heading 'How do I vote?' draws attention. There are links to AEC

to understand the referendum process. • Includes information about question wording, YES/NO nature of the vote, double-majority requirement for passing, enrolment and voting options, polling booth hours, links to where to find polling stations.	resources and clear instructions on how to vote in person, early, on the day, or by postal ballot. The YES/NO nature of the response required is explained and there is also a link to the AEC's 'Where to vote' tool. The 'How does the Voice referendum pass?' section is also useful for helping people understand the broader process after their ballot is submitted. These two sections are detailed yet succinct and in everyday English, at around 300 words.
ABC News 13/10/2023 (ABC1NAT 13/10/2023 19:14-19:17 • Broadcast news segment providing information about when the audience is likely to know the outcome of the referendum. • Includes information about poll close times, how counting works, double-majority requirement for passing, YES/NO nature of question. • Provides partial background and context for understanding the referendum as a democratic process.	This media item provides some important information, including the YES/NO response requirement (though this appears only as a graphic), and the double-majority requirement, as well as the poll closing times. It does not include referrals to external resources (like the AEC website) or information about the question wording. As such the information provided is partially adequate. It is concise and easy to understand, and the graphics aid in comprehension of complex aspects such as the double-majority requirement. While not necessary in every item of news, journalists could consider if procedural information can be standardised and provided in a consistent and simplified format throughout the campaign period. This is naturally easier for online items rather than broadcast because hyperlinks etc. can be inserted into online content. However, a back announcement or screen graphic, or crawler listing places viewers can go for further information would be useful. For radio, they could have a back announce or link in the show notes to go to

	the ABC's 'about the Voice' page for more information.

Suggestions

1. Provide greater consistency in news reporting about referendum processes.

In the sampled coverage, voting information was often provided in a non-uniform manner. This is to be expected due to the variation in formats, platforms and target audiences of the sampled content. For example, in a radio news item the YES or NO nature of the question, question wording, ballot paper, and vote counting process were explained, but not other elements. While in an online news item the question wording, the function of referendums, and the double-majority requirement were discussed, but not the YES or NO nature of the question.

To ensure the audience does have access to consistent and complete authoritative information about the voting process the ABC could consider referring to a stand-alone web page 'About the Voice' that contains links to external sources such as the AEC and FAQs etc. For audio content reference to this resource could be mentioned during or at the end of a broadcast, such as: "For all the details about the referendum and how to vote go to the ABC's 'About the Voice' page "; for video/TV a graphic or crawler could provide information about the site with voice over; and a hyperlink with text could be provided for online. This might be more effective if delivered early in the program or towards the beginning of written pieces but will naturally vary depending on the format and flow of the item.

It should be noted, the ABC did produce a range of explainer pieces that were part of the sampled content, however, that information will only reach certain segments of the audience. A dedicated webpage resource regularly referred to would provide more uniform information.

2.2 Information about Referendum Outcomes

About the criterion

We evaluated whether each media item **provided adequate information about the immediate future benefits, risks or other outcomes** (material, political, cultural or otherwise) which were, on the balance of evidence, most likely to result from a YES or NO outcome. **Evidence of this,** for example, included discussion of possible social and political impacts for First Nations peoples in Australia, the requirement for parliament to pass legislation to constitute the Voice in the case of a YES vote, or alternative approaches to addressing health and life expectancy disparities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the case of a NO vote.

Observations

1. The sampled content provided sufficient information about the Australian Constitution, how a YES vote would alter the Constitution, and the subsequent legislative process that would be required to establish the Voice.

Not every item assessed contained detailed reference to the outcomes of the referendum. This naturally varied across the sample. Overall, the sampled media items provided sufficient information for an ordinary person to understand that a YES vote would alter the Australian Constitution to include a section that would recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the First Peoples of Australia and establish an advisory body—the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice—that would make representations to the Parliament and the Executive on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The coverage also made clear that subsequent to a YES vote the Parliament would have to pass legislation that would constitute the Voice as well as its composition, purpose and remit. Furthermore, the sampled media items provided sufficient information for an ordinary person to understand that a NO vote would result in no alterations to the Australian Constitution being made.

2. On balance, the sampled content provided the best available information about what the composition, purpose, and remit of the Voice would likely be.

No information was provided by the Government of the day about its preferred policy or what it intended to legislate with regard to the composition, function, powers and procedures of the Voice in the event of a successful YES vote. Similarly, to the best of the research team's knowledge, no major political party provided a public policy platform or information about their preferred composition, function, powers or procedures.

Taking this into account, the sampled media items provided a good quality and variety of information about proposed models for the Voice. This included, for example, discussion of the Final Report on the Indigenous Voice Co-design Process published by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (the Calma-Langton report), which presented several possible models for how the Voice could be constituted in legislation.

Examples

Content analysis	Observations
Voice to Parliament explained: Here are the answers to your most-asked questions about the referendum ABC News Online 5/10/2023 • Despite information gaps, it provides a good overview of what is likely to happen if the referendum succeeds or fails.	This article provides a thorough and even overview of possible outcomes. Overall, the ABC's coverage of the Voice rarely detailed how the referendum would alter the constitution and how the legislative process enacting the Voice would need to be a separate process. This article does a good job of breaking that process down, and explaining how subsequent policy or

• This includes discussion of how the Voice would need to be legislated by parliament, as well as proposed structures for the Voice (including the Calma Langton model). • It notes how the Voice would differ from existing policy settings and how it might help to close the gap. • It debunks important misinformation about what won't happen after the referendum (i.e. Voice will not provide for reparations).	regulation might stem from advice provided by a Voice to Parliament. Clear and simple sections such as 'How will the Voice impact Indigenous people day to day?' and 'How could the Voice help close the gap?' provide essential interpretation that would have assisted in informing voters. It also clearly details that in the event of a No vote the Government would not be seeking to legislate a different form of advisory body, a detail missing from a lot of other coverage. Though this article is lengthy, it is concise and easy to read. It is likely the length would not present a barrier to an interested and engaged voter.
7.30 30/8/2023 (ABC1 NAT 4/10 19:30 – 20:00) • Series of state-based segments on the YES and NO campaigns. • Detailed interviews and discussion featuring advocates from both the YES and NO campaign, as well as vox pops to contextualise. • Some discussion of polling data, campaign strategies, and likelihood of success or failure in each state. • Provides good historic context localised to each state. • Some segments touch on or note that changes are needed to address social issues.	The substantive focus of these segments appears to be on voting patterns, campaign discourse, strategies, and the political moves/countermoves made by various actors. As such, there is limited information provided that might help voters to understand possible social and policy outcomes. These state-based items contain some mention of practical steps that could be taken besides or in addition to the Voice in order to close the gap. But overall, there is no detailed engagement with referendum outcomes. Where social conditions or social change are mentioned, possible tangible solutions facilitated by a Voice are rarely detailed by either sources or the journalists. For example, in the story from Tasmania journalists discuss high incarceration rates in the state (at approx. 19.39) as a problem that the Voice may address. However, the problem statement is punctuated by a

	conclusion that the Voice *may* lead to Aboriginal led solutions to addressing this issue. Voters may be left wondering what kind of Aboriginal led solutions might be proposed and how they might function, but no further detail is provided. Discussion then moves on to polling data. The journalist could have sought more detail, or noted, that they weren't able to provide any. The Voice is at times conflated with 'closing the gap' without any logical engagement with what steps might proceed between a YES vote and policy change. Some voters may have found these logical leaps difficult to make.

Suggestions

1. Election or referendum coverage should be cautious to ensure that coverage of political or campaign strategies is appropriately balanced with coverage of possible policy outcomes and directly affected stakeholder groups.

As noted elsewhere in this report, coverage sometimes gave greater prominence to campaign strategy, political tactics, and discussion of 'winners and losers' sometimes referred to as 'horse race' journalism. While a certain amount of this coverage is interesting to long-time politics watchers, political insiders and journalists, it does not provide content relevant for voters to make a decision based on the substance of the issues at hand, in the context of an election or referendum, this type of horse-race and insider-focussed reporting should be engaged with sparingly.

2. Election or referendum coverage can be an opportunity for solutions focused reporting. To facilitate this, more engagement is needed with grassroots stakeholders who are likely to be impacted by the outcome of a vote.

Solutions journalism advocates balancing problems focused reporting with reporting that shows how solutions are being enacted. Some of the coverage in this referendum touched on critical health, education, and socio-cultural issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. This was a missed opportunity to provide more solutions coverage focusing on how Indigenous health, education and community support organisations are meeting their challenges, and what those organisations saw as the pros and cons of the Voice.

2.3 Fair Comparison Between Differing Positions

About the criterion

We evaluated whether each media item provided **adequate and sufficient information to provide context for both the YES and NO cases**, as articulated by proponents for both cases in their own words. Conscious of the phenomenon of false balance (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004), we consider this criterion with reference to differing positions both between and among supporters for the YES and NO cases as well.

We note that the terms of reference focus primarily on what is needed for someone to make 'an informed decision when voting'. Thus, evidence of this criterion includes, for example, the outlining of and fair contrasting of significant arguments made in favour of both the YES and NO cases in each media item. However, we accept that it is likely voters will have been exposed to a number of media items over the course of the referendum campaign. As such, this evaluation addresses the sampled media items as a whole.

For this criterion, the research team focused in particular on contrasting arguments made by proponents of the YES or NO cases, rather than explanations or interpretations of those arguments relayed by journalists. The research team did not evaluate whether journalists or presenters engaged in advocacy or displayed any partisanship in favour of or against either the YES or NO cases. Any evaluation of journalistic advocacy or partisanship in the sampled content is beyond the scope of the terms of reference.

Observations

1. The sampled content provided adequate opportunities to YES and NO proponents to relay their respective arguments to voters. Overall, the contrasting of YES and NO cases in the sampled content was adequate.

The positioning of the YES and NO arguments was adequate overall. Coverage focused on the key arguments made by both sides, rather than speculation, hearsay or appeals to emotion. Occasional media items showcased mostly YES arguments; others showcased mostly NO arguments. However, the sample as a whole was mostly balanced. Fairness isn't only about time allocation it is also about treatment, and in the example below unverifiable claims went unchecked for one interviewee, which could be seen as unfair.

2. The sampled content presented a variety of different perspectives among YES and NO supporters, rather than presenting YES and NO as homogenous positions.

Adequate time was given to exploring differing positions among YES and NO supporters. This included giving time to coverage of NO supporters in favour of

sovereignty or treaty ahead of a Voice. More coverage could have informed voters about differing views among YES supporters, particularly with regard to different views on how the Voice would be legislated should the YES vote be successful.

Content analysis	Observations
Between the Lines 08/09/2023 -- The Voice is cracking – can the Yes vote be salvaged? • Interviews with Shireen Morris and Alexander Downer. • Presents arguments for both the YES and NO cases for the Voice. • Detailed and in-depth interviews, the interviewer does a good job of moderating and challenging some claims.	These interviews are generally informative and robustly conducted. While the interviews are ostensibly balanced because the program is structured so that one interviewee represents the YES case and the other the NO case, at times this can be seen as false balance or performative neutrality. The interviewer is robust in challenging both interviewees. But Shireen Morris and Alexander Downer represent very different positions within the YES and NO cases. Morris appears to hold a relatively moderate YES position. Whereas Downer appears to represent a somewhat less mainstream NO position. There are also numerous instances where interviewees are allowed to put forward unverifiable or speculative claims about the Voice. These speculative claims generally go unchallenged. For example, at approximately 12:33 the interviewer asks a question based on an unverifiable claim that the Voice will 'share power with parliament', which is a question based on speculation and does not seem to clearly stem from verifiable information available at the time. As the referendum and subsequent legislation had not been passed this is not something that can be verified. At approximately 29.55, the interviewer asks another question based on hearsay about how the Voice might have 'open ended constitutional powers'. In responding to the question Downer suggests that while the Government won't publicly say how it hopes to legislate the composition of the Voice that 'they know absolutely how the Voice would be set up, they know the answers to those questions, but they won't give you the answer to those questions, it's all very deceptive.' The interviewer moves the interview on. The leading question here is based on hearsay and the response contains an unverifiable and speculative claim that goes unquestioned. The Government is

	subject to checks and balances as well as the separation of powers, it does not enjoy the unhindered right to pass legislation undebated and unamended. This interview provides a good example of how issues of balance and fairness are not always easily managed.

Suggestions

1. Election and referendum coverage should give less prominence to unverifiable and speculative claims than verifiable and certain ones. Fairness in coverage is about more than just equal time or balanced positioning.

Overall, the sampled media items focused on verifiable claims made by YES and NO proponents. Some sampled media items allowed speculative claims to go unchallenged or unexplained in detail. As a principle, coverage should try to ensure this is minimised.

2. Election and referendum coverage should be cautious not to represent less prominent positions as extreme by placing them on an artificial spectrum.

Some coverage framed various positions as being 'constitutionally safe' or 'not going far enough' or aligned them with various positions on a political spectrum such as 'conservative' or 'progressive'. Coverage should ensure that framing positions in this way does not give the false impression that positions exist on an artificial spectrum, as this kind of political shorthand could discourage substantive engagement with the arguments themselves.

2.4 Use of External Sources of Information

About the criterion

We evaluated the **external sources of information used to provide background, context or information in each media item**. This included interviewees as well as external texts such as references to reports, government publications, datasets, or polling. Additionally, each source was labelled by type, for example noting whether the source was a politician, a YES or NO campaigner, a legal expert, etc. For longer media items only the first six sources were recorded in order of appearance. **Note:** coders did not evaluate the ethno-racial identity or Indigeneity of sources as this was not directly observable information in the media items. This was also beyond the terms of reference. For each media item, coders made notes on the **majority background**: what, on balance, comprised the majority of context provided by external sources in a media item (i.e. was the information provided mostly political, campaign related, legal, journalistic, cultural, etc.)

Observations

1. The sampled content provided a broad range of historic, social, political and legal context and information through the use of external sources.

The coverage provided adequate context via a range of sources. This included established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocates, prominent constitutional lawyers, historians, politicians and campaigners, and ordinary people living in communities around the nation. It should also be noted that the coverage provided both a national and local context, with particular media items focusing on the local and regional context by giving time to state political leaders, community health and education organisations, and remote communities.

Examples

Content analysis	Observations
7.30 4/10/2023 (ABC1 NAT 04/10 19:30 – 19:39) • Uses historic footage, interviews and quotes to provide an overview of the views of NO advocates in favour of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty. • Provides in depth and well contextualised interviews from experts, academics, advocates, state Voice members and politicians. • Uses a broad range of sources, representing different domains of knowledge and expertise. The Voice Referendum Explained 6/9/2023 (Can a Voice improve Indigenous lives?) • Provides solutions focused coverage of how the Voice might address issues like youth crime in Alice Springs. • Includes interviews community members and people involved in local youth programs. • Highlights views of ordinary community members and provides good analysis of how a Voice may lead to policy changes and	Both of these media items provide good coverage, representing viewpoints across a range of domains including political, academic, legal, campaign related, social and non-elite community members. 7.30's 4/10 broadcast provides for a range of perspectives within a story focusing on the 'sovereignty NO' movement and contextualises these perspectives with analysis of the Uluru Statement, as well as how terms such as sovereignty and treaty are being used in this political context. 'Can a Voice improve Indigenous lives?' provides helpful and informative context from non-elite sources such as community members and youth program workers. This item focuses on differing community perspectives on how the Voice may lead (or not lead) to solutions to serious social issues. Both of these items are examples of informative coverage and a diverse range of perspectives. Importantly, they both provide for viewpoints that have received less coverage in other items.

increased certainty for social programs.	
ABC News 30/08/2023 (ABC1 NAT 30/08 19:00 – 19:07) • Coverage of the announcement of the date for the ballot. • Features a range of sources and their discussion of/reactions to the announcement. • Contains some historic context and details about the ballot paper and the voting process. • The package is followed by a studio segment where polling data is discussed in detail.	Almost every source in the package is a politician, except for a brief (approx. 12 second) pivot to a number of vox pops. The package begins by stating that the announcement of the referendum date marks the beginning of six weeks of campaigning from 'both sides of the debate'. This frames the referendum in oppositional political terms, when the debate was more nuanced and had several perspectives. Grabs then feature the Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, business executive and social activist Tanya Hosch, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Greens leader Adam Bandt, Independent MP Kate Chaney, Albanese (again), Opposition leader Peter Dutton, Shadow minister Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, and Albanese (again). These comments are followed by a detailed discussion of opinion polling data, which mainly focuses on campaign strategy and the 'undecided voter' segment. The choice of sources and focus on polling data in this item is again representative of what is sometimes referred to as 'horse-race coverage'. There is no substantive discussion of policy or social issues, and the referendum is framed primarily in terms of oppositional campaign strategy. Additionally, the choice of sources gives the impression that 'both sides of the debate' are represented primarily by leading political actors such as

	party leaders and members of parliament.

Suggestions

1. Election and referendum coverage should aim to ensure that elite sources— particularly politicians—are not overrepresented as sources of context and information.

Overall, the coverage leaned towards overrepresentation of elite sources. By this we mean that the voices of political and economic elites (politicians, senior professionals, business owners, senior executives, etc.) were overrepresented. We note that there are unique challenges facing journalism at the moment in terms of time and resourcing constraints and that this has intensified the difficulty of incorporating non-elite sources into coverage. However, the incorporation of non-elite sources, particularly community leaders or the heads of smaller support and advocacy groups, is still an ideal that journalism could strive towards.

2. Consideration of a different reporting style for referendums.

Referendums differ from general elections. They have different aims. A referendum is about the merits of an idea to be included in the constitution and a federal election is a contest about who should lead the country. However, the same political reporting approach used for elections was adopted by the media generally in relation to the referendum. Perhaps the media needs to give consideration to whether a different style of reporting could be adopted for referendums in particular, and elections in general with less focus on political tactics and winning and more on the substance of the ideas being put to the people.

2.5 Communication Style and Transparency

About the criterion

We evaluated the **clarity of communication and ease of comprehension of each media item** with the intended audience of each item in mind. For this criterion, coders assessed whether the language, content, style and visual or audio affordances were appropriate for the audience and conveyed information in a way that was clear and easy to understand.

In addition, we evaluated **whether it was clear or easy to understand where information was coming from, who or what the sources of information were, and whether sources had relevant conflicts of interest that should be disclosed to the audience.**

Observations

1. The overall communication style in the sampled media items was clear, concise, and mostly easy to understand. Video footage, animations, graphics and audio elements were used appropriately and aided in comprehension. However, in some items there was a degree of political and legal jargon used that assumed a degree of prior knowledge.

The standard of communication was high throughout the sample. Overall, there were no major issues with how information was communicated.

Suggestions

1. Election and referendum coverage could consider how communication styles can be adapted to be more accessible for those with lower levels of written and oral English skills, as well as learning differences such as dyslexia, developmental language disorder, auditory processing disorder etc.

Many Australian voters may find it difficult to engage with the ABC's coverage because they have a lower level of written or oral communication skills, or because they have a developmental language disorder or common learning difference such as ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, etc.

Some of the most informative content in the sample—explainers and fact-checking articles—were communicated in a style that would be difficult for such individuals to engage with due to length and use of jargon. Consideration should be given to how these highly informative pieces could be communicated in creative and more accessible ways.

2. Election and referendum coverage could aim to reduce the use of jargon. Equally, coverage could consider lowering the standard of assumed knowledge for some news items.

We note that the intended audience for some of the sampled news items were generally more informed and engaged voters who are interested in politics. However, there is strong research suggesting that the use of technical or jargonistic language can discourage engagement from the broader audience who may be interested in increasing their knowledge and understanding of the political system. Research suggests that political news is hard to understand especially among those who are light news consumers, which is the majority of Australian population (Fisher et al, 2024). ABC should consider how best to tailor coverage of elections and referendums to those with a minimal level of assumed knowledge.

2.6 Discussion Questions—Informative Reporting

- Should referendums and general elections be reported differently, given the very different aims of each?
- Given the social and cultural impacts of the Voice referendum, should the coverage have been dominated by political reporters, or broadened to help

shift away from the traditional style of horse race, conflict based political reporting?

- How can the ABC best report on political processes where information about possible outcomes is being withheld from voters?
- How can the ABC balance reporting on the problems that have precipitated referendums while also showcasing grassroots driven solutions?
- How can the ABC make information about the voting process more accessible to people with learning differences or disabilities?
- How can the ABC make information about the voting process more accessible to first time voters, including those who may have become citizens only recently?
- How can the ABC make information about the voting process more accessible to people with lower levels of education, knowledge and interest in politics?
- How can the ABC better plan for and assist journalists in incorporating the views of non-elite sources into electoral coverage?
- How can the ABC continue to improve and expand the accessibility of its content in ways that do not place additional workload stress onto frontline journalists?

3 Misinformation and Disputed Claims

3.1 Mitigation of Unverifiable Claims

About the criterion

We evaluated whether each media item **pre-empted, highlighted and explained unverifiable claims or supposition** that arose in the context of reporting or analysis. **Evidence of this** included the calling out of or challenging of unverifiable claims—including speculation, hearsay, or unsubstantiated theories, clarification about potentially misleading statements or claims, explanations that more information or data or context was needed, as well as clear labelling of possible misinformation.

Observations

1. Where appropriate, the sampled media items did pre-empt, highlight and explain unverifiable claims. In particular, explainers and fact-check articles provided a useful venue for this.

Overall, the sampled media items made suitable efforts to highlight, pre-empt and assess unverifiable claims. This was the case in ordinary coverage, but was particularly noticeable in fact-check, explainer articles, and explainer radio/podcast packages. Occasionally, unverifiable claims, supposition, or hearsay, were allowed to go unchallenged. However, we consider the context of each media item and note

that for some formats it would be unhelpful or unnecessary to challenge every unverifiable claim, particularly where contrasting positions are provided.

Examples

Content analysis	Observations
7.30 12/10/2023 (ABC1 NAT 12/10 19:37 – 19:40) • Segment of 7.30 discussing the effects of misinformation in NSW during the final weeks of the campaign. • Interviews Australian Local Hero of the Year Amar Singh as well as a number of other people involved in the YES and NO campaigns. RMIT ABC Fact Check 29/9/2023 – Secret agendas, context-free claims and mistaken identities • Fact check article overviewing a range of misinformation that has appeared during the campaign period.	Pre-empting is introducing a topic of misinformation in a way that primes audiences to be sceptical. In the 7.30 media item while introducing the segment on misinformation the voice over begins by stating '[Singh] has been rallying culturally diverse communities who he worries have been misled by false ideas'. Singh then notes that he believes people have been receiving misinformation about the Voice, that it will lead to people's land being taken from them. In the RMIT ABC Fact check 'Secret agendas, context-free claim and mistaken identities', all of the potentially false or misleading claims are preceded by the statements: 'The debate has witnessed all manner of misleading claims' and 'to help you navigate the campaign's final fortnight, we've rounded up some key themes of misinformation'. Both of these media items provide a good example of pre-empting as a practice in mitigating misinformation. The audience is warned prior to hearing or reading the misinformation that what they are about to hear/read is 'false' or 'potentially false or misleading'. As such, they are primed to be sceptical about the content of the misinformation.
RMIT ABC Fact Check 11/08/2023 – Is the Uluru Statement from the Heart one page, or 26? Here are the facts • A fact check article explaining political debate over the length of the Uluru Statement of the Heart.	Media items that deal with misinformation must be cautious not to give greater prominence to the disputed claim and thus unintentionally amplifying it. Elements that have greater prominence in news items are often the most remembered.

	This media item carries the headline 'Is the Uluru Statement from the Heart one page, or 26?' Phrased as a hypothetical, the headline opens the possibility that either option could be the truth. Additionally, if an audience member were to only view the headline and not read the article, they may be primed to believe this is a legitimate question rather than something that is being debunked. The article begins with the statement that CheckMate is examining claims that "'secret' documents have revealed the Uluru Statement from the Heart to be not one but 26 pages long.' This is then followed by another section heading 'Two-minute read or 26 pages of detail: Who's correct on the Uluru Statement from the Heart?' The claim that the Uluru Statement from the Heart is 26-pages is then introduced by contrasting arguments put by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Sky News host Peta Credlin, rather than via an expert or the fact-checker's own words. Although the article eventually concludes that it is only one page, the false claim has not been pre-empted. Attention is drawn to the disputed claim itself. The structure of the article, including the prominence of the false claim as a hypothetical question in the headline and sub-headings, may lead readers to the wrong conclusion.

Suggestions

1. Fact-checks and explainers could avoid posing hypothetical questions about disputed claims to the audience. Try not to introduce the possibility that a claim is verifiable if the conclusion of the article is that the claim is not.

Fact-checks and explainers generally deal with clear and verifiable facts. While it is sometimes appropriate to introduce fact-checking through hypothetical questions— sometimes framed in the format of 'is a disputed claim accurate?'—this should generally be avoided, particularly if it might introduce the possibility that an

unverifiable claim could be accurate. Journalists need to be alert to the possible amplifying effects of reporting and repeating false claims.

2. Fact-check articles in particular should be cautious when testing unverifiable claims that largely hinge on interpretation.

Some claims made by public figures are unverifiable because they are a selective, framed or distorted interpretation of those facts, or because the meaning of a word or phrase could be interpreted in multiple ways depending on the person. Political communication is often symbolic; we recognise that actors use rhetorical tools such as metaphors, double meaning, and coded language to persuade their audience. This can sometimes result in an inseparable blend of fact and fiction.

Fact-checking articles, which largely focus on the verification of facts, may not always be the right venue to test claims that hinge largely on interpretation. Verification as a practice relies upon presentation of unambiguous data, records, or evidence demonstrating whether a claim is true or not. If a claim can largely be said to be a matter of interpretation, then it may be better to test that claim in an analysis article instead.

3.2 Foregrounding of Facts over Misinformation

About the criterion

We evaluated whether each media item **foregrounded factual information before introducing or discussing known myths, misinformation, or misleading claims.** Particularly in the context of fact-checks and news items about misinformation, we evaluated whether facts were positioned before misinformation, misinformation was preceded by warnings and clear markers distinguishing it from verifiable information, and whether misinformation was followed by clarification of the non-factual nature of that content. Of relevance here was also the prominence of myths and misinformation in media items and whether facts were given more or less prominence.

Observations

1. The sampled media items adequately distinguished factual information from unverifiable, disputed, or non-factual claims. Additionally, the bulk of coverage on myths, misinformation, or misleading claims is contextualised clearly in fact-checking or explainer articles.

Overall, the sampled media items provided informative coverage of myths, misinformation, and misleading claims made during the referendum campaign. In most cases, this was clearly labelled or demarcated as non-factual information or disputed claims. For example, sections of articles were labelled as discussing misinformation, or presenters introduced a topic by saying they were going to discuss misinformation.

N&MRC—ABC VOICE REFERENDUM COVERAGE EVALUATION

Example

Content analysis	Observations
RMIT ABC Fact Check 19/7/2023 – The Yes and No arguments have been published without fact checking. Here's what you need to know. • Extensive fact check article overviewing verifiable claims made in official YES and NO pamphlets.	In some sections of these articles, misinformation is foregrounded over facts. For example, in 'The Yes and No arguments have been published…' under the 'National Indigenous Australians Agency' tab, three paragraphs are used to introduce the claim that the NIAA can be considered an existing Voice to Parliament, implying a Voice is not necessary. The 'fact' that the NIAA is not an independent body in the same way a Voice would be is not introduced until paragraph 5 of that section. However, in the context of the article this is unlikely to mislead. The article is straightforwardly a fact check of claims made in the Yes and No pamphlets and the 'fact' in question is relatively easy to explain.
RMIT ABC Fact Check 13/10/2023 – Jacinta Nampijinpa Price says the gap in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is 'more about place than race'. Is that correct? • Fact check that addresses the claim that disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is primarily due to geography rather than discrimination.	Foregrounding becomes an issue when there is added ambiguity. For example, in 'Jacinta Nampijinpa Price says the gap in outcomes…' the claim that disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is due to 'place rather than race' is foregrounded twice: first in the headline itself, then in the first four paragraphs. The verdict ('Oversimplified') is ambiguous and the analysis and data that follows is long, detailed and at times complicated and difficult to understand. A relatively high level of reading and academic comprehension would be needed to fully understand all the facts provided. For this reason, it is likely that many readers may remember the prominently displayed but disputed claim 'place rather than race', over the detailed facts and evidence provided in the pages that follow.

Suggestions

1. Fact-check and explainer articles should aim to ensure that factual information is presented upfront and 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.

Occasionally, misinformation was not foregrounded clearly by factual information. While this is not always necessary, for particularly memorable and oft-repeated misinformation it is better to report facts first, then discuss or rebut the misinformation.

The first part of an article is generally easiest to recall. As such, beginning an article with discussion of 'the claims' made, or the assertions that are under dispute, carries a slight risk that the disputed information will be recalled more easily than the clear, verifiable and factual information that follows. Better recall of disputed claims is also likely if they are repeated again in the same piece or across news stories. As such, 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 the verifiable and factual information.

2. Fact-check and explainer articles should avoid introducing a disputed claim in a format that would provide the claim with more prominence than the facts.

Formatting is an important part of downplaying the visibility of potentially false or misleading claims in a media item. As such, wherever possible unverifiable claims should not appear in headlines, sub-headings, pull-quotes, or be bolded or underlined. Even if the unverifiable claim is phrased as a hypothetical question, it should not be positioned as a heading, sub-heading or any other prominent feature on the page. Unverifiable claims could be introduced in a neutral way by using headings or sub-headings that mention the topic or theme of the claim rather than the claim itself. In contrast, verified information should be given prominence through bolding, sub-headings or pull-quoting, etc.

3.3 Rebuttal of Verifiable Claims

About the criterion

We evaluated whether each media item made **reasonable efforts to verify claims made by sources that could be tested, checked, or triangulated against other sources of information**. For this criterion, coders evaluated whether disputed claims were discussed or brought up in the media item, as well as whether the journalist or fact-checker made sufficient efforts to identify the claims as disputed and attempt to assess the veracity of the claims by using appropriate data, evidence or testimony.

Observations

1. Dedicated fact-checking and explainer articles were helpful in rebutting verifiable claims.

The overall sample demonstrated that substantial efforts had been made to test claims made throughout the referendum campaign to verify what was true and false. Much of this was limited to explainer or fact-check items. However, there are also numerous examples of verification in ordinary coverage as well.

Example

Content analysis	Observations
7.30 30/8/2023 (ABC1 NAT 4/10 19:30 – 20:00) • Series of state-based segments on the YES and NO campaigns. • Detailed interviews and discussion featuring advocates from both the YES and NO campaign, as well as vox pops to contextualise. • Some discussion of polling data, campaign strategies, and likelihood of success or failure in each state. • Provides good historic context localised to each state. • Some segments touch on or note that changes are needed to address social issues.	The format of broadcast television often does not provide much time for contestation or verification of facts. However, there are examples where further steps could have been made by journalists to verify claims. For example, at 19:33 Federal MP James Stevens makes the claim that 'there has been bullying and ostracization of people for having any view other than yes, it has been made clear by the big corporates and celebrities that this is something any good person should support.' This is a claim that merits further evaluation to determine whether Stevens is relying on hearsay or factual instances of people being bullied or ostracised for holding a NO position. However, in this instance the claim goes unexamined.

Suggestions

1. Fact-checks should avoid ambiguous determinations on whether a claim is true or not.

Occasionally, fact-check or explainer items will conclude that a claim is neither verifiable true no false but should be determined some other way. For example, a claim might be determined as 'oversimplified' rather than simple 'true' or 'false'. Fact-checks should be cautious not to provide determinations that have the potential to produce more ambiguity for the audience than certitude. If a claim cannot be determined to be clearly factual or not, ABC could consider whether a fact-check

article is the correct venue to discuss that claim. A more appropriate place to test these claims may be in an analysis article.

2. Fact-check, explainer and analysis items should balance rigour and detail with accessibility considerations.

Voters should be able to access high-quality and rigorous verifications of the facts even if they have a lower level of written or oral English skills, or a learning difference or disability, such as dyslexia, ADHD, dyspraxia, auditory processing disorder, etc. Consideration needs to be given to how particularly lengthy fact-check or explainer pieces that use academic or jargonistic language can be made more accessible to these audiences. This also applies to those who lack interest in news or in the topic.

3. Verifiable claims that are being debunked should not be introduced as hypotheticals.

If a claim is proved to be non-factual it should not be introduced by the media item in the form of a hypothetical question. Hypothetical questions provide for the possibility that a claim is true. If the substantive conclusion of the article is that it isn't, it should plainly state that it is wrong and not tease the audience with the possibility that it might be right.

Perhaps, headlines for fact checks should not be run through the Chartbeat system and human judgement solely used to avoid unintended amplification of the false information.

3.4 Verification and Accuracy

About the criterion

We evaluated whether each media item made reasonable efforts to ensure **information presented as factual**—in contrast to information presented as opinion or interpretation—**could reasonably be verified by audience members as being accurate**, and affordances were provided for audience members, where appropriate, to check the veracity of that information themselves. Additionally, coders considered whether sufficient contextual information was provided to ensure information presented as factual was not misleading in some other way.

Observations

1. Overall, the sampled media items demonstrated evidence of verification throughout, and where possible hyperlinks to sources were provided to help audiences verify the information.

This was particularly true of fact-check and explainer articles, which provided ample hyperlinks to external sources to provide audience members with additional information. For broadcast news items there were fewer opportunities to offer these

additional tools for audience verification. However, presenters mostly made clear where they were sourcing information from when posing a question or discussing a particular element of the story.

Suggestions

1. For online users with lower levels of digital literacy, links to external sources of information 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.

3.5 Discussion Questions—Misinformation and Disputed Claims

- How can the ABC effectively debunk misinformation and disinformation without giving undue prominence to myths and false information?
- In the context of an election or referendum, are there certain misinformation topics that the ABC should elect not to cover to reduce the risk of giving greater prominence to false or misleading information?
- When dealing with misinformation, to what extent should journalist's account for audience members who only skim articles, or read headlines or sub-headings while not engaging with the main text? How can 'light readers' be accounted for in editorial processes about misinformation, given they are likely to only read the headline, which might be repeating the false claim without correction?
- Fact-check articles can be detailed, complex and hard to understand. How can fact-checkers provide accurate analysis while reducing jargon and technical language that has the potential to disengage audiences?
- How can the ABC increase transparency and provide more information to news consumers about sourcing practices, how journalists verify facts, and why certain claims are fact checked while others are not?
- Should some story headlines not be used in the Chartbeat system to avoid amplifying misinformation?

4 Conduct of Interviews

4.1 Professionalism in Interviewing

About the criterion

We evaluated whether media items that contained interviews **exhibited professionalism**, in that questioning was appropriate, fair, honest and polite, contestations and interruptions were made at appropriate times, personalisation and sensationalism were avoided, and interviewers were not argumentative, hostile, or condescending.

Observations

1. Interviews were generally conducted professionally across the sampled media items, questioning was overall appropriate, polite and fair, and where contestations or interruptions were made, they were on topic and not argumentative, hostile or personalised.

The standard of professionalism for interviews across the sample was high. The research team did not note any points where interviewers substantially crossed the line into unprofessional behaviour. We note that at times interviewers were robust and determined in their conduct, interrupting or attempting to keep interviewees on topic or focused on substantial matters in interviews. We note as well that the Voice to parliament referendum was and continues to be an emotive issue. Despite this, ABC journalists did not exceed what would be expected of the standard of professional interviewing by most journalists

4.2 Accurate and Complete Questioning

About the criterion

We evaluated whether media items that contained interviews **exhibited fair questioning that was based on accurate or complete information**. Evidence for this included, for example, interviewers disclosing the sources of data or information their questions are based on. For this criterion, coders paid particular attention to whether questions were based on speculation or opinion on the part of the interviewer and whether interviewees had to correct interviewers on the facts underpinning a question.

Observations

1. Overall, interviewers exhibited fair questioning that was based on accurate and complete information. When asked about the information their questions were based on, interviewers provided additional context and verifiable information.

Interviewers in the sampled media items often prefaced questions with relevant context based on accurate and complete information. Across the sample, there were only a few instances where questioning was based on incomplete or inaccurate information, however in most cases this was remedied within the interview itself through further explanation or contextualisation.

Example

Content analysis	Observations
RN Breakfast 08/11/2023 – Peter Dutton labels Voice referendum 'reckless' • Interview with Opposition leader Peter Dutton discussing the Voice referendum and alternative proposals.	Overall, this is a good interview, conducted in a professional, probing and fair manner. Questions are overall based on accurate and complete information, and are relevant to the topic at hand, as well as being relevant to the domain of knowledge and expertise of the interviewee. At one point the interviewer makes a contestation, asking Dutton whether—based on advice from constitutional expert Anne Twomey—it was possible to change the Voice referendum question wording. The interviewer implies this is false. Dutton rebuts the contestation by arguing that if the legislation is amended then the wording can be changed, to which the interviewer responds: 'well let's talk in reality, because you know that's not going to happen'. This exchange is likely one that would not be constructive or informative for an undecided voter. Additionally, missing from the exchange is Twomey's advice that amending the legislation would likely take too much time, given requirements to debate and discuss any amendments in parliamentary sitting weeks. Neither the interviewee nor interviewer are completely accurate on this question, and partly this stems from the incomplete nature of the question to begin with.

4.3 Relevant Questioning

About the criterion

We evaluated whether media items that contained interviews **exhibited relevant questioning.** By this we mean that questions put to the interviewee were relevant to the general topic of the interview, the line of questioning, a broader issue related to the interview, or a direct response given by the interviewee. For this criterion, coders

also evaluated whether questioning was appropriate and respectful to the domain of knowledge and experience the interviewee would reasonably be familiar with.

Observations

1. Overall, interviewers asked relevant questions during interviews which were appropriate to the subject of the interview and respectful of the knowledge and experience the interviewee would be familiar with.

Interviewers generally stuck to questions that were relevant to the topic of the interview. There were no significant examples of interviewers going off topic, asking personal or irrelevant questions, or jumping from one topic to another in a way that would be confusing or difficult for an interviewee to follow. In general, interviewers were respectful of the domain of knowledge and experience for their interviewees. For example, politicians were asked questions that were generally relevant to the political dimensions of the Voice, while academic and legal experts were asked about specific topics related to their area of research.

Suggestions

1. Interviewers could try to prioritise questions that solicit responses related to most likely outcomes of voting a particular way, rather than less substantive issues.

As noted elsewhere in this report, coverage often focused on campaign strategy, political tactics, and 'winners and losers' in the referendum. Campaign coverage is sometimes appropriate given campaigns provide an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their character and trustworthiness. However, this is less relevant in the context of a referendum since no candidates are being elected. Particular lines of questioning about who might win or lose, the conduct of individuals associated with certain campaigns or political organisations, and perceived strategic gains or losses in the campaign, are also less relevant and informative in this context.

4.4 Appropriate Contextualisation

About the criterion

We evaluated whether media items that contained interviews **exhibited appropriate contextualisation**, wherein the interviewer provides additional information as needed to assist the interviewee in understanding or responding to a question, assist the audience in understanding the full meaning or intent of a question, or assist the audience in understanding a decontextualised response given by the interviewee.

Observations

1. Across the sample, interviewers generally provided good contextualisation to questions and responses by drawing from external sources, verifiable information, or follow-up explanation or analysis.

Clear examples of this included prompting interviewees with statements they have made on the record in the past, referring to statements made by academics, lawyers or experts in other contexts, and reference to established statistics, data, or past voting patterns.

Example

Content analysis	Observations
Insiders 08/10/2023 (ABC1 NAT 08/10 09:23 – 09:44) • Interview with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese discussing the Voice to Parliament, the ongoing YES and NO campaigns, and the success of the NO campaign in shifting public opinion.	This interview provides a good example of the use of contextualisation to support a question or series of questions. At approx. 09:34 the interviewer asks Albanese whether the government will legislate the Voice anyway even in the event of a NO vote. Albanese takes the position that the government would not. The interviewer follows up by asking Albanese why the government would not legislate the Voice given all the benefits it's ministers have been attributing to it. To contextualise, a clip is played of various government ministers talking about what the Voice might achieve. The use of file footage here helps provide the audience and the interviewee with context to frame the question. It helps to explain why the interviewer is asking the question by making it clear that it is a reaction to the government's own discourse rather than hearsay or speculation.

Suggestions

1. Interviewers should be conscious of how contextualisation can frame questions in ways that give more prominence to political or campaign strategy instead of substantive policy, potential outcomes, and the views of affected stakeholders.

Occasionally, interviewers ask questions that are more about campaign strategy or political tactics. Polling data is also used frequently to provide context. ABC could consider whether such contextualisation leads the line of questioning away from substantive matters of policy and towards a discussion of strategy. A certain amount of this contextualisation is necessary for the audience to understand the positioning

of YES and NO proponents. It is equally important for the audience to understand *why* a proponent may be using a certain argument or style of argument. However, this needs to be balanced carefully so that policy, potential outcomes, and the views of key stakeholders remain a priority of focus.

4.5 Appropriate Contestation

About the criterion

We evaluated whether media items that contained interviews **exhibited appropriate contestations**. By this we mean that claims made by interviewees were challenged politely, avoiding personalisation, requesting clarifications or additional information when necessary, and in reference to facts or verifiable information. Of note, coders paid special attention to whether contestations were based in matters of fact and were not attempts to **solicit speculation, hearsay or an uninformed opinion** outside the domain of knowledge the interviewee would reasonably be expected to possess.

Example

Content analysis	Observations
RN Breakfast 05/10/2023 – 'We should end the separatism': Tony Abbott on the Voice • Interview with Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott discussing Abbott's role in the NO campaign, views on alternatives to the Voice, and	This interview provides some excellent examples of contestation as well as some difficult examples. Abbott states early in the interview that Aboriginal people should be 'encouraged to integrate into the mainstream of our society'; the interviewer challenges Abbott to clarify what he means by 'integrate', likely because this is a somewhat loaded political word with historic links to discourses of assimilation. The contestation is made firmly, the interviewer politely interrupting with 'I just want to challenge that idea' but not allowing Abbott to continue. Later Abbott states that 'people like Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton, Pat Anderson and others have been running Aboriginal policy for the past 30 years'. The interviewer challenges firmly, having to talk over Abbott, arguing that Abbott was the 'Prime Minister that ripped quite a lot of money out of Indigenous affairs'. Abbott complains of unfair treatment, stating that 'you're arguing over the top of me, this is not an interview, it is an argument'.

	The former example here is perhaps more professional than the latter. The phrasing 'ripped quite a lot of money out of Indigenous affairs' is editorialization on the part of the interviewer. However, this is arguably not outside the normative standards of professional journalism—in which live on-air interviews are expected to at times exhibit some passionate but ultimately good-natured contestations. Ultimately, the interviewer does not resort to badgering, personalisation, inappropriate or off-topic questioning, or any other kind of unprofessional behaviour. But the interview as a whole provides a good example of the difficulty in making appropriate contestations in real time.

Observations

1. Overall, interviewers took a polite and fact-focused approach to contestations, with only occasional prompts for speculation or opinion.

The standard of interviewing in the sampled content was professional, polite and firm. Contestations were generally on-topic and based on verifiable information, comments made on the record, or substantive matters raised by other interview participants. Where contestations were made, they were generally polite but firm. While interviewers were occasionally emotive and passionate in their contestations, there is little evidence to suggest that they strayed over the line into unprofessionalism. Interviewers did not personalise, sensationalise or badger interviewees even when contestations took an adversarial approach to challenging interviewees. Overall conduct met the standard that would be expected of political journalists engaged in a robust discussion of matters of fact and substance.

4.6 Discussion Questions—Conduct of Interviews

- How can programs improve structured preparation time so that interviewers can prepare accurate and complete questions for their interviews?
- How can programs better plan for and produce contextualisation content—like video or audio clips—to assist interviewers when conducting interviews?
- How can the ABC better prepare and assist interviewers with distress caused by challenging interviews and difficult contestations?

5 Evaluation Findings Summary

5.1 Evaluative Response to the Terms of Reference

How well did the sampled content achieve the aim of helping Australians make an informed decision when they voted?

Yes. The sampled content was overall successful in providing information required for a reasonable person to understand the voting process, how a 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.

It is important to note 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 prioritise coverage of campaign strategy, political tactics and discourse about 'winners or losers' of the Voice debate**, over the cultural and social impacts of the referendum. A substantive factor that may have influenced this was the Coalition's decision to actively campaign against the Voice. But whatever the motivating factor was, the resultant coverage sometimes favoured elite and political sources, opinion polling data, and coverage of tactics that was more reminiscent of candidate focused federal election coverage.

Given this context—and the significant information constraints—the ABC's coverage could have been made more accessible. **At times, politically focused coverage assumed a good deal of prior knowledge on the part of the audience**, particularly in relation to the long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander political advocacy in Australia, as well as the various political actors' (and their parties') histories of advocacy for or against policy change.

Ordinarily, assumed knowledge is not so much an issue in content that is aimed towards an engaged, informed and politically minded audience. However, we argue that **in the case of the Voice referendum there were unique information constraints and a substantively different political context to that which federal elections audiences would have been familiar with**. Advocates for the YES and NO case were not necessarily aligned with major political parties, there was a plurality of views represented within groups advocating for YES and NO, and none of the major political parties had publicly available policies on how they might legislate the Voice if the vote were successful. These factors could have been considered in planning for and developing coverage throughout the campaign period.

Did the sampled content exhibit an appropriate approach to dealing with misinformation and disputed claims?

Yes. The sampled content dealt appropriately with misinformation and disputed claims by highlighting and mitigating unverifiable claims, foregrounding and clearly labelling misinformation, rebutting verifiable claims, and providing opportunities for audience members to seek out additional information to verify fact from non-fact.

Were interviews conducted in an appropriately probing manner?

Yes. 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 practice.

Could the sampled content have better helped Australians make an informed decision when they voted?

Yes. While the sampled content was successful in helping Australians to make an informed decision there are opportunities for improvement in future election or referendum coverage.

5.2 How could the sampled content have better helped Australians make an informed decision when they voted?

The following are some suggested areas for improvement.

Critical voting information—such as polling day voting and early voting options, ballot paper information, voter registration information, polling hours, and links to external resources etc.—could be more standardised and consistent across election or referendum coverage. This might include linking to a centralised homepage containing key facts and external reliable sources for audiences to go to for further information.

> **ABC could consider taking steps at the beginning of a campaign period to consolidate critical voter information into one resource that can be easily referred to across coverage either through hyperlinks in text, a back announcement or spoken URL in audio, or a graphic or crawler in video.**

Election or referendum coverage should also carefully consider how to balance coverage of policy and affected stakeholder groups with coverage of campaign strategy, political tactics, polling data, and perceived 'winners and losers'. Given the differing aims of a referendum and a general election, consideration could be given to whether traditional political reporting approaches driven by competition and conflict, are the most appropriate for reporting on a referendum.

In line with this, referendum coverage should aim to ensure that elite sources—particularly politicians—are not overrepresented as sources of context and information.

> **ABC could consider how journalistic practices and editorial guidelines relevant to election and referendum coverage could be altered to ensure that 'horse-race' and 'winners and lowers' coverage is minimised.**

Fact-checking and explainer articles provide an important venue for informing voters and debunking misinformation. Fact-checking and explainer articles should avoid providing ambiguous determinations on whether a claim is verifiable or not, introducing claims as hypotheticals, testing unverifiable claims that largely hinge on interpretation, or structure articles in such a way that unverifiable claims are given more prominence. These suggestions are discussed in greater detail and specificity in Section 3 of this report.

Transparency is key to building the credibility and trust associated with fact-check articles and explainers.

> As such, **ABC could consider structuring fact-check and explainer articles so that they clearly show the process by which information was collected and authenticated, as well as more detailed information about the sources used.**
>
> **Additionally, ABC could consider providing a resource attached to or associated with fact-check and explainer articles that provides transparency over why certain claims are checked and others are not, guiding principles used in deciding whether a source is reliable or not, and the steps journalists take to determine authenticity of information.**

Finally, there are improvements that could be made in making information more accessible to those with learning differences, auditory or visual processing issues, or lower levels of oral or written English proficiency, and those who are less engaged with politics and political news.

The research team notes that fact-checking and explainer articles could benefit from being adapted to a simpler format. Additionally, political reporters need to ensure they are writing for the widest audience and not just 'political junkies'. That means **avoiding political jargon and avoiding assuming a high level of background knowledge** as this presents a potential barrier to some of the audience.

References and Appendices

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Appendix A: Summary of Sample

Program	News items analysed
7.30	5 programs (video), broadcast period 30/08/2023 – 12/10/2023
RN Breakfast	8 programs (audio), broadcast period 30/08/2023 – 11/10/2023
7PM (ABC News Broadcast)	6 programs (video), broadcast period 30/08/2023 – 13/10/2023
ABC News Online	5 x Fact check articles, 5 x Analysis articles, 4 x Explainer, published online 2/4/2023 – 14/10/2023
Insiders	3 programs (video), broadcast period 10/09/2023 – 08/10/2023
Q&A	3 programs (video), broadcast period 07/08/2023 – 09/10/2023
Late Night Live	3 programs (audio), broadcast period 25/07/2023 – 09/10/2023
The Drum	3 programs (video), broadcast period 30/08/2023 – 21/09/2023
Between the Lines	2 programs (audio), broadcast period 21/07/2023 – 8/09/2023
The Voice Referendum Explained	10 episodes (audio), broadcast period 23/08/2023 – 15/10/2023