

The ABC's Referendum coverage needed to resonate for the general audience without alienating the passionately engaged. This dilemma occurs in most news coverage but is exacerbated by many Australians' lack of Indigenous affairs knowledge. An Ipsos poll before the Referendum in 2023 found 56 per cent of Australians were interested in Indigenous issues, leaving 44 per cent with no interest.¹

The same poll found only half of Non-Indigenous Australians understood the underlying concept of the Voice to Parliament. This drives home the need for the ABC's journalism to explain without patronising. Many are likely to have turned to the ABC for information on August 30, when the polling date was announced.

7pm news August 30

The ABC 7pm news dedicated 6 minutes 19 seconds to the referendum date announcement, beginning with a package from the launch in Adelaide setting out key dates, explaining the rules for a referendum to succeed and giving historical context.

This was followed by an explanation of the ABC's poll of polls method. However, a more useful editorial choice would have been to focus less on polling, and instead explain more about the cases for and against the referendum.

The third section was the referendum correspondent answering "is the nation ready for this one?" referring to the tone and vitriol of the debate. This was useful insight, but tackling this subject needed more than just a line or two. The ABC should cover the racism and division which surfaced, recognising that such coverage would attract condemnation and controversy and be ready to support the team assigned to such reporting.

All three pieces discussed which States would be "swing" or "battleground." There was also similar analysis about the need for the campaigns to cut through. At times it is all but impossible to avoid duplication, but there is less excuse when the coverage had some pre-planning.

The significant gap in the August 30 7pm news content was that it did not include an explainer introducing the viewer to the broad concepts, ie

For	Against
Social indicators like health and education would improve if an Indigenous Voice is listened to and that would save money	The Voice would be an expensive and unnecessary layer of bureaucracy, it would be better to listen to existing Indigenous bodies
There has been general agreement since PM John Howard of the need to recognise Indigenous people in the constitution	A Treaty is more important than a Voice
Putting it in the constitution creates certainty as it can't be easily abolished like previous bodies	The Voice does not have enough power, it is only an advisory body and can be ignored
A large group of Indigenous people from across Australia asked for a Voice in the Uluru Statement from the Heart as a way forward	The Voice is not clearly defined and could cause delays or delve into broader policies than Indigenous Affairs

¹ <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-08/2023%20Ipsos%20Indigenous%20Issues%20Report%20v6.pdf>

A digital outline of the yes and no cases was available on August 30, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-30/voice-to-parliament-yes-no-cases/102788518>. It should also have been part of the tv news coverage. It could have been achieved in the same overall time by shortening the segment on polls, removing some duplication and replacing the cross from the Referendum Correspondent. As noted, there is an important place for a story on vitriol and racism but it made more sense to have an explainer on day one and then to prepare a separate story with examples of racism once the campaign was fully underway.

The explainer would have provided some building blocks for viewers to spot misinformation and to weigh up disputed claims throughout the rest of the campaign. Ideally, it would have been presented by the Referendum Correspondent as that title signals to the viewer that they have authority and expertise.

7.30 August 30

On the same day, 7.30 demonstrated the significance of the issue by dedicating its entire program to the referendum with a perspective from every State and Territory. This was a useful summary of Indigenous issues in each place, for example, in Western Australia the referendum was debated amid controversy over State laws aiming to protect sacred sites in the wake of the destruction of Jukkan Gorge. In the Northern Territory, it was caught up in the debate over public safety in Alice Springs. The program served as an introduction to key concepts in the referendum such as the Indigenous incarceration rate and gaps in other social indicators.

The packages were visually engaging with excellent graphics and background, but the format made it hard to avoid duplication as the same issues mostly occur in every State and Territory. The show frequently mentioned polls, although it was rightly careful to explain that sample sizes were small and that some places such as Tasmania were not always included by pollsters.

Even though the audience for 7.30 can be expected to have a somewhat deeper knowledge, it is likely there are still gaps. A reference to the “Jukkan Gorge fiasco” was not explained.

The program featured some strong examples or case studies.

- The NSW package showed Donna Ingram explaining her support for the Yes case while also outlining the concerns others held.
- In the Victorian package, Rueben Berg made a strong rhetorical case for Yes.
- a practical example was given that ACT elected body had existed since 2008 and achieved change such as lobbying for a bus stop outside Aboriginal medical centre.
- Annette Xiberras in the Victorian package spelled out her concerns about the lack of detail over the final form of a Voice, “I still don’t even know what it is. Until they can tell us how the voice is going to be structured how it is going to be implemented and how it works, I am hesitant to vote yes.” She also said she was worried it would not give indigenous people more power in decision making than they have now.

However, some interviewees could have been challenged more especially campaign leaders Rachel Perkins and Noel Pearson and political players Michaelia Cash and James Stevens.

- Rachel Perkins said the Voice was about a requirement on politicians to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when they make laws and policies about them. It would have been good to put the counter-argument to her that there is no requirement to accept or act on the advice given.
- Similarly, Noel Pearson said it would be a new chapter and a transformative moment but he is not shown being pressed for more on what this would mean.

- Liberal MP James Stevens said there has been bullying and ostracisation, risk and unintended consequence, but is not pressed for examples or to back this up. He also said there are more practical things that could be done and it would have been good to ask him to expand.
- Liberal Senator Michaelia Cash is shown talking about “standing up to Mr Albanese and standing up to Canberra and saying “No”. Laura Tingle provided context in her analysis saying “Peter Dutton sees this as something that can help really tear down Anthony Albanese’s lead on the Coalition in the polls and it is a pragmatic political judgement” but that came nearly half an hour after the James Stevens comments and in a separate segment to one featuring Senator Cash. Context on the political aspect to the referendum was important for the viewer.

A suggestion to help the audience navigate the issues is to have used the chief political correspondent Laura Tingle’s skills at the start of the program rather than putting her segment at the end of the show. This could have covered off on polling so that it did not need to be part of each State and Territory segment.

Digital content

The sampled content includes a range of explainers, analysis and factchecks. Explainers would be a likely first choice for a person seeking information.

Explainers

This clearly-written piece <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-03/the-voice-referendum-everything-you-need-to-know/102895238> cleverly gave readers two ways to navigate, either clicking through to the topic they are interested in, or stepping through from the top. There was a straightforward explanation of the referendum process and what needed to happen for it to pass. The article was careful, for example it did not repeat the contentious claim that 80 percent of Indigenous people back the voice, instead it provided context. It was an excellent example of giving the audience information they can use to decide.

The article should have been more assertive in the way it dealt with a claim from the No camp that the Voice “could present a risk to our system of government, potentially leading to legal challenges, delays and dysfunction.” This was a section of the explainer summarising the Yes and No cases from the AEC pamphlet and it linked out to a fact-check, but this check did not deal with the claim about a risk to the system of government. The strength of the statement that the Voice could present a risk to our system of government, meant context should have been added within the article. This could have included mentioning and linking to the Solicitor-General’s opinion on the matter. There is a clear difference in the language between this part of the No campaign’s argument and all other rhetoric from both sides that it should have been made clear that the evidence was not available to support it.

The explainer incorporated interviews from Four Corners and the Referendum Explained podcast, allowing readers to do a deep dive if they chose. It is comprehensive, but would it have been more effective if it was punchier? “Everything you need to know” sounded like a valuable way to help the voter grapple with the topic, but was the length of the piece a barrier for people looking for a simple summary? It would be worthwhile to look in detail at how many people read all the way through to assess what return there was on the resources dedicated to it. Given the research showing the limited interest in Indigenous issues, a cut down version of this all-inclusive pieces may have been preferred by audiences.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-11/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-voice/102208504> This video explainer ran 13 minutes 40 seconds. It was described as a deep dive and that was worth doing on such an important topic. As discussed above, analysis of how many viewers watched the entire video would be helpful to judge how well it was used by the audience. A more concise explainer called “**What** you need to know about the voice to parliament” as well as the longer “**everything** you need to know” might have appealed to an audience which does not usually engage with indigenous issues. The Guardian (under 2 minutes) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/video/2023/aug/30/the-voice-to-parliament-explained-in-under-two-minutes-video> and the SMH (3 minutes 18) both created tight explainers. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyk1-iSAWmU>

This discussion about duration is not a criticism of the longer style, but a suggestion about evaluating the optimal forms for the audience.

While it is not labelled an explainer, the 7.30 story on October 4 effectively acts as one in explaining the Black Sovereign movement. This was well-constructed and would inform a viewer unfamiliar with this perspective. It provided context rather than assuming knowledge, for example it explained who Michael Mansell is.

Analysis

Three pieces stood out for their sophisticated analysis.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-14/the-unloving-message-of-the-voice-referendum/102975718>. Laura Tingle gave context using her deep personal reporting history going back to Wik and Mabo. Her extensive political contacts meant she could draw on Tony Mitchelmore’s research to explain why the proposal was not gaining broad support.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-03/voice-referendum-vote-on-92-words-stay-out-of-weeds/102800166> Annabel Crabb is an exceptional writer who drew on historical context to analyse the referendum debate. She set out that there were two yes cases and two no cases in a way that would cut through for general audiences.

“there are literally two cases sloshing about for Yes. The first is that the constitutional change is modest and won’t do much. The second is that it will be a powerful force for improving the lives of Indigenous Australians.

there are also two No cases.

There’s the Opposition’s argument that the Voice is a dangerously radical proposition that would gum up the works of government and the courts. And then there’s Independent Senator Lidia Thorpe’s argument that the Voice should be opposed because it’s utterly toothless. No wonder there’s confusion.

And the PM’s decision to characterise the Voice as a change that will make us feel better, and “might just” improve the lives of First Nations people – well. It tells you which No case he fears the most.”

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-30/voice-referendum-date-with-destiny-october-14/102792418> Bridget Brennan’s engaging analysis was released on the day the referendum date was announced. It comprehensively set out the issues and history for those turning to the ABC for information once they knew when they would go to the polling booth. These insightful analysis pieces from experienced journalists were an important part of helping Australians make an informed

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

Factchecks

“Those who see and believe misinformation are, often, not the same as those who see and believe the subsequent fact-checks” is the way the Conversation explains the dilemma with the factcheck approach². As noted previously, many Australians do not keep up with developments in Indigenous affairs and there is a danger of a disconnect between the ABC’s factchecks and the reader who may find the tone dismissive. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-29/fact-check-voice-to-parliament-misinformation/102913680> A section of this factcheck deals with how much power the Voice might have which is a valid concern for voters to consider or even be concerned about.

“This includes a classic of the genre, that the body would constitute a “third chamber” of parliament. Constitutional and legal experts have [weighed in on this question](#), however, explaining that its role would be advisory only, and not confer any power of veto.

Meanwhile, some opponents have argued [we need only look to New Zealand](#) to see the pitfalls of a “Māori Voice”, which has allegedly grown from being an advisory body to become more powerful than parliament itself.

But this slippery slope argument doesn't hold water. For one thing, New Zealand established its Waitangi Tribunal specifically to adjudicate on breaches of the country's foundational treaty, something Australia doesn't have.”

The reader who turned to this factcheck to determine if what they had heard about a “third chamber” or the New Zealand example, would not necessarily have connected with this style of writing. Factchecks also invite the audience to click through to other articles and this is not always realistic for the time-poor voter who has turned to the ABC for information.

Factchecks set themselves up as independent arbiters and should stick to simple and neutral language. This piece <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-29/fact-check-voice-to-parliament-misinformation/102913680> lists “stacked decks” and “big bad numbers” as headings for categories of misinformation. In contrast, this explainer (not factcheck) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-05/voice-to-parliament-referendum-2023-most-asked-questions/102878560> used simple headings such as “purpose” “structure” and “misinformation”.

AAP Factchecks also use a straightforward tone and style, eg <https://www.aap.com.au/factcheck/no-vaccines-are-not-a-leading-cause-of-child-mortality/>

Final week

The undecided voter would have been likely to turn to the ABC in the final week and particularly on referendum eve. The October 13 7pm news began with a comprehensive package from the Indigenous Affairs Editor. This was followed by a segment from the referendum Correspondent including a reference to a “vocal fringe who have been racist and bigoted and have aimed to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel they don’t belong in Australia”. This is valid analysis

² <https://theconversation.com/misinformation-how-fact-checking-journalism-is-evolving-and-having-a-real-impact-on-the-world-218379>

but it would have been more useful to have backed this statement up with examples rather than bald statements. As discussed in relation to the August 30 coverage, this story should be done, but needs support and time.

The third element was an explanation of the referendum rules and how votes are counted. This was useful but it became speculative about how the States might vote.

7.30's 12 October program was a sweep around each State and Territory. It featured excellent examples of the arguments for and against:

- Nala Mansell (No supporter) in the Tasmanian package said "We've had advisory bodies advising Government about closing the gap for 14 years now. It's not an issue of the Government not having enough advice from Aboriginal people, the issue here is that Government aren't willing to listen to the advice or act on that advice."
- The NT package referenced people from Ngukurr saying they wanted to speak directly to representatives, not have information filtered through a voice or representative body.
- In the WA package, Graeme Campbell said "any advancement is very, very slow because the money never gets down to where it's needed and they (Aboriginal people) know that if the yes vote gets up there'd be more of the same". However, Graeme Campbell's controversial political background should have been included beyond saying he was the Federal representative for Kalgoorlie in the 1980s.
- It was powerful to hear in the WA story from someone who has changed their mind to support the Yes case because of two suicides "there has to be some way forward, if we say no – what do we have after that point."

Interviewing

Interviews are an important way to explore competing views and test arguments. The downside is there is less scope to include background and context. This problem is exacerbated when many in the audience have only a surface level of knowledge and interviews may not be as useful for these people.

The sampled content includes interviews with politicians and leaders from the yes camp, no campaign and the progressive no side. These interviews challenged the Prime Minister on whether he would legislate for a voice if the referendum failed and questioned Marcia Langton on claims she had labelled no voters "racist" or "stupid". No campaigner Warren Mundine was tested on his views in favour of changing the date of Australia Day and supporting treaties. An RN Breakfast interview with Senator Lidia Thorpe delved into the failure to implement all recommendations of Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody from 1991. Liberal MP, Julian Leeser, who had quit the frontbench over his support for the Voice was pressed on his stance.

These interviews balanced seeking a response to daily issues with pursuing the broader referendum themes. An Insiders interview on September 17 rightly began by questioning No campaign leader Warren Mundine on Senator Jacinta Price's earlier comments on colonisation. It was relevant to explore how her fellow No case leaders feel about this issue and her contentious view. Some of the issues touched on would require the audience to have been following these issues closely, for example the reference to Gary Johns no longer being part of his campaign.

Some interview subjects took idiosyncratic approaches, for example, Thomas Mayo read the entire Uluru Statement from the Heart during as part of his answer during interview on RN Breakfast. Noel Pearson described the Uluru sunrise and took quite a “poetic” approach to answering questions during an interview on RN Breakfast in the week before the vote. The interview with Marcia Langton about an article in The Australian would have been quite hard to follow for an audience member who had not read the story.

Some common issues arose with these interviews:

- Most included questions on polls but received unsurprising answers
- At times assumed knowledge that can’t be dealt with easily amid the interview
- Challengingly complex legal subject matter

The interviews seemed to recognise the complexity of the issue by giving subjects

- Longer interviews
- More time to answer questions before being interrupted

Some suggestions

- Add as much background information as possible in questions
- Craft questions clearly to give audiences the best chance of keeping up
- Bear in mind the balance between challenging subjects on daily stories and the need to explore underlying referendum issues

Misinformation and disputed claims

The sampled coverage mostly avoided reiterating misinformation, but there some instances where claims could have been clarified. As previously discussed, this article should have been more explicit that there is no evidence to back a No campaign claim that the Voice would be a risk to the system of government. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-30/voice-to-parliament-yes-no-cases/102788518> Reporters could have added context such as that the Solicitor-General had told Parliament that the Voice did not include a veto power and could not delay legislation by refusing to provide advice.³

The sampled content showed the ABC dedicated significant resources to providing options for voters to seek out accurate information, such as the 10-part podcast series - The Voice Referendum Explained or the fact-checks and digital explainers. Fact checks are discussed in detail in an earlier section of the report. In summary, they are not always accessed by those who come across misinformation.

A simple change to improve audience understanding is to ensure appropriate background is provided. Warren Mundine’s political history should have been included. Graeme Campbell needed more explanation in the 7.30 package from WA, he was only referred to as the Federal representative for Kalgoorlie in the 1980s.

³ <https://t.co/Mh6er4ezGr>

Strengths

The sampled content showed the ABC created material in a wide variety of formats for the audience to find and engage with. The evidence showing growing audience appetite for podcasts was recognised with a 10-part podcast series⁴. Resources were clearly dedicated to producing detailed video and online explainers with engaging design. Some of the ABC's best writers and most experienced columnists contributed insightful analysis. Perspectives were given from all around the nation, especially by 7.30. The Drum, Insiders and Q&A also travelled to relevant locations to add diversity to the discussion. The referendum process including dates, the question and the rules determining the result was thoroughly explained. Examples enhanced the coverage and gave the audience ways to understand how a Voice could improve Indigenous lives or create extra problems.

Suggestions

The specific arguments for and against the Voice itself were generally not spelled out as clearly and comprehensively as the process. Many pieces of content set out what the Yes and No campaigns' broad arguments were, but they were not quite as successful at drilling down to precisely how it would make a difference either way. This was partly due to each campaign keeping the argument quite general "it would be unifying to listen to First Nations People" "it would be divisive to create a body only for First Nations People in the Constitution". This list brings together some suggestions made throughout the report and includes some extra thoughts.

- Explainers setting out the main arguments could have been included in the 7pm news on August 30 and October 13. The Referendum Explained podcast and digital versions were available, but it should also have been part of the main tv broadcast.
- The Referendum Correspondent should have expanded with examples on the reference to a "vocal fringe who have been racist and bigoted and have aimed to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel they don't belong in Australia". This analysis had a place, but needed clear commissioning and fact-checking.
- A substantial story or article setting out the view from constitutional conservatives would have helped audiences understand what that meant.
- A story could have examined the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body⁵, which is the closest example to the proposed Voice. It could have looked when that body's voice was acted on and when it was ignored as well as looking at how much it cost and how it is regarded.
- 7.30 mostly chose a State-by-State approach. This identified similar issues especially incarceration rates and health statistics in most jurisdictions. Stories examining how the proposed voice might have had any impact on "closing the gap" would also have been useful.
- Polling should have been referred to less often, particularly in broadcast stories to allow more space for other information of more interest to audiences⁶.
- More awareness was needed of explaining references such as to the Wave Hill Walkoff, Yirrkala Bark Petition or the Barunga Statement.

⁴ https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2024-06/apo-nid326816_4.pdf

⁵ <https://atsieb.com.au/>

⁶ <https://journalistsresource.org/politics-and-government/horse-race-reporting-election/>

Two thoughts that are not recommendations but offered for consideration are:

Should the ABC's audiences have been told more about the backgrounds of some of the principle players in the referendum debate. Other media profiled Noel Pearson and looked at allegations about his behaviour.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/nov/28/noel-pearson-used-foul-abusive-language-says-queenslands-education-head>

<https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/dropping-bombs-and-stoking-feuds-the-other-side-of-noel-pearson-20140817-1053ie.html>

<https://theconversation.com/noel-pearson-and-white-masochism-69300>

Could Warren Mundine have been profiled to give the audience a clearer understanding of his complex political history? He succeeded Barry Jones as ALP National President in 2006 and several times after that sought Senate positions but subsequently ran as a Federal Liberal candidate. He supports a Treaty and changing the date of Australia Day but ran a conservative no case against the Voice?

In conclusion, the ABC should be congratulated for comprehensive coverage of a challenging subject. This report has been prepared and written with the aim of encouraging further discussion about the journalism and the impact on the audience. Any feedback or questions are welcomed.

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