

## **Editorial Audit No. 1 (conducted by Andrea Wills).**

### **ABC Radio Interviews with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition during the 2013 Federal Election Campaign.**

#### Response from ABC Radio

ABC Radio acknowledges the value of this audit process. The thoughtfulness and thoroughness of the review itself, and the extent to which it assesses content against the Impartiality standards of the EdPols and the related Guidance Note is also noted and appreciated.

As 17 of the 23 items reviewed were the responsibility of the Radio Division, we are pleased to note the overarching conclusion that ‘the ABC did achieve due impartiality across the sample of items’.

The reviewer, Ms Wills, has expressed her hope that the ABC would regard her remarks as ‘useful constructive criticism to ensure that [it] becomes even better at fulfilling its important public service broadcaster role during election campaigns’ and ABC Radio certainly accepts her comments and conclusions in this positive light. Radio is currently considering the preparation of a divisional ‘advice note’ to staff involved in election coverage in the future which would draw upon this assessment for content and direction.

In order to best prepare this response, Radio has distributed the review (in confidence) to those presenters and broadcast teams whose work was singled out for comment + editorial line managers and their responses have been incorporated into our overall remarks. While Radio appreciates the value of a methodology which prioritises the audience experience, we also welcome the opportunity to submit a response in which an account of relevant production factors can be considered.

Although the reviewer has not found that any item failed to comply with the ABC’s Impartiality standards, she identified issues in a number of the 17 interviews. We will address these below.

She also made one general suggestion to the effect that ABC Local Radio consider greater use of talkback during election interviews, arguing that these help to enliven discussion and broaden the agenda of each discussion. Radio thinks these observations are just and will talk to program teams about including talkback more regularly in election coverage. It should be noted however, that politicians will not always agree to participate in talkback, that the short notice provided for many interviews and the limited time made available by party leaders can make it difficult to publicise, and the program team has to be sufficiently experienced to manage it successfully.

The only other general observation was that the range of subjects covered across the interviews in the sample group were not as diverse as they should have been. This meant that some important policy areas were not discussed at all, while others were covered to the point that the two leaders were too much in their comfort zone. The reviewer suggested

that this was not in the interests of either good listening nor informing the electorate and suggested the development of better strategies for assuring breadth of discussion in future election coverage. Again, Radio accepts that this is a reasonable observation and will work with program teams develop better mechanisms to ensure greater diversity in their questioning. We believe that the 'Vote Compass' project was useful in providing a barometer of public interest in policy areas in the 2013 campaign and that we can expect it to play an even greater role in future campaigns. Again though, and based on feedback from programs and editorial managers, we suggest that interviews with party leaders have been traditionally vulnerable to this criticism. The leaders themselves are usually 'on message' and attempting to present a both a small target and an elevated image. Also, many program teams were given very short notice of availability and consequently scarce time to prepare – as well as very limited time available which mitigated against wide-ranging conversation. For each interview with the leaders, there were many others with Ministers and their opposition counterparts in which a much broader range of issues were considered, and therefore a regular listener would have a different appreciation of diversity than the reviewer was reasonably able to achieve.

On specific matters:

Ms Wills suggested that interviews with the then Prime Minister on the Drive Programs of 891ABC Adelaide (4 September) and 666ABC Canberra (5 September) were overly speculative in nature. We have received mature responses from both teams, welcoming the feedback and keen to provide the best possible service to their audiences. Both teams reported that despite repeated requests to the Prime Minister's office during the campaign, they were both rung on the afternoon in question and offered a 5-6 minute interview on the spot. This rendered comparative research impossible and did not allow for detailed interlocution. We would also point out that both interviews were conducted very late in the campaign after many weeks of policy-based programming. Despite this, the Adelaide team pointed out that their early questioning included the highly relevant matter of the future of the car industry in South Australia.

A similar critique was made of an interview on 6 September (the eve of polling day) on Radio National Breakfast in which Mr Rudd was questioned about his apparent failure to convince voters of his right to re-election. Ms Wills has suggested that audiences would have been better served by adhering to questions around specific policy areas. RN Breakfast has also advised us that they had sought an interview with the PM for many weeks and were finally given 20 minutes notice on the last possible day. This is a very senior team, who made a reasoned decision that the time for a policy interview had passed. As with the Local Radio stations, they had conducted many policy-based interviews and panel discussions on a wide range of subject areas over the preceding weeks and had offered the PM the opportunity for that style of encounter. A senior Minister had already conceded on the program that morning that the Government was set to fall and they felt that it was more appropriate to question Mr Rudd as Labor leader on the meta-narratives of the campaign and his personal responsibility for the forthcoming defeat. ABC Radio agrees that this was a defensible decision, since vindicated by events.

Ms Wills has also examined the conduct of an interview on 774 ABC Melbourne Drive with the then Opposition Leader, and observed that the interviewer had allowed Mr Abbott to take control of the conversation, especially around the matter of paid parental leave, and ended up in the 'rather uncomfortable position' of answering questions himself. While Radio feels that this has a rather tangential relationship to issues of impartiality, both we and the presenter in question concede that the interview could have been more skilfully handled.

It is also accepted that an interview on 612ABC Brisbane Mornings should probably not have included a direct question to the Opposition Leader on his personal financial arrangements, although we note that Ms Wills concludes that it did not amount to a 'significant matter of unfairness'.

Accuracy is an important component of the impartiality standards at the ABC, and Ms Wills has spent some time considering an exchange between the 702ABC Sydney Breakfast presenter and Mr Abbott over international carbon pricing regimes. She concludes that neither the interviewer nor interviewee presented their perspectives with due accuracy. ABC Radio does not contest this finding and will continue to remind content-makers of the need to ensure that any 'facts' presented in a line of questioning will stand up to close scrutiny.

The 702ABC Sydney Breakfast program is also mentioned for an interview with the Prime Minister concluding with the words 'Mr Rudd, best of luck in the rest of the campaign'. We note that at the end of his interview with the Opposition Leader, the same presenter had signed off with 'have a great day and travel safely', which would, in normal circumstances be seen as fairly equivalent good wishes for both leaders, but we accept that in the middle of an election campaign there should have been a more careful and neutral choice of words.