

**INTERNAL EDITORIAL REVIEW
CASHLESS DEBIT CARD COVERAGE
AUGUST 2017
Linda Mottram, Editorial Policies**

SCOPE AND SUBJECT

To review coverage of the public campaign by prominent businessman Andrew “Twiggy” Forrest for an extension of the cashless debit card to help curb violence and drug & alcohol abuse in Indigenous communities.

TIME SPAN

This review covers the period from the date of Andrew Forrest’s key news conference (August 9 2017) to the last day that any major ABC stories or interviews mentioned his campaign (August 22 2017).

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

A total of 16 items were reviewed, including Radio, Regional and News content on TV, radio and online including live interviews, packaged broadcast stories and written content.

METHODOLOGY

The reviewer, Regional Editorial Policy Adviser Linda Mottram, worked with Editorial Research Coordinator Jannali Jones to collect the majority of relevant program material for the period.

Most items were auditioned, but where this was not possible transcripts and summaries were consulted. Where necessary, contact was made with the journalists and content-makers involved to seek further information or to clarify their editorial processes.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Was the ABC’s coverage of the issue impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism?
2. Were a sufficient range of diverse perspectives included?
3. Was all factual material presented accurately and in context?
4. Any other issues with the coverage that impacted on its editorial integrity?

We also took account of issues affecting Australia’s Indigenous peoples can be particularly contentious and sensitive. Stereotypes also abound, which is something the Editorial Policies strongly advise ABC journalists to avoid.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

1. Was the ABC's coverage of the issue impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism?

The coverage was impartial on all occasions, presenting the facts of the story with appropriate context while avoiding judgements on the issues. Where ABC outlets were closer to the impact of the story, content differed but always displayed impartiality.

2. Were a sufficient range of diverse perspectives included?

Taken overall, ABC teams provided a very diverse range of perspectives. Some perspectives were obtained in markets closest to the issues at stake, while national teams gave a broader overview, still bringing a rich range of views to the discussion.

3. Was all factual material presented accurately and in context?

Factual material was presented accurately and in context. As discussed above, two further questions could have been explored during the review period. First, how does substance abuse and related dysfunction compare in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in the regions under discussion? Second, what is the provenance of the street scenes in the Forrest video? Teams overall produced accurate, contextualised reporting, notwithstanding these questions.

4. Any other issues with the coverage that impacted on its editorial integrity?

As noted, some reports/interviews would have benefitted from the inclusion of additional statistics on the issues under discussion. The main statistic circulated during the review period was that 36 men were charged with 300 offences against and 184 child victims in the Pilbara town of Roebourne. This relates to one, ongoing police case. There is a need for caution that one statistic is not held up as an indication of conditions in all Indigenous communities, especially in the face of a well-funded mining magnate's campaign. ABC teams generally, though, displayed sensitivity to issues of stereotyping, in line with the ABC's [Guidance Note on Indigenous Content](#).

More probing on the veracity of anecdotes introduced in the flow of interviews would have enhanced some of the reporting, especially when Ministers chose to brush away and not engage with challenges. The ABC's [Guidance Note on Interviewing](#) is recommended. It must be stressed though that ABC interviews were to a high standard.

The review also pointed to a perennial ABC question: how to make best use of the ABC's own subject matter experts. The example of Norman Swan's interview with Ken Wyatt is a case in point. Had Swan's knowledge of Indigenous substance use statistics been more widely understood by reporters, what impact might there have been in reporting during the review period?

Swan's interview also highlights that a greater diversity of Federal Ministerial views could have been achieved across the range of programs by seeking out not only the Social Services minister but also the Minister for Indigenous Health, himself an Indigenous man.

It is worth noting that during the review period, parts of ABC Regional performed very strongly, on this story, with a wide and deep range of views provided. Some Regional interviewing could be better researched, though given the challenges for small, remote, multi-platform teams, this should not be overstated. These teams will benefit from a training focus around the ABC Interviewing Guidance note, which began in mid-2017.

Finally, there was a risk that the ABC's use on TV and online of the violent scenes from the Forrest mini-documentary video may have caused harm or offence particularly to Indigenous people. There was clear editorial justification for use of the vision given the influence Andrew Forrest was seeking on a major Federal policy decision. There are no known complaints on this issue, suggesting the ABC did not use the video excessively and was appropriately contextualised.

BACKGROUND

On 8 August 2017 mining billionaire Andrew Forrest launched the latest round of his advocacy for the widespread use of welfare income quarantining, directed particularly at Indigenous communities. Forrest claimed the extension of the card was urgently required to curb the use of cash welfare payments for alcohol, drugs, and gambling in Indigenous communities, where substance abuse is blamed for high rates of child abuse, domestic violence, and wider social dysfunction. The cards quarantine 80 per cent of welfare payments for the purchase of specified necessities and restrict access to cash. Mr Forrest first advocated a cashless debit card as part of his Review of Employment and Training, conducted at the request of the Federal government in 2014.

Mr Forrest's new campaign kicked off with the release of a mini-documentary, launched under the hashtag "timetoact" on 9 August. This short video ran for 2'13" and began with a warning to viewers about the graphic material to follow. It cut quickly to CCTV footage of Indigenous people engaged in violence on unidentified streets, including violence towards a child. The featured commentators were West Kimberley Indigenous community member and mother, Mary O'Reeri, the Mayor of Port Hedland, Camilo Blanco, both lamenting conditions in their region, as well as retired WA Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan, who described north-west towns as "war zones". The narrative centred on the case of the Pilbara town of Roebourne, where police had recently charged 36 men with 300 offences against 184 children. It has been claimed that widespread substance abuse accounts for much of the dysfunction in Roebourne.

The scenes of violence and excerpts of the commentary from the video were featured in ABC TV and online news stories, while audio extracts from the commentary were played by some ABC radio stations. Issues raised in the video were discussed in a range of stories which considered claims by Mr Forrest and others (including the retired WA Police Commissioner) about the potential for the card to make a difference in troubled communities.

It should be noted at this point that beyond signposting the scenes of violence on unidentified streets as "CCTV video", the ABC has not established the provenance of the vision. Although the video includes a strong implication that the scenes were filmed in Roebourne, this is not clear. During production, the ABC was approached to provide vision from a funeral for use in the video. Permission was not granted, though vision was then used in the mini-documentary. ABC Regional has since requested that the ABC vision be cut from the video. Questions remain about the provenance of other vision used in the Mindaroo video, although this angle was not raised in any of the stories under review.

Soon after the release of the video, Mr Forrest escorted various supporters to Canberra, to lobby the Prime Minister for the extension of the cashless debit card beyond two existing trial sites at Ceduna and towns in the East Kimberley. At the time, the government was waiting for a report on the trial of the card and an announcement about extending this trial was widely expected.

ANALYSIS

OVERVIEW

Andrew Forrest's wealth and political access make his interventions in policy highly newsworthy. Governments have sought his advice over the years and his personal focus and philanthropy around Indigenous affairs, which he also weaves through his businesses, attract further interest in his policy pronouncements. Forrest uses everyday terms to portray complex issues in Indigenous communities, giving his prescriptions wide public appeal, especially when he is supported by Indigenous representatives. He is not universally supported, however. Critics, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, [accuse](#) Forrest of over-simplifying policy issues, of a less consultative approach than claimed and of questionable practices in his actual dealings with Indigenous Australians. Many experts also differ with Forrest on the cashless card. A past iteration of the card, the Basics Card, used during the Northern Territory Intervention under the Howard government, was not favourably [assessed](#). These factors make Mr Forrest's interventions contentious and momentous.

INITIAL ABC NEWS RESPONSE

Forrest's latest intervention on the cashless card was not surprising in itself. But the confronting [images](#) of street violence included in his mini-documentary were considered new and newsworthy and ABC news and other programs initially focussed on these. The support of the retired WA Police Commissioner was also significant. Initial ABC news reporting treated the story as a middle-ranking item and coverage was not sensational or excessive. It focussed on the facts of Forrest's announcement, the mini-documentary, and some early expressions of concern and [criticism](#), many of which had been aired previously. The accounts were factual and impartial in both content and in tone. The treatment was appropriate.

THE MINISTER AND ANDREW FORREST

Alan Tudge, the Federal minister for Human Services, has responsibility for the program and is therefore one of the key players in this story. He was interviewed twice in the period under review: on "[PM](#)" on 11 August and on "[AM](#)" on 17 August. A wide range of concerns was put to the minister in both interviews, encompassing the card, its impact, paternalism, and the inflammatory language used to describe communities ("war zones"). Ministerial interviews are an opportunity to present and flesh out a range of views on an issue with the key decision maker. Questions about the mechanics and impacts of the cashless card had mounted during the week of Forrest's intervention, justifying two interviews with the minister in a short space of time, ahead of an expected major government announcement on future of the program.

The lines of questioning in both interviews were inspired by Andrew Forrest's claims about the importance and value of the card and income quarantining. There was considerable probing of these claims.

A reporter [package](#) which preceded the PM interview included a detailed account from the charity 'Save the Children' (STC) which works with communities in Kununurra, one of the Kimberley towns where the card had been trialled. Volunteer staff working on the ground were unavailable, but the WA state manager, Juan Laranaga, claimed that groceries and fuel bought with the card were being on-sold at a loss so that families could get access to cash the card denied them. Other examples cited by Mr Laranaga included the mugging of aged people in Kununurra for money, and children soliciting sexual favours for cash, apparently re-creating many of the issues the card was designed to help stamp out.

The STC story was held for a day by the program, due to appropriate reporter concerns about broadcasting second-hand claims about Kununurra from a manager in Perth, while also running the STC view in isolation. In the intervening period, both the minister and the Mayor of Port Hedland (a supporter of the Forrest campaign) were also secured in order to provide an alternative position. The editorial practice here was sound, focussed on providing a suitable diversity of views and ensuring that content did not unduly favour one perspective.

In the interview with the Minister, the first question asked in general terms about STC's claims that residents were subverting the card to access the cash they were supposed to be denied. The Minister dismissed the issue, saying a few would always get around the card, but asserting that the gains were more significant. Despite the STC evidence, which offered a wealth of ready-made detail for further interrogation, the interview moved on. The reviewer notes that the interview with the STC was also lacking real substance, though the lack of access to staff on the ground was a legitimate obstacle.

In the ensuing discussion, the Minister claimed that while the card was not a panacea, it was having a "greater impact than almost any other intervention". The interviewer pressed for more information. The Minister relied on generalised and inconclusive references to early analysis of the trial of the card, pending the final report. This was discussed for some time. Importantly, the interviewer also asked whether Mr Forrest's campaign influenced the Minister, although they went no further when the Minister deflected the query. The audience might have expected further interrogation, given Mr Forrest's very close relationship with government on these issues and the controversies around his dealings with Indigenous communities.

The Minister was also not pressed when he dismissed suggestions that services in relevant Indigenous communities were inadequate. The minister pointed to additional funding for services, but no further details were sought on how that money supported policy objectives, a key question raised by critics of the cashless card.

For accuracy and to give audiences more substantial context, the program could have sought from the Minister current empirical evidence about the extent of dysfunction in Indigenous communities compared with non-Indigenous communities, given the use by the Forrest supporters of the provocative term "war zone".

Whether further detailed questioning is practical is always a matter of the relative news merits of the story and the moment-to-moment realities of putting fast-moving, daily current affairs to air. The reviewer is aware that very tight staffing has also impacted on capacity in the News Division's Radio Current Affairs unit.

It is also the case that the interview, as it stood, clearly highlighted to the audience that the value of the card was not established or universally agreed, particularly given the evidence from STC.

During the later interview on the AM program, the minister was quizzed by the presenter about the concerns within Indigenous communities that the card was paternalistic and shamed families. This interview explored a range of issues raised by individuals and organisations about the application and implications of the card, issues that had been forcefully dismissed by Andrew Forrest (see 7.30 story below). During this interview, the Minister was asked whether he was comfortable with the description of communities as “war zones”. The minister distanced himself from this language. This interview addressed concerns about the card that were being voiced widely. It also addressed the potential offence caused in Indigenous communities by Forrest’s approach and particularly the video Mr Forrest had released.

As with the PM interview earlier, this interview would have benefitted from a question as to whether there was sufficient empirical evidence to justify provocative descriptions and the expansion of a major, contested policy initiative.

TAKING THE ISSUE FURTHER

On 11 August, the ABC Radio Perth Drive program also interviewed the same manager from Save the Children. Again, and particularly given this was a live to air interview, audiences might have expected to hear questions that went beyond anecdote. Importantly, the interview talent did not reject a role for the cashless card but rather focussed on the need for appropriate accompanying services which, he said, were not available. The interview was preceded by a substantial audio quote from Andrew Forrest about his support for the card, giving appropriate context and an alternative view for audiences to weigh against the interview talent. But the interview did not substantially test STC’s claims beyond anecdote.

MORE VOICES, MORE IDEAS

Many new voices were featured during the review period, particularly in ABC News online and Regional news contributions. Among these were Indigenous residents of some of the towns where the cashless card is already imposed or could be imposed. Equally, there were countervailing views from such figures as the representatives of several regional shires. Bringing previously unheard voices to the debate was an important editorial achievement. This success reflects a continuing commitment by the ABC in the key state affected by the story, WA, to continue to reach beyond initial announcements and reactions, as well as easily accessible experts and politicians, to showcase as diverse a range of views as possible.

These interviews and [stories](#) also demonstrated a degree of healthy scepticism whenever statistics were quoted by advocates of one position or another.

Concurrent with the Forrest story, a WA Coronial Inquest into the suicide of 13 Aboriginal adults and children from the Kimberley region was running, a major news story covered by ABC reporters. The Forrest advocacy for the cashless card was [raised](#) by one expert in evidence to the inquest. The expert linked the disempowerment at the heart of income quarantining with suicide. The ABC’s commitment to reporting the inquest ensured that this angle on the Forrest story was presented to audiences – a major benefit of the ABC’s commitment to rostering reporters to cover lengthy court proceedings.

ABC radio programs and online stories covering regional South Australia and regional Western Australia heard interviews and additional commentary on the Forrest campaign and the cashless card. These offerings included informational interviews on the expected extension of the card to the Goldfields region across multiple shires. In one interview, the CEO of the City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder, an advocate for the card, stated that where the cashless debit card was used, it applied to all welfare

recipients, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, a point often lost in the reporting. The official also voiced concern that the Forrest mini-documentary was hysterical and not an accurate portrayal of life on the streets of most towns. Further, he worried that the Forrest campaign could risk work that had been done quietly to secure the card for the Goldfields region.

Not strictly relating to the Forrest intervention but on the same day as the Forrest announcement, the WA Commissioner for Families and Children, Colin Pettit, was featured on WA Regional State-wide Drive. The Commissioner discussed additional approaches needed to create lasting impact in dysfunctional communities. He argued for the development of a “culture of safety” for families, based on his experience of listening to children, and dealing for many years with intergenerational trauma. A clip of retired WA Police Commissioner Karl O’Callaghan was also played. The efficiently-delivered segment was a quality piece of interviewing and gave additional substance to the debate. It demonstrated a capacity to fulfil the requirements for impartiality at the highest level by raising key questions on all sides of the argument, a fine example of the best of ABC Regional’s work.

7:30

A national [overview](#) of the issues was presented on ABC TV on the 7.30 program on 16 August. The report highlighted the mini-documentary, including the images of street violence. It aired the views of proponents for the cashless card, taken from the video, as well as key criticisms of the Forrest approach. The contrary voices were an Indigenous leader who worked for and got on well with the Forrest family, and an academic, who agreed that while strict measures around access to alcohol may be needed, there were nonetheless concerns about the card. It also included a Greens Senator dismissing a claim that had been made by Andrew Forrest sometime in the previous 24 hours that the Greens were a “party of paedophiles”. Andrew Forrest was also featured, reiterating his argument with the Greens and the basis on which he had made this controversial claim. This side issue had not been previously reported by ABC News. The 7.30 story closed with ex-Commissioner O’Callaghan asserting that communities must care about their children, and that that means they will have to endure some restrictions. The report was impartial in the treatment of the issues and in its tone, giving a national audience an overview of the debate.

The 7.30 story provided several views about these complex issues. In such a substantial package, though, several days into the discussion about the Forrest initiative, audiences might have expected a subtler approach to deeper issues (such as intergenerational trauma, previous work on income quarantining, relative statistics on dysfunction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities) particularly since such issues were being widely explored well before the Forrest initiative. That said, there can be legitimate resource and time limitations in the making of daily current affairs programs.

THE EXPERTISE OF ABC REPORTERS ON THE GROUND

During the review period, one of the most comprehensive analyses of policy responses to dysfunction in Indigenous communities came from ABC Regional reporter, Erin Parke, who was also covering the WA Coronial Inquest into the 13 Indigenous people to have committed suicide. Based in Broome, Erin and others in the region are deeply familiar with matters raised by the argument over the card. In an interview with ABC Radio Perth Mornings, she offered a nuanced and detailed assessment of the issues. The Mornings presenter at times editorialised and did not specifically seek answers from the reporter to matters he raised, including the alleged under-resourcing of relevant government departments, though the commentary was within reason and would meet audience expectations for a wide-ranging, unscripted discussion in a general ‘flow’ program. This interview fulfilled, to a high level, audience expectations of a deep understanding of complex issues in the

news, with an impartial, questioning tone delivering important context for those listening to use in making informed decisions on the issues at hand.

The same reporter provided further texture to the debate with a [report](#) from the Coronial hearings. She included the view of a senior Indigenous figure supporting the cashless card because decades of other efforts had failed, alongside one of the few Indigenous doctors in WA's north who pointed out that the region lacks specialist detox services necessary for dealing with addiction. This report contributed significantly to the diversity of views and experience available to ABC audiences trying to navigate this issue, demonstrating a high level of capacity and commitment in applying editorial standards.

THE EXPERTISE OF ABC SUBJECT EXPERTS

An important new dimension in the debate was injected during an [interview](#) on RN Breakfast between expert health broadcaster Norman Swan and the Federal Minister for Indigenous Health, Ken Wyatt. Mr Wyatt happens to be an Indigenous man from WA. The interview included a discussion about the importance of considering underlying issues fuelling alcohol and family abuse in some Indigenous communities. The interview discussed the cashless card, with the Minister calling it a "band-aid". The importance of long term education in the prevention of damaging cyclical behaviours was also addressed, and Swan also raised a statistic previously unexamined by the ABC, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people overall consume alcohol and drugs at lower rates than the non-Aboriginal community but that at its extreme, substance abuse in Indigenous communities is very bad. The Minister confirmed that one-third of Aboriginal people report using alcohol or drugs (a lower rate than in non-Indigenous communities) but noted that the issue dominates the national discussion about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Audiences were therefore offered a series of little-known but important facts on which to ponder what a comprehensive response to substance abuse and dysfunction might entail. The interview also signalled that there was not a monolithic view in favour of the card within the Turnbull government.

The interview continued with a critique of emergency interventions in places like Fitzroy Crossing in WA, where, while just a handful of people were behind some terrible incidents, blanket 'solutions' had been imposed in preference to a targeted approach. Again, the interview invited audiences to think more deeply about the policy and human issues, and to consider the nature of the discussion within the Federal government.

Examples of other, effective substance abuse programs were presented as alternatives to the cashless card, introducing a not unknown but hitherto unexplored dimension to the body of reporting presented within the review period.

This interview was produced by Cathy Van Extel, an experienced hand on Indigenous stories, whose expertise complemented Norman's medical knowledge.

IN THE COMMUNITY

An online [report](#) from ABC Goldfields on the 22nd of August was timely. The report did not mention Andrew Forrest specifically, but is included here as an indication that ABC reporters in key areas remained alive to the looming government decision on the extension of the cashless card trial, with Kalgoorlie and the WA Goldfields speculated to be the likely site. It aired significant community feeling in those areas, by reporting on a public briefing with public servants attended by a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens of several potentially affected towns. The piece added to the

diversity of voices and views being canvassed on the mooted extension, giving voice to Indigenous citizens in relatively remote communities, often a difficult set of voices to tap.

RANGE OF TALENT

- Andrew Forrest and the Indigenous and non-indigenous supporters of the Forrest view);
- Federal minister, Alan Tudge, who has responsibility for the cashless welfare card;
- Federal minister, Ken Wyatt, with responsibility for Indigenous health;
- Indigenous citizens and non-Indigenous citizens who attended meetings or were approached by the ABC to provide their views, which were diverse;
- Indigenous community leaders who were largely ambivalent about or opposed to the card;
- academic and NGO figures with critiques of the card;
- shire and local government officials;
- other political players (eg the Greens)

COMMENT FROM MANAGING DIRECTOR, MICHELLE GUTHRIE

This review contains some useful analysis and advice for future coverage.

In particular, it emphasises the importance of improving coordination and communication between different content teams to ensure knowledge and information is shared and our best content and greatest expertise is shared.

The planned reorganisation of our content divisions is designed to do exactly that – group together content teams with similar expertise and interests to encourage greater collaboration, coordination and communication.