

# **EDITORIAL REVIEW 15**

## **DIVERSITY OF BROADCAST NEWS STORIES**

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Editorial Policies

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## Background & Scope

This review was undertaken by the Editorial Policies team as an exercise to identify and compare the story choices being made by the ABC, the SBS and the free-to-air commercial services in key morning (radio) and evening (television) news bulletins. Reviewers captured the content of morning and evening bulletins on one common day each week, on a rotating basis, over 8 weeks from 21 September to 13 November 2017.

The exercise was governed by the following brief:

*The Impartiality principles state that a democratic society depends on diverse sources of reliable information and contending opinions being presented, to 'equip audiences to make up their own minds'.*

*The ABC has traditionally interrogated its impartiality by examining the range of voices and perspectives presented on any given story. Our editorial reviews, whether internal or external, have rarely extended to the question of whether impartiality has been compromised at the point of story selection.*

*Many contemporary media analysts assert that news organisations will pick and choose the stories they pursue for a complex matrix of reasons, including unconscious cultural bias. This bias can lead an organisation to overlook stories or categories of stories, and this in turn could mean that it is failing to provide audiences with the information to make up their minds on potentially important matters.*

*The ABC is frequently accused of overlooking systemic gaps in its news coverage. This criticism takes many forms, but tends to coalesce over the proposition that the left-wing bias allegedly prevalent among ABC staff leads them towards stories which accord with a world view which is both progressive and 'elite'. Another common and related criticism levelled at the ABC is that it ignores the 'cost of living' stories important to ordinary Australians in favour of progressive social causes.*

*This review will attempt to investigate these and similar claims through a comparative review of the story selection and narrative focus of the broadcast news services of our major commercial competitors (and SBS TV). While necessarily limited by time and resource constraints, the scope and 8-week time frame will provide a useful basis for analysis of the ABC's performance against the core impartiality requirements.*

*This review will be confined to news content which appears in TV and radio bulletins. It will not include, for example, the current affairs content broadcast on 730, AM, PM and The World Today. This is because the story selection for daily news content provides the most broad and comprehensive record of the stories the ABC judges to be inherently newsworthy on a regular basis, as well as providing an easy and effective point of comparison with other media organisations who all produce content similar to ours in length, regularity and purpose.*

*ABC broadcast news content will be compared to the output of commercial and other national services in these ways:*

*Radio: Radio listening is at its highest in the morning, peaking in all markets between 0630-0730. In this exercise, the 0700 news bulletins broadcast on ABC Radio Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane will be compared to the major morning bulletins from commercial stations with a more substantial news focus (2WS and 2GB in Sydney, 3AW in Melbourne and 4BC in Brisbane), for one morning each week for 8 weeks. (The 0700 bulletin has been chosen in preference to the 0745 bulletin as it is shorter and provides a fairer and more consistent point of comparison with commercial counterparts than a 15-minute bulletin).*

*Television: The prime-time evening news bulletin remains a staple feature of all free-to-air television services. For logistical reasons (the size of the review team and the challenge of obtaining interstate video), this segment of the comparative exercise will be confined to Sydney. For one evening each for 8 weeks, the evening bulletins from SBS, channels 7, 9 and 10 will be compared to the 7pm ABC News.*

*The review aims to provide answers to the following questions:*

**To what extent does the ABC news service conform to or deviate from other services in the daily selection of news stories? Are there certain categories of reportage conspicuously under-represented on the ABC? Are there others that appear to be unduly dominant on ABC news services?**

**To what extent does the ABC vary or conform in the thrust of individual stories?**

**What assumptions does the ABC appear to be making about the interests and circumstances of its audiences, and does this differ from the apparent assumptions of other services?**

**Is there any evidence that the ABC's editorial approach is inconsistent with its role and purpose as a public broadcast organisation?**

## Executive Summary and Key Recommendations:

This review is just one opportunity to consider the important issue of how and why the ABC selects the stories it does. It examines a small cross section of bulletins over a brief period, and its conclusions can only be interpreted within those limitations. It is intended that future reviews will build on these preliminary findings, developing over time a more sophisticated understanding of the complex issue of how the ABC sets its news values and determines which stories to cover. This review focusses on the key morning radio bulletins and prime time television bulletins as they remain the programs which draw some of the biggest audiences to ABC News. However, future reviews will also look for opportunities to examine other platforms and services including mobile and online news.

With regard to the review questions:

- **To what extent does the ABC news service conform to or deviate from other services in the daily selection of news stories? Are there certain categories of reportage conspicuously under-represented on the ABC? Are there others that appear to be unduly dominant on ABC news services?**

We found that the story selections made by the ABC were often substantially different from those made by the commercial newsrooms. In particular, the ABC offers considerably more international coverage than the commercials, and more stories on 'social policy' issues. Our bulletins focus more heavily on the global and the national (as do those of SBS) while the others are weighted more towards the local. The ABC is also much less likely to cover celebrity news, human interest stories, including minor mishaps, or to include stories solely on the basis of spectacular (or sometimes not that spectacular) footage. All networks devote a similar proportion of time to sport and weather. The different values which drive these divergent selections are discussed in the body of the report.

- **To what extent does the ABC vary or conform in the thrust of individual stories?**

In those cases where the ABC and the commercial networks did cover the same stories (most often the big, federal political stories on the evening TV bulletins each day), there was nothing obviously different in the editorial approach of the ABC from the other services. All channels were likely to provide a competent package describing the developments during the day and including grabs from the major players and commentators. On a few occasions reviewers noted that the commercial reporters provided their own editorial commentary, sometimes through sarcasm.

- **What assumptions does the ABC appear to be making about the interests and circumstances of its audiences, and does this differ from the apparent assumptions of other services?**

The question of assumptions about audiences is the most difficult part of this review, and an interesting topic to pursue in future exercises. More than 1500 individual items were logged during the course of the review, and when considered *en masse*, it does reveal that the ABC

(and SBS) assume their audiences are more interested in the big events shaping the world and the nation, and less interested in what's happening to their neighbours. To characterise it crudely, an ABC bulletin might leave an anxious viewer sleepless over global instability, while Channel 7 will leave them more worried about crime or violence at the end of their own street.

- **Is there any evidence that the ABC's editorial approach is inconsistent with its role and purpose as a public broadcast organisation?**

On our role and purpose as a public broadcaster, it should be said first that the reviewers did not identify any breaches of editorial policy. With particular regard to impartiality, it appeared that even the shortest items included an appropriate range of voices and perspectives.<sup>1</sup> The issue of assumptions canvassed above does raise the question of whether the ABC is failing to design its broadcast news for the widest possible audience, but given that broadcast time is limited and so many other options are available to people, the question is not whether we should also be running footage of individual house fires or escapee animals, but whether there are some thoughtful, unique ways we could add more local, human interest and hip pocket stories to our coverage, possibly through better use of our regional resources.

## Comments from ABC Managing Director

This comparative review of story selection and examination of the diversity of the ABC's broadcast news stories is a useful reminder of the importance the ABC's impartiality not just in the way in which we cover the news but what we choose to cover. The recommendations suggested to improve our diversity should be prioritised by our teams namely to cover economic/hip pocket issues more often and in a different way; drawing on our regional and rural reporters for more human interest stories; and for our local news bulletins to be even more local and community based. I look forward to future reviews which extend to other platforms and services particularly on our non-broadcast platform.

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<sup>1</sup> It should however, be noted that the reviewers were primarily concerned with logging and categorising the content rather and were not formally assessing it against the editorial policies.

## High Level Analysis of Data:

The reviewers monitored all news bulletins across all the target services, and allocated the stories broadcast into the following categories:

1. **INTERNATIONAL DISASTER** fires, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes etc
2. **REGIONAL/RURAL** country stories about country issues
3. **FEDERAL POLITICS** stories largely from Press Gallery on politics/policy
4. **SOCIAL POLICY ISSUES** health, transport, education etc
5. **CRIME** violent crime, law & order, court cases
6. **STATE POLITICS** stories principally focussing on State Govt decisions
7. **BUSINESS** stories that focus on individual companies or sectors
8. **ECONOMY** broader finance stories that cover the wider economy
9. **HIP POCKET** finance or economic stories that focus primarily on impact on the community
10. **SAME SEX MARRIAGE** a special category recognising that the postal survey was open during this period
11. **SPORT** all coverage of sports results, issues, codes
12. **GENERAL INTEREST/COLOUR** light and bright, quirky, softer pieces, arts etc
13. **LOCAL DISASTER** fires, floods, car crashes, explosions
14. **COMMUNITY** missing persons, local interest, infrastructure, traffic
15. **SCIENCE** medical breakthroughs, space, environment
16. **INTERNATIONAL POLITICS** Geopolitics, Trump, Middle East etc
17. **TERROR** terrorism, national security etc
18. **WEATHER** for better or for worse
19. **INTERNATIONAL** Any other international stories, excluding general interest stories, and usually involving disasters.

These were chosen as the most useful means of exploring differences of approach between the different news services. Same Sex Marriage was singled out as a specific issue as it was a significant running story at the time, and so provided an opportunity to compare the specific approaches taken by each media organisation.

Inevitably stories fitted into multiple categories, so all stories were originally placed into more than one category where necessary, and then a final assessment sorted each story into the primary category where it was *most* relevant. Therefore (for example), a story about a significant national policy announcement that had a financial impact on individuals could be included in the *Federal Politics* category if it had been handled primarily as a political story with politicians being approached for comment, or in the *Hip Pocket* category if the story had largely ignored the politicians and instead explored the impact on real families using case studies or examples.

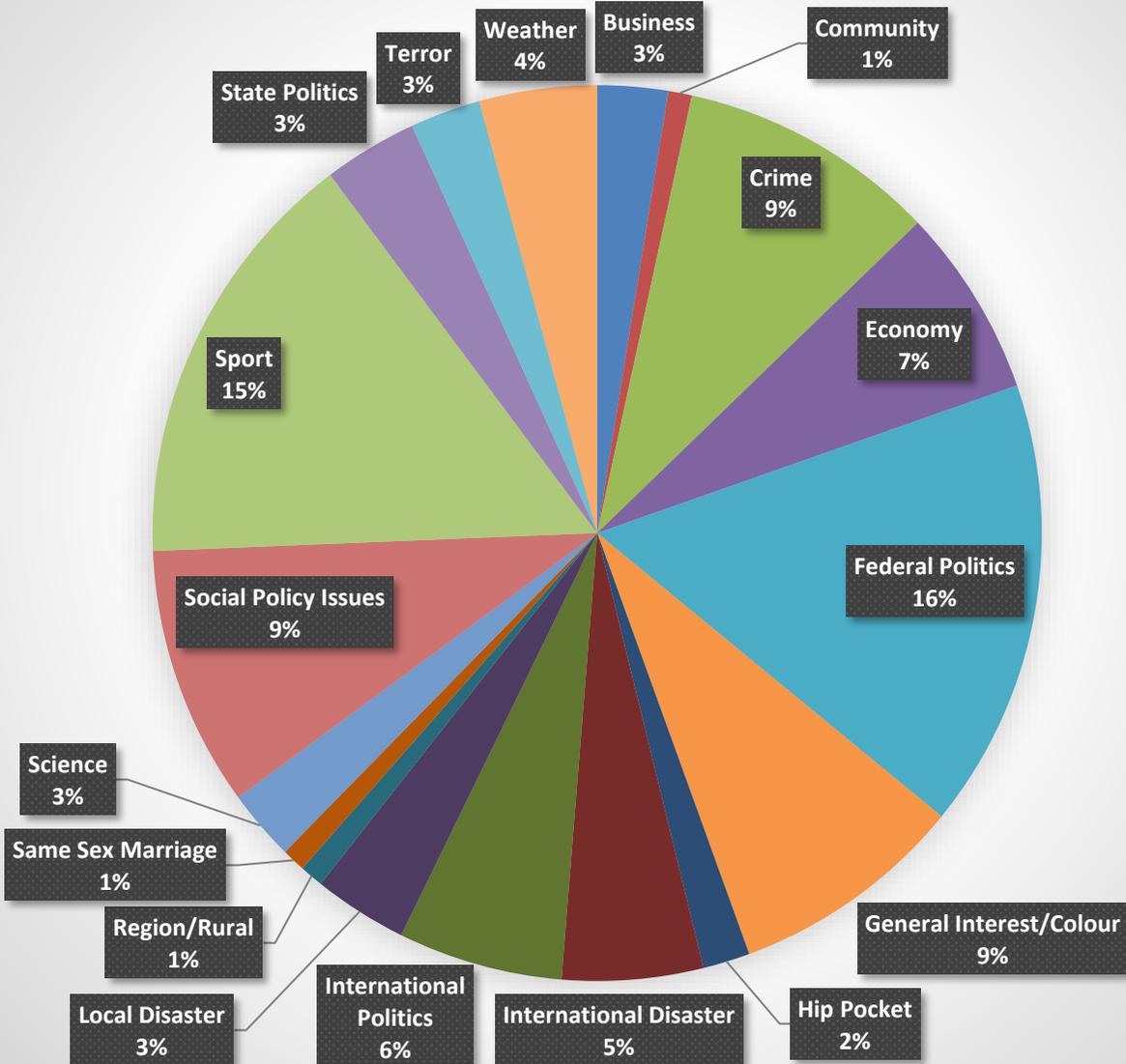
The analysis that follows is based on that final allocation of stories into one key category. Radio and Television have been examined separately where necessary to provide more useful and relevant analysis.

### The approach of the different TV news services:

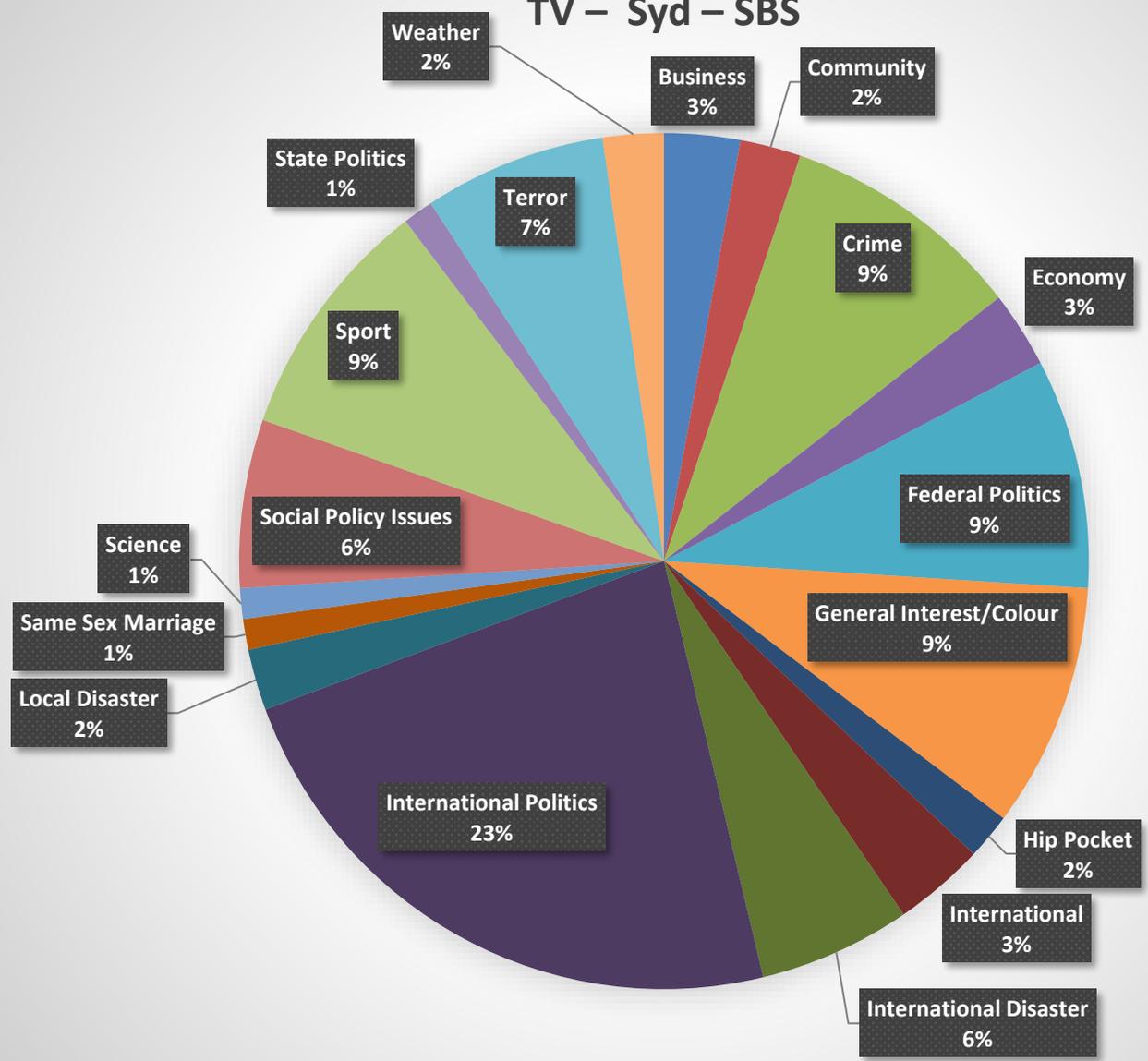
Once all the stories on all days were categorised, it became clear that there were clear differences in editorial approach between the ABC and other broadcasters.

The following pie charts show the kinds of stories broadcast on each individual service, expressed as a percentage of their overall coverage.

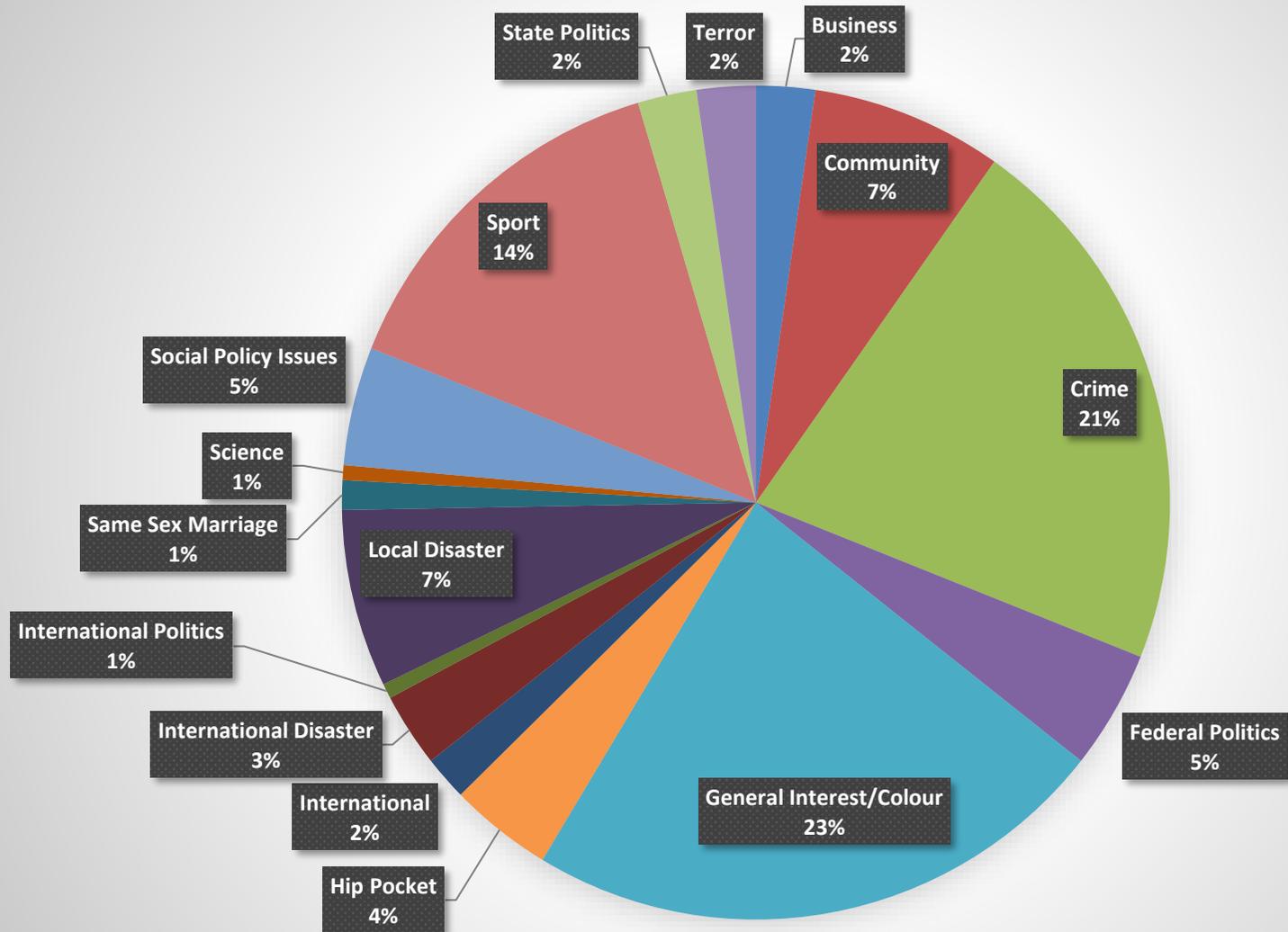
# TV – Syd – ABC News



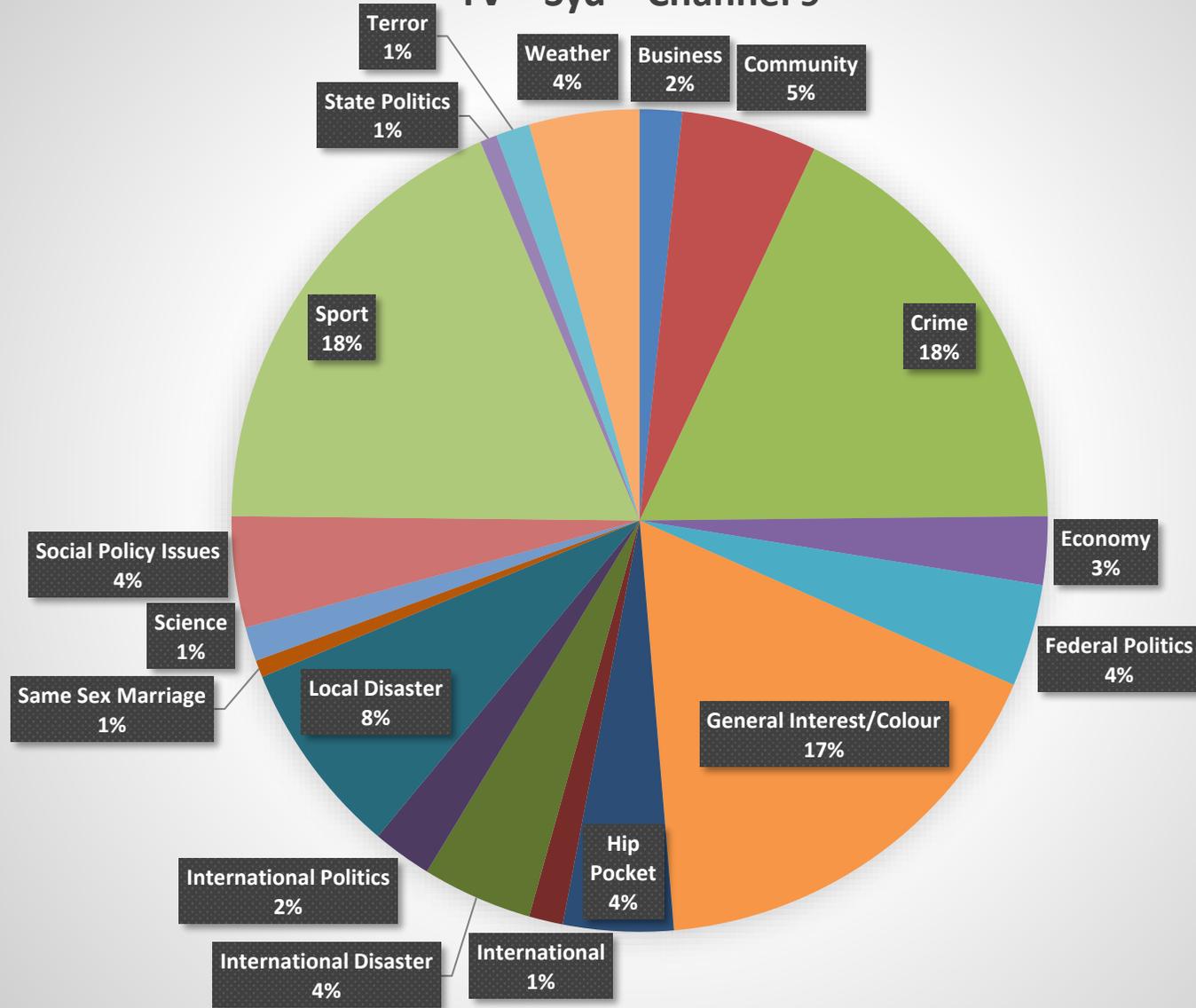
# TV – Syd – SBS



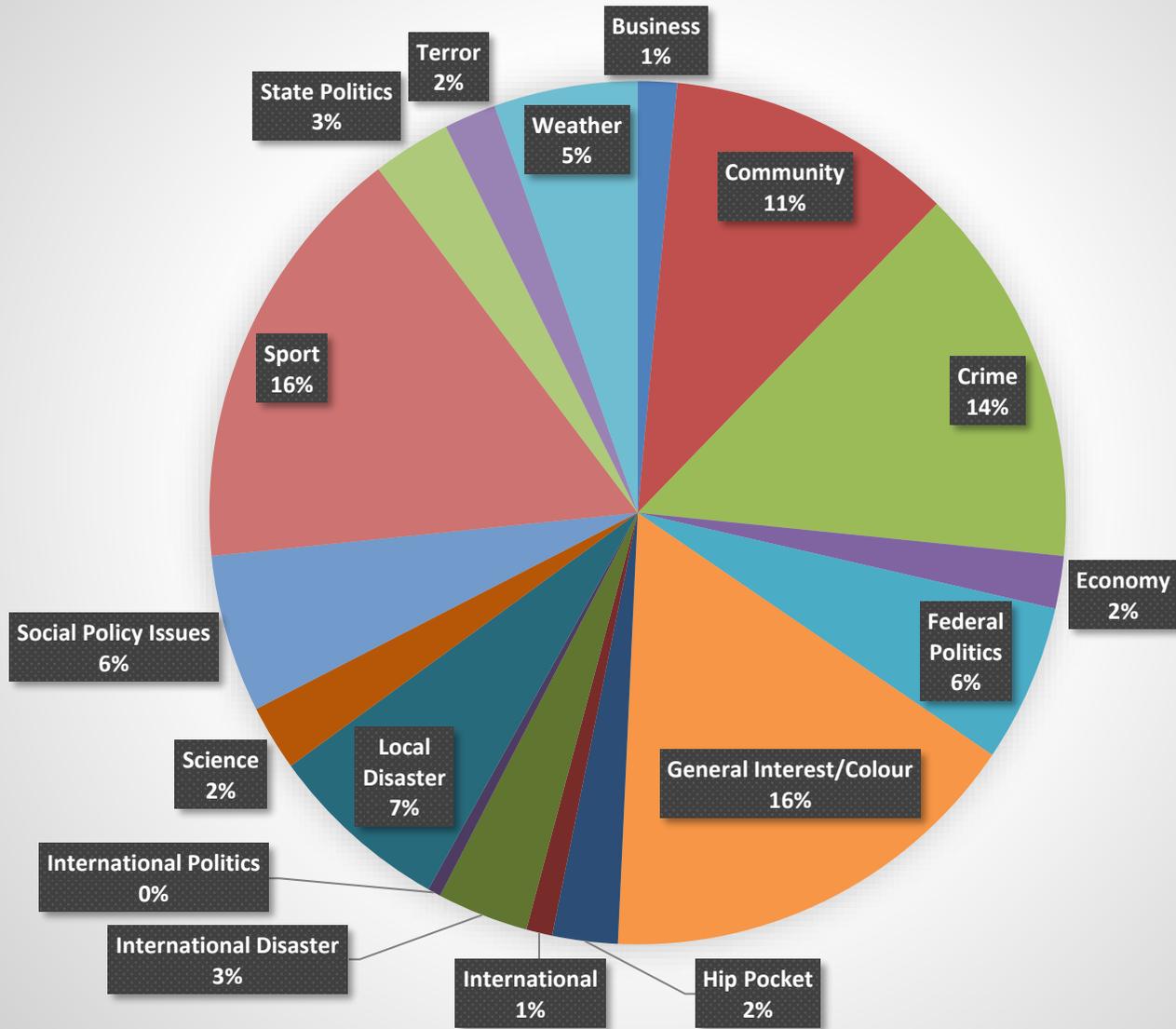
# TV – Syd – Channel 7



# TV – Syd – Channel 9



# TV – Syd – Channel 10



From the pie charts, the top three categories included on each network were gathered into the following summary:

Top Three Areas of Interest				
ABC	SBS	SEVEN	NINE	TEN
Federal Politics (16%)	International Politics (23%)	General Interest (23%)	Crime (18%) Sport (18%)	General Interest (16%) Sport (16%)
Sport (15%)	Federal Politics (9%) Sport (9%) Crime (9%) General Interest (9%)	Crime (21%)	General Interest (17%)	Crime (14%)
Crime (9%) Social Policy (9%) General Interest (9%)	Terror (7%)	Sport (14%)	Local Disaster (8%)	Community 11%

And from this breakdown, a number of things became apparent:

1. The ABC covers noticeably more **Federal Politics** and **Social Policy** than the other news services. These two categories account for 25% of our news, compared with 15% on SBS, 12% on Ten, 10% on Seven and 8% on Nine.

2. The commercials cover far more **Crime** and **Local Disasters** than the public broadcasters<sup>2</sup>. The ABC and SBS only covered these stories 12% and 11% of the time respectively, compared with 28% on Seven, 26% on Nine and 21% on Ten.
3. The commercials also cover far more **General Interest** stories, which are stories without strong news value or other editorial significance, which are included primarily because of colourful pictures or lighter subject matter. Broadly speaking, there are at least twice as many of these kind of stories on the commercials than the public broadcasters.
4. Once the dominant **International Politics** category is excluded from SBS, the public broadcasters are seen to share a template. The level of coverage of Federal Politics, Sport, Crime and General Interest is similar, and they all appear in the same order of priority. The final category is also a point of difference – SBS focusses more on **Terror** (understandably given their international focus) while the ABC focusses on social policy. However, even there the comparative difference in coverage of social policy issues is minor (9% compared to 6%).
5. Given the occasional criticism that the ABC covers too many social issues at the expense of financial or ‘hip pocket’ issues, it is worth noting that this criticism is not borne out by the research. While it is true that the ABC does indeed cover more social policy stories, the coverage of **hip pocket** issues is broadly consistent across all networks (ABC 2%; SBS 2%; SEVEN 4%; NINE 4%; and TEN 2%). Once you take into account the ABC’s significantly higher coverage of **the economy and business** (ABC 10%; SBS 6%; SEVEN 2%; NINE 5%; and TEN 3%), it appears that the ABC is more likely to cover economic stories from a big picture perspective, while the commercials (particularly Seven and Nine) will more often look for the hip pocket angle.
6. There was no discernible difference in the level of coverage of **same sex marriage** during this period, which was surprisingly low across all networks

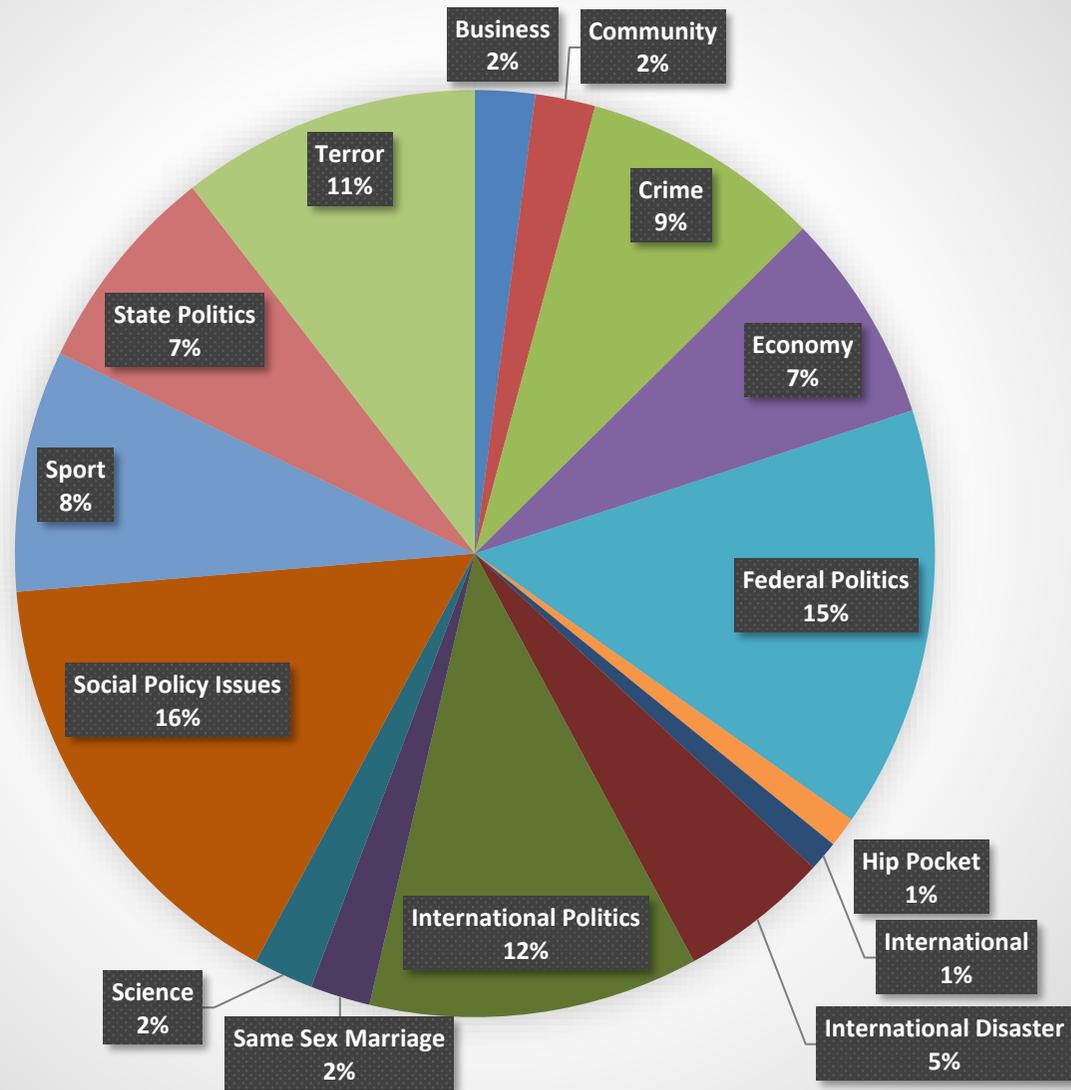
### The approach of the different radio news services:

The following pie charts illustrate the relative prevalence of categories covered by each individual service, expressed as a percentage of their overall coverage. Unlike the TV summaries (which were only conducted in Sydney), the radio results are listed separately for each location

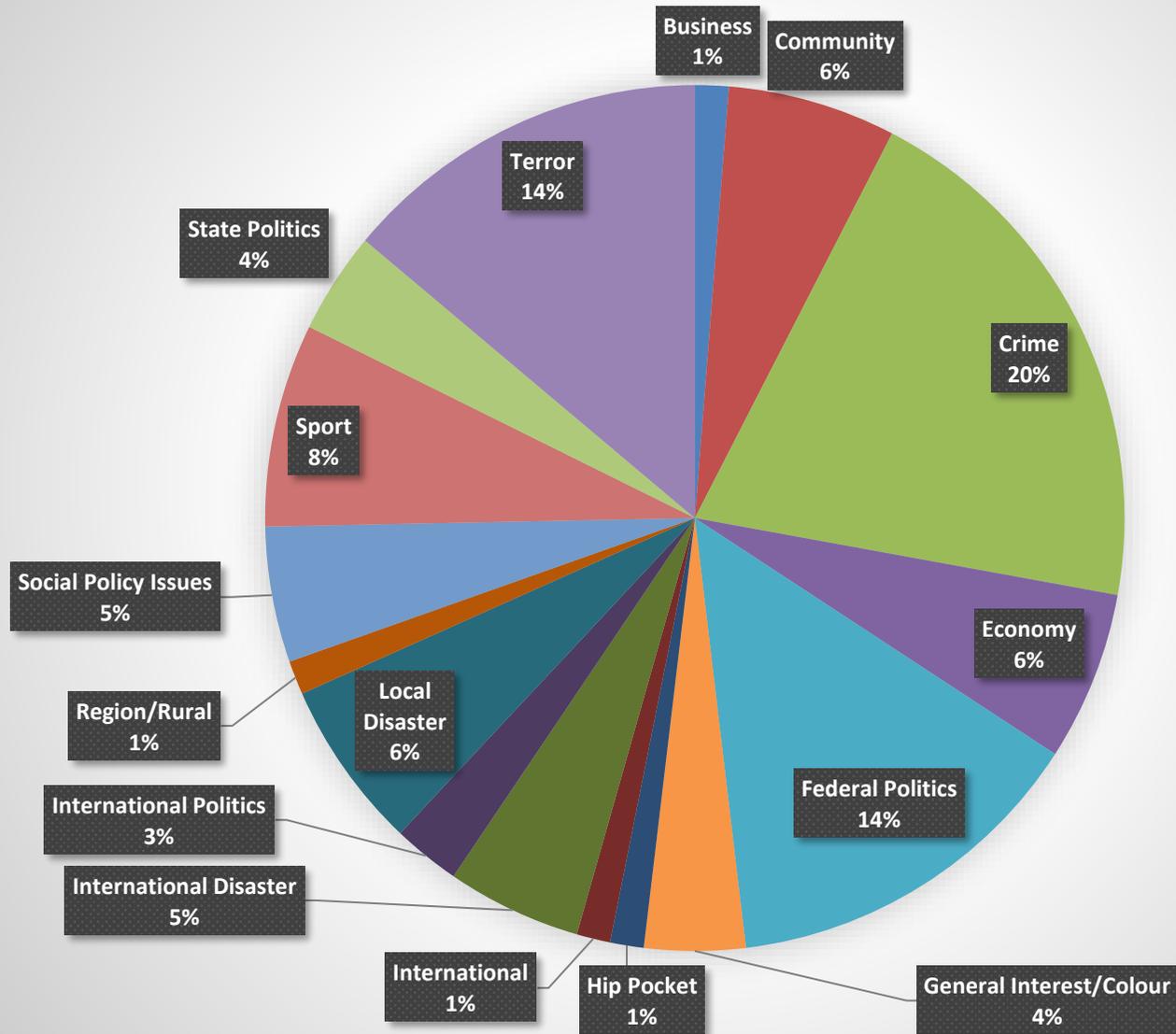
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<sup>2</sup> With all analysis that includes SBS, it should be kept in mind that their news is dominated by international content (32% or 39% if ‘terror’ is included) which results in all other categories of stories being proportionately lower.

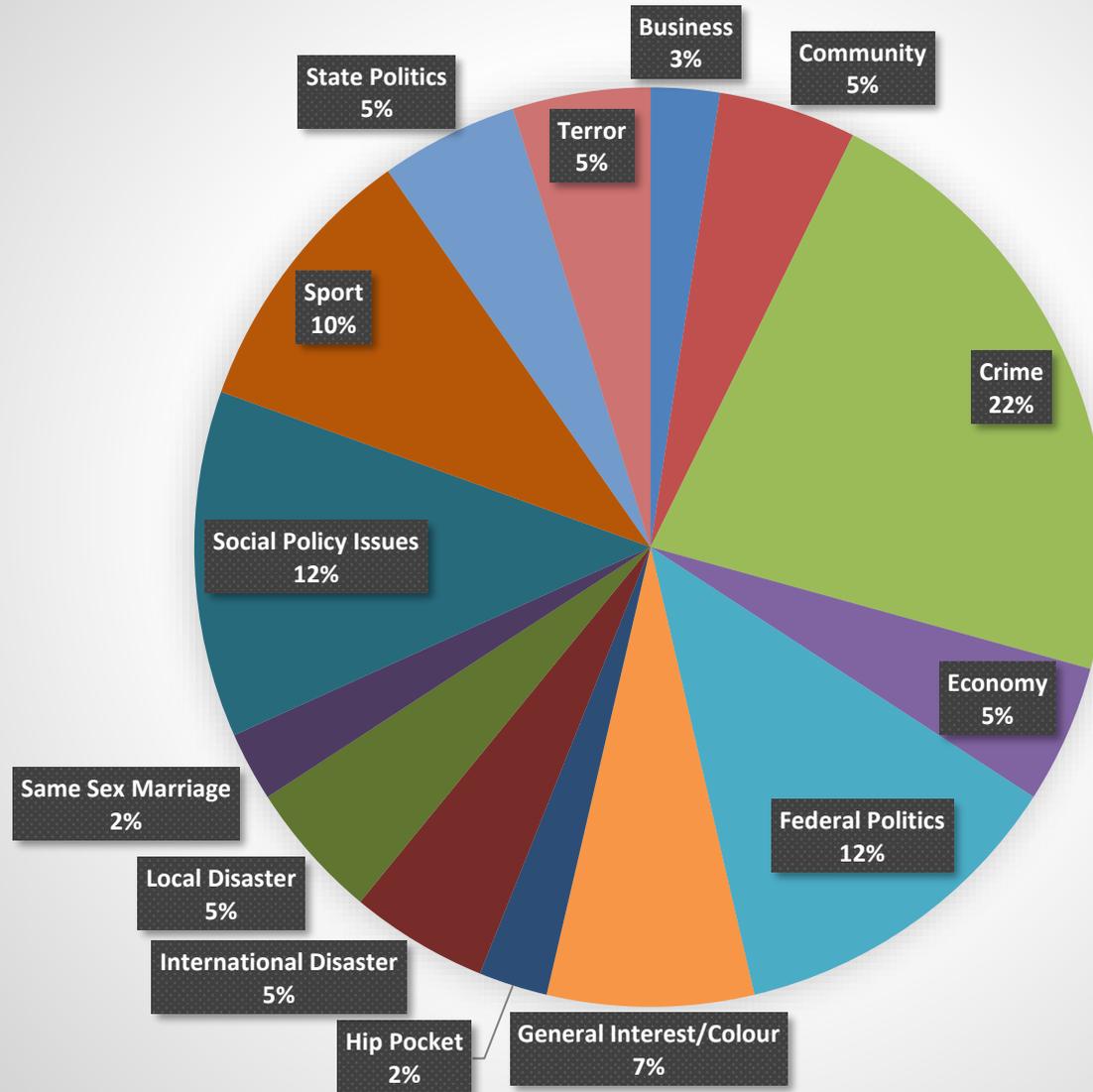
# Radio – Syd – ABC



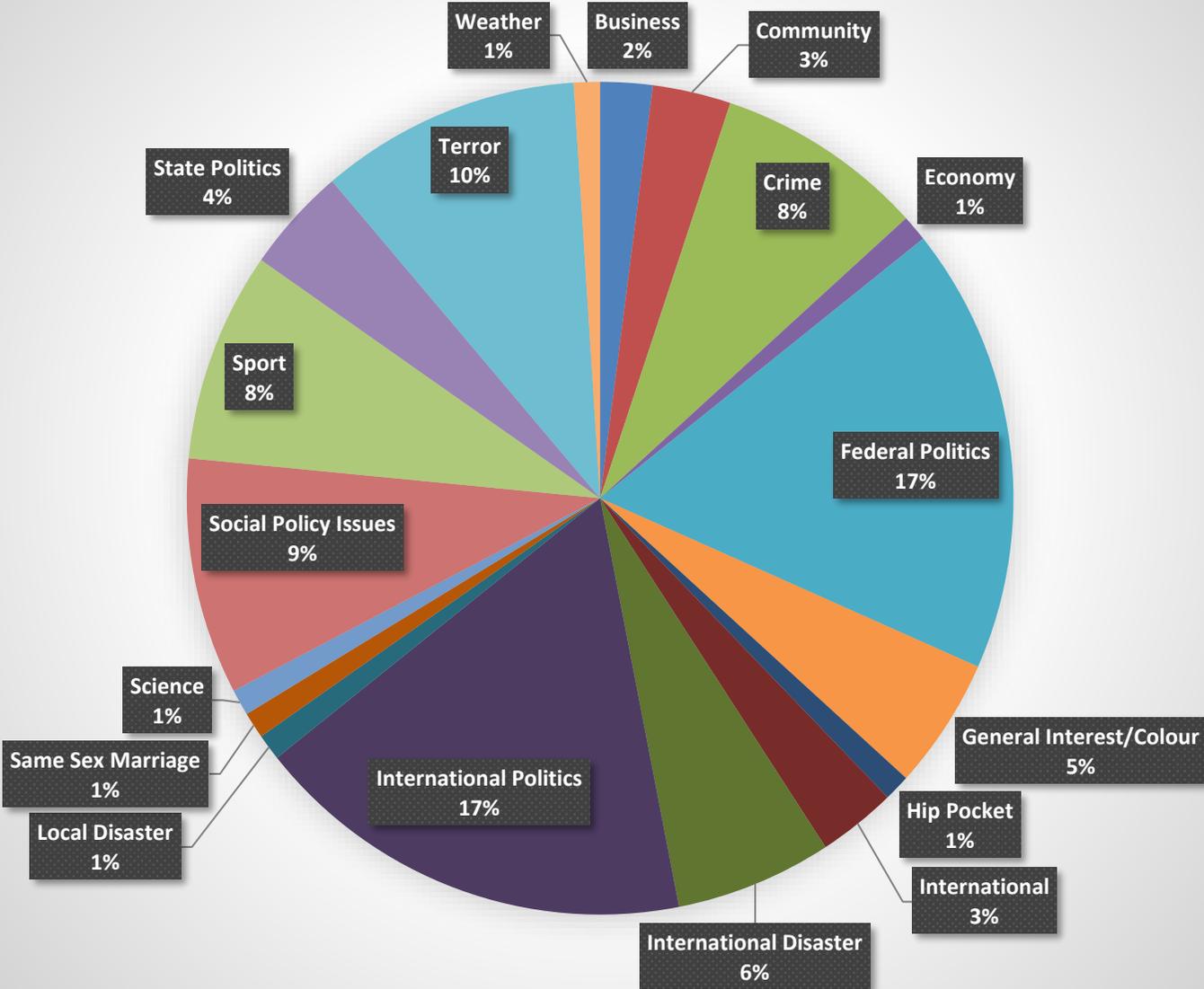
# Radio – Syd – 2GB



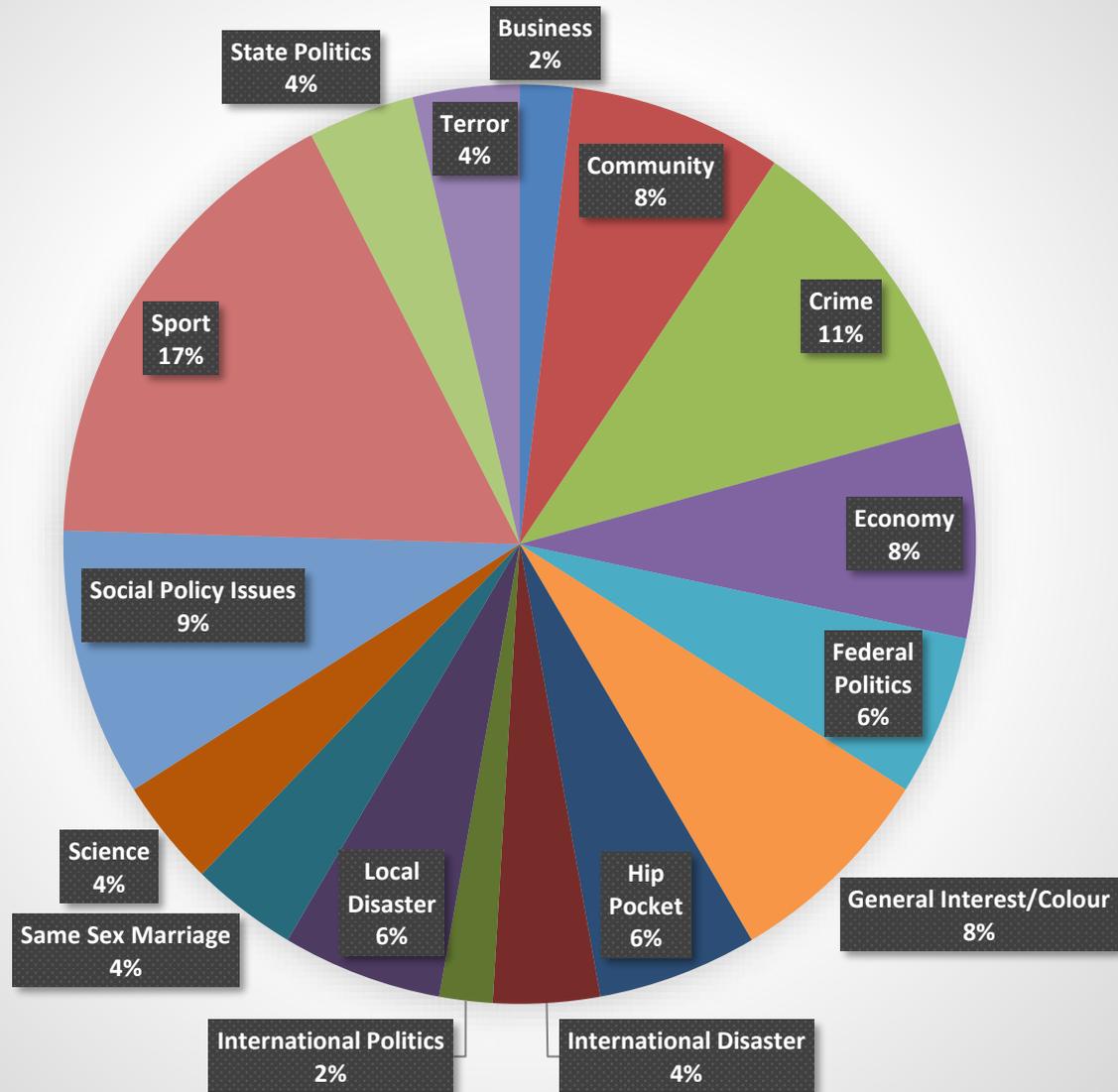
# Radio – Syd – 2WS



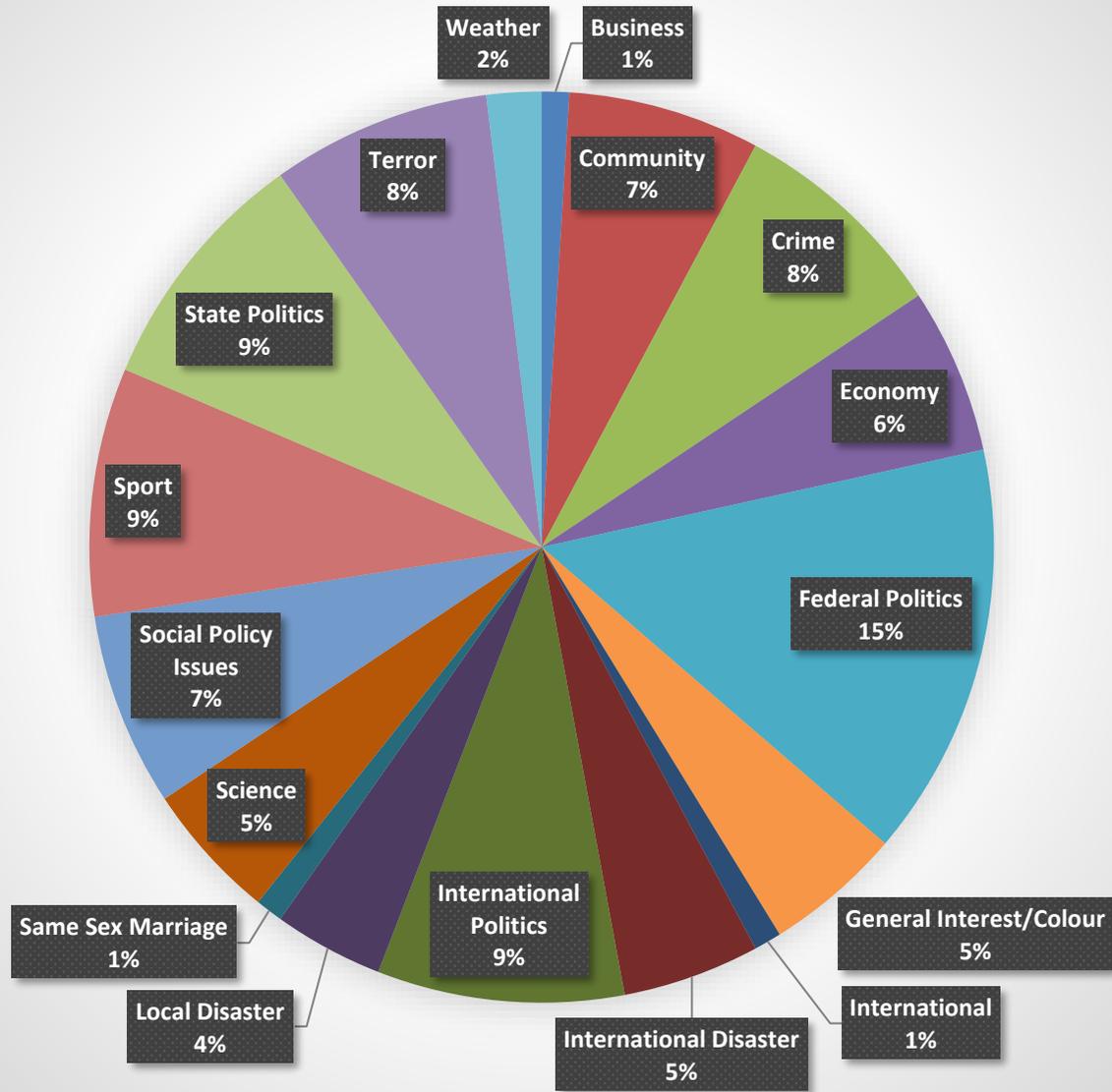
# Radio – Melb – ABC



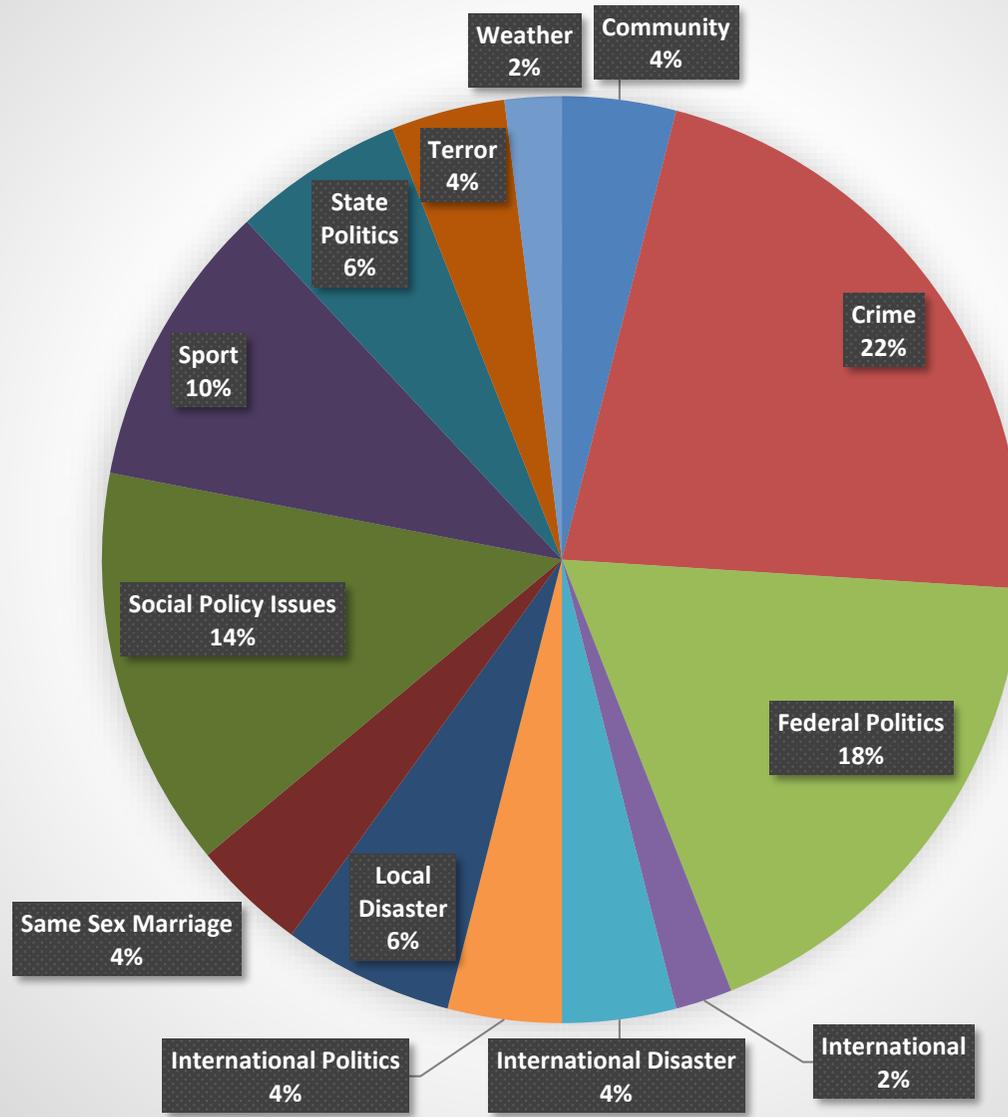
## Radio – Melb – 3AW



# Radio – Bris – ABC



# Radio – Bris – 4BC



Top Three Areas of Interest						
ABC Syd	2GB	2WS	ABC Melb	3AW	ABC Bris	4BC
Social Policy (16%)	Crime (20%)	Crime (22%)	Federal Politics 17% International Politics 17%	Sport (17%)	Federal Politics 15%	Crime (22%)
Federal Politics 15%	Terror (14%) Federal Politics (14%)	Social Policy (12%) Federal Politics (12%)	Terror (10%)	Crime (11%)	Sport (9%) International Politics (9%) State Politics (9%)	Federal Politics (18%)
International Politics 12%	Sport (8%)	Sport (10%)	Social Policy (9%)	Social Policy (9%)	Terror (8%) Crime (8%)	Social Policy (14%)

1. When comparing the ABC to the commercials, it is noticeable that, with the exception of 3AW, there are very similar levels of **Federal Politics** coverage across all news services. This is very different to the picture when it comes to TV. **Social Policy** is likewise not hugely different, with the exception of 2GB. When these two categories are combined, ABC Sydney and Melbourne lead the way (with 31% and 26% respectively), followed by 2WS on 24% and ABC Brisbane on 22%.
2. Once again, consistent with the picture in TV, the starkest difference between the ABC and the commercials concerns the coverage of **Crime**. All ABC bulletins spent between 8 and 9% of their time on crime, compared with most of the commercials, who spent more than twice as much time on crime.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The exception to this was 3AW in Melbourne, which had coverage much closer to the ABC across a range of categories.

3. There are notable **differences between the three ABC services** in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. A high level of **Federal Politics** is common to all three as well as fairly high levels of **International Politics**, but then clear differences emerge. Sydney has an over-riding focus on **Social Policy**, Melbourne is quite like Sydney except for a strong presence of **Terror** (which may be the result of a strong local story at the time) while Brisbane had noticeably more **Crime** and **Sport**.

## Detailed analysis

The high-level data summarised above points to a range of issues which would benefit from closer analysis.

To do this, the reviewers have selected a number of case studies, choosing particular days, news services and/or issues for a more detailed examination of the stories covered. What follows are three case studies exploring different aspects of the data.

### Case Study One: A closer look at the Sydney radio market.

#### *Background information*

WSFM News claims to be 'Sydney's most comprehensive FM News network'. The bulletins are compiled with the resources of ARN Group News, and use ARN News anchors, but they present for WSFM solely. WSFM News has its own theme song. Traffic reports are provided just prior to the news bulletin. **2WS** is the shortest of the bulletins and usually includes only 4-5 items. It is more likely to include a random 'novelty' item than the other two. Almost invariably, the items consist of 2-3 sentences from the newsreader.

Bulletins on **2GB** are provided by Macquarie National News, the news service provided by Macquarie Media to radio stations across Australia. Macquarie also supplies to 3AW in Melbourne. A level of common stories between 3AW and 2GB was noted during the review period, and the relationship explains the small number of Victorian stories on 2GB. The 2GB bulletin runs typically for 4-5 minutes, with a combination of brief reporter packages and presenter reads, with sport, traffic and weather nearby (either before or after). International news often comes courtesy of the UK correspondent who chats with Alan Jones in the previous hour.

The 0700 **ABC** bulletin includes 6-7 minutes of international, national, state and city news items, 2-3 minutes of high-level finance and sport, followed by state and Sydney weather. Many stories are reporter packages, usually longer than those of 2GB.

While 2WS has been included to broaden the range of this comparison, 2GB and the ABC are more equivalent services in length and ambition.

Data provided by Audience Insights for the 0700-0715 quarter hour across the relevant surveys in 2017 shows an average weekly reach of **251,000 for 2GB, 206,000 for 2WS and 198,000 for ABC Sydney.**

*Detailed content comparisons (sport and finance excluded)*

	<b>ABC</b>	<b>2GB</b>	<b>2WS</b>
Federal Politics	15%	14%	12%
State Politics	7%	4%	5%
Social policy issues	16%	5%	12%
Same Sex Marriage	2%	0%	2%
International	18% (disaster + politics)	9% (disaster + politics)	5% (disaster only)
Business/Economy	9%	7%	8%
Hip Pocket	1%	1%	2%
Terror	11%	14%	5%
Crime	9%	20%	22%
Local Disaster	0%	6%	5%
General Interest	0%	4%	7%

## Comparative analysis

There is nothing particularly striking in the comparative proportions of state and federal political coverage, business and economy, hip pocket and same sex marriage (except for the final two being so low, especially during the period of the postal survey).

During this period, 23 stories were categorised under 'terror', of which only two appeared on 2WS (one report on the Australian-born ISIS recruiter Neil Prakash and one on a terror bombing in New York), with the remainder evenly distributed (11:9) across the ABC and 2GB. This is largely explained by the 2WS bulletin being less concerned with international news than the other two, as only 3 of the terror stories were domestic.<sup>4</sup>

The local disaster category (car accidents, house fires etc) occupies a slightly lower proportion of content on radio than television, almost certainly because it is driven by the availability of footage. The ABC Sydney TV bulletin carried a small number of local disaster stories during the survey period, but there were none on ABC Sydney radio. Nor did the ABC Sydney radio bulletins include any of the novelty items ('German donkey bites carrot-coloured car') which regularly rounded off the commercial bulletins.<sup>5</sup>

In many cases, the 'local disaster' stories on the commercial services have a similar emotional impact to the local crime stories, with a combined focus on things that might go wrong for you, the listener. The commercials are much more likely than the ABC to carry items which seem fairly minor in the scheme of things, such as a woman being trapped in her car (and then released) after a crash in Sylvania (2GB, 10 October). These stories are about mishaps which affect individuals, whereas the ABC is more likely to focus on phenomena affecting a cohort, such as cuts to the pension.

The three categories with the greatest discrepancies in the proportion of stories were crime, social policy and international.

### *Crime*

There were 33 crime stories in total across the three services over the 8 weeks. 16 of these appeared on 2GB (20% of all stories on that service), 9 on 2WS (22%) and 8 on the ABC (9%).

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<sup>4</sup> Note: We are counting Prakash as an international story because his activities and his trial both took place overseas.

<sup>5</sup> Although ABC News online did publish the story on 29 September: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-29/german-court-tells-donkey-owners-to-pony-up-for-damaged-mclaren/9000254>.

All three services covered the two big international crime stories with local connections: the murder of an Australian woman in Kenya, and the sentencing of drug-smuggler Cassie Sainsbury in Columbia<sup>6</sup>. 2WS and 2GB both noted that an Australian had been convicted of assault in Florida. The greater discrepancy in the crime figures was a local one, where the only two common stories were the discovery of a woman's body in Chatswood, lifted from the ordinary by a man (presumed to be the killer) filmed huddled on an awning on a nearby apartment block who eventually handed himself over to police, and a particularly major drug bust in Wollongong. The commercials, especially 2GB, were more interested in lesser violent crimes (such as stabbings and assaults) than the ABC. On September 21, for example, 2GB ran 3 local crime stories while the ABC included none.

### *Social policy*

Social policy was a more difficult category to capture than crime, as it overlaps with 'community issues' on one side, and often into state and federal politics on the other. Stories marked as 'social policy' on the ABC included the euthanasia bill introduced into the NSW Parliament, protection policies for children with disabilities, and the release of research into pensions, poverty, girls and STEM and mental health. On 10 November, the ABC carried two stories from the NSW public education sector. These kinds of topics, while certainly not unknown on the commercials, were less frequent.

### *International*

Of the 3 services, 2WS included the least international news. Stories were confined to disasters (the earthquake in Mexico, a terror attack in New York, the California wildfires), items with an obvious Australian connection (Prakash, Sainsbury, the Florida tourist and the Kenya murder), and the car-hungry donkey. 2GB carried a very similar range with the addition of a story on the hurricane in Puerto Rico and the asylum-seeker protests on Manus Island in November. 2GB also recycles snippets from the regular chats between presenter Alan Jones and his UK correspondent.

The ABC bulletins are significantly more weighted to international coverage of a more 'disinterested' nature, regardless of whether there is a clear Australian angle. For example, Europe correspondent Steve Cannane reported regularly on the Catalan independence saga. The ABC's investment in international news is obvious in the composition of bulletins, which frequently open with a story from overseas. On 29 September, the 0700 radio bulletin began with a report on the Prakash trial from Matt Brown in Turkey, followed by comment from an expert in de-radicalization, IS releasing a recording of their leader, a warning from the Pentagon on North Korean aggression, Chinese bans on North Korean businesses and international co-operation on spy satellites. After two local stories (a paedophile sacked from a Port Macquarie school

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<sup>6</sup> Ms Sainsbury was described as an 'Australian woman' by the ABC, a 'drug mule' by 2WS and 'Cocaine Cassie' by 2GB.

and a man being tried for attempted murder), we returned to overseas with the Rohingya in Bangladesh and the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, wrapping up with an item from Adelaide, sport and weather. On the same day, 2WS moved on from Neil Prakash to a car crash death in the Illawarra, a Sutherland woman charged with assault, delays at Sydney Airport and changes to the lockout laws. 2GB was also far more focussed on the local with a fire in Blacktown, a fatal accident in holiday traffic and police raids on cosmetic clinics across the city.

### *Localism*

Differences between the commercials and the ABC on local journalism were fairly stark. On 17 October, for example, 2GB and 2WS both reported that the state government was planning to spend \$2bn on two news sports stadiums. Subsequently, and not surprisingly, this became a huge Sydney/State Politics story – but there was nothing on the ABC. The commercials also ran with the notorious property developer Salim Mehajer failing to appear in court. Silence again from the ABC despite demonstrable local interest in a home-grown Sydney villain<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, an ABC listener that morning would have heard about a Salvation Army report on rising levels of poverty, pension distress in the bush, criticism of the government being slow to respond to the flu, and a crackdown on ticket scalping, which are all important stories. ABC News may choose to comment on these matters of selection and omission, but on the surface, it appears that commercial and ABC newsrooms exist in such a fairly loose relationship to each other, regularly intersecting but often operating in a distinct zeitgeist.

These differences in the ‘imagined audience’ for each outlet become even more obvious if we factor in the stories appearing in the first 7 or so pages of the two Sydney newspapers, the Sydney Morning Herald (Fairfax) and the Daily Telegraph (News Corporation). This table presents the broadcast and print stories available to Sydneysiders on 13 November. While 2WS looks to have the greatest number of shared stories, this mostly reflects the smaller number of items. The table illustrates that beyond a handful of big stories each day, news choices proliferate.

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<sup>7</sup> ABC News Online reproduced photos of a car crash involving Mr Mehajer on the 17<sup>th</sup>, and an article dated 19 October is still available online.

2WS 13/11	2GB 13/11	ABC 13/11	SMH 13/11	Daily Tele 13/11
Newspoll slump for Govt while PM in Asia	Violent protest at Abbott fundraiser (on 10/11)	Citizenship saga	Pollution forecasts for WestConnex	NSW PS Indigenous culture program
Man stabbed in Arncliffe	Newspoll slump for Govt while PM in Asia	SSM (Patterson bill)	Clive Hamilton book on Chinese influence pulled	Animal abuse penalties too light
Cocaine bust	Citizenship saga	SSM (Victorian PS counselling)	Peter Hartcher analysis on minority govt	Citizenship saga (very anti-Labor)
Animal abuse penalties too light	Funeral for killed Sydney schoolboy	PM in Asia	Police break up cocaine ring	NSW loses public service chief
Study shows people lose sleep from worry	Texas massacre memorial	Manus Island	Deloitte Access points to federal budget problems	Asylum seekers rort handouts
	Rain in outback	Queensland election	Goldman Sachs paid \$16.5m for WestConnex advice	Today Show host speculation
	Manus Island	Indecent assault Hurstville	Trump heats up Twitter war	Clooney for POTUS?
	Cocaine bust	Catalonia	Turnbull in Asia. Attacks North Korea	Eating disorder video
	Asbestos warning	Lebanon	Citizenship saga continues	Sleep/worry study
		Cocaine bust	Preview of postal survey + calls to LGBTQI helpline	White ribbon activism
		Antibiotic awareness campaign	More Chinese shopping on Australian websites	New financial watchdog
			Cost of detention camps soar	SSM (Patterson bill)
			Charity race for cancer research	Joyce proposes nuclear electricity
			New face of unions	Bad poll for Govt

				Turnbull Trump selfie. Criticises N Korea.
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*Final observations made on the basis of these survey findings.*

- The number of stories focussed on activities of the state government seems low across all services, particularly in comparison to the federal sphere. It might be interesting to examine this in more depth (ABC-only).
- Equally, on these results, the ABC Sydney bulletin carries quite a low level of news from or about Sydney.
- The ABC's focus on NSW as a state is also inconsistent. A typical bulletin, 2 November for example, included only two stories emanating from NSW (plus one on the winner of the Sydney Peace Prize, which both is and isn't a 'local' story).
- Across the 8 days of this survey, there were 4 stories which appeared to have been supplied by regional reporters (from Newcastle, Port Stephens, Lithgow and Dunedoo).
- While women's sport was covered on all three services, the ABC deserves special mention for consistency and prominence.
- Although impartiality within stories was not the focus of the survey, there were no noticeable issues with the standards of ABC reporting. There were several times when the ABC played an impeccable straight bat while others felt free to editorialise. On 17 October, for example, when the government announced the end of the Clean Energy Target, the 2WS newsreader said 'Malcolm Turnbull chooses coal and cheap power over anything clean and green. Apparently', while 2GB's political reporter pointedly emphasised that the Government's replacement plan was 'complicated'.

## Case Study Two: Television News bulletins October 17.

Audience figures for the five Sydney news services were supplied to the reviewers by ABC Audience Insights.

*Audience figures<sup>8</sup>*

<b>Network</b>	<b>Average Weekly Reach</b>
ABC NEWS	504,000
SEVEN NEWS	611,000
NINE NEWS	684,000
TEN EYEWITNESS NEWS FIRST AT FIVE	418,000
SBS WORLD NEWS	200,000

The table below has been compiled from the pie charts, showing the proportion of stories in each of the categories carried by each service across the entire survey period. In this case study, we will primarily use the individual story data collected for 17 October to illustrate and examine some of the broader trends which have emerged. In a couple of instances, we will also draw on examples from other evenings when interesting issues arose. The purpose of this brief examination is to look for differences in the story choices being made by the ABC in comparison to the other services.

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<sup>8</sup> Source: OzTAM Consolidated 28 Data, Mon-Fri, Sydney, w/c 27-8 - w/c 26-11 2017

It must be noted that the ABC's 7pm TV bulletin is the shortest of the five at 30 minutes. When adjusted for advertising, the SBS and commercial bulletins present roughly 42 minutes of news, sport, weather and traffic. From roughly the halfway point each evening, the commercial bulletins are more likely to burn through a higher volume of short items, often no more than a couple of sentences read over vision.

Note: Although not recorded as a stand-alone category, live traffic reporting (usually from a helicopter) is a significant component of all three commercial bulletins, and is one of the main reasons why their proportion of 'community' content is higher than the ABC or the SBS. The live crosses to 'your city' very much enhance the sense that these are Sydney bulletins.

	ABC	SBS	Ch7	Ch9	Ch10
I'ntl Pols	6	23	1	2	1
I'ntl disaster	5	6	3	4	3
Fed Politics	16	9	5	4	6
State Politics	3	1	2	1	3
Economy	7	3	0	3	2
Business	3	3	2	2	1
Crime	9	9	21	18	14
Terror	3	7	2	1	2
Social Policy	9	6	5	4	6
Community	1	2	7	5	11
Science	3	1	1	1	2
SSM <sup>9</sup>	1	1	1	1	0
Region/Rural	1	0	0	0	0
Local disaster	3	2	7	8	7
Hip Pocket	2	2	4	4	2
General Interest	9	9	23	17	16
Sport	15	9	14	18	16
Weather	4	2	***10	4	5

<sup>9</sup> This survey was conducted across the period of the same-sex marriage postal survey, and was therefore a regular thread within broader-ranging reports on federal politics. This category captures the surprisingly small number of stand-alone stories.

<sup>10</sup> Weather was not recorded for Channel 7, but it's reasonable to assume it would be consistent with the other channels.

The categories which stand out most in this comparison table are **federal politics, crime** and **general interest**, where the percentages of content for the ABC and SBS stand in marked contrast from the commercials. Because there is no particular purpose in analysing the story choices made by the SBS newsroom for this more detailed examination, the following analysis will focus on the ABC ‘versus’ Channels 7, 9 and 10.

*Federal Politics*

<b>ABC</b>	<b>Ch7</b>	<b>Ch9</b>	<b>Ch10</b>
Clean Energy target dumped by Govt. Package on day’s events + summary of govt proposal.	CET dumped. Package with key players.	CET. Chris Uhlmann covers both #auspol and hip pocket aspects. Brief Q&A with presenter.	CET dumped. Detailed package with key players. Editorial tone quite critical of Govt.
Reaction to power plan. Package with reactions from energy retailers and state governments			
Interview with the PM on new power plan			

This day was slightly unusual in that the ABC’s political coverage revolved around one story, but the general ratio of 3:1 (ABC: Commercial) nonetheless holds. The divergent emphasis was exacerbated (as is the case on most evenings) by the placement of stories within the bulletins. While the ABC and Channel 10 both lead with the Clean Energy Target, it was the **fifth** story on Channel 7 (after the baby attacked by its grandmother, the toddler rescued from a burning car, the announcement of a 2019 construction start for F6 motorway, and the postponement of Salim Mehajer’s assault hearing) and the **fifth** story on Channel 9 (following the burning car, the F6, sailors missing after wild weather in Queensland and the cleaver). While Seven and Nine, both with considerably bigger audiences than the ABC, clearly believe that viewers want a

decent warm up act before they're ready for the politicians, the ABC appears to have its own rules for constructing bulletins, based on the idea that stories of intrinsic magnitude need to be scheduled first. But while the ABC places first the stories that affect the greatest number of people, the style of storytelling tends to be less personal. Its various packages on the CET were standard compilations of brief, reactive interviews with politicians, experts and energy retailers, firmly focussed on the national picture. When Channel 9 eventually got around to the CET, political editor Chris Uhlmann commenced with the 'human' story of a small business owner before working back up to the political elite. That having been said, Seven and Ten offered more traditional packages, although Ten was less impartial than the others, pointing out rather snarkily that while the Government had provided few details of their alternative scheme, they had had time to produce an ad, observing that the PM had struggled to explain the absence of renewable energy and rounding off with a reminder that he was still falling in the polls.

*Crime*

<b>ABC</b>	<b>Ch7</b>	<b>Ch9</b>	<b>Ch10</b>
No crime story	Baby attacked with meat cleaver by grandmother. Took place in Queensland but baby is from Sydney.	Baby attacked with meat cleaver by grandmother. Very brief – just a voice over.	Salim Mehajer claims that car crash injuries prevented him from attending hearing.
	Salim Mehajer. Very similar package to Channel 10.	Boy shot in the face on farm in Young. Another brief RVO.	Tourist bashed in city.
	German backpacker bashed.	Backpacker attacked and teeth smashed.	Baby attacked with cleaver by gran
	Hit and run offender sentenced.	Salim Mehajer. Like others.	

While the ABC 7pm bulletin usually includes a ‘crime’ story, this table still reveals a typical evening. While most crime stories have a considerable (often fatal) impact on the people directly involved, they are not as central to the ABC’s news culture as they are to the commercial services. On this evening, the ‘grandmother attacks baby’ story has obviously attracted the interest of the commercial newsrooms because of the sensational combination of a gran and a meat cleaver. The second common story, the Mehajer trial, may have been ignored by the ABC (again) because of a feeling that there was nothing further to be learned from the story of one young man running off the rails, but perhaps it’s more instructive to speculate on the silence around the spate of violence and theft in the inner city. It would be interesting to know whether the story had been considered and rejected, and why, or whether it had failed to hit the radar of the news desk, and again, for what reason?

There were at least a couple of instances during this exercise when all three commercial services covered a ‘sensible’ story not included on the ABC. A particularly good example occurred on September 21, when the News Corp papers revealed that little-known rules were allowing unqualified, especially trainee doctors to work in after-hours medical practices. These services make after hours house calls and are increasingly popular. Many ABC viewers would be using them and would likely have had no idea that the doctors coming to their homes may not be fully qualified. It’s an obvious quality of life/consumer/your city kind of story, and SBS also picked it up, leaving the ABC alone in its silence.<sup>11</sup> It would be interesting to know what caused this omission.

*Sydney ‘safety’*

<b>September 21</b>				
	<b>ABC</b>	<b>Seven</b>	<b>Nine</b>	<b>Ten</b>
<b>House fire</b>		Y	Y	Y
<b>Road rage</b>		Y		
<b>Unqualified doctors</b>		Y	Y	Y
<b>Missing woman</b>		Y	Y	Y
<b>Energy woes</b>		Y	Y	
<b>West Connex exhaust</b>		Y		
<b>Medical costs</b>		Y		

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/09/21/minister-launches-after-hours-gp-probe>

<b>Not allowed to celebrate Xmas any more</b>		Y		Y
<b>Unsafe buses</b>		Y	Y	
<b>Armed intruder</b>			Y	
<b>Plant thief</b>			Y	
<b>Phone theft</b>			Y	
<b>Brawl in street</b>			Y	

The other issue which arises when considering the categories of crime and local disaster, is that of ‘community safety’, or at least perceptions of same. The table above derives from 21 September, and includes all the stories that were about something going ‘wrong’ in Sydney. While there was plenty of bad news on the ABC (the Mexican earthquake, farmers reeling through drought, the cost of the Newcastle light rail project, and the NDIS), commercial viewers were more likely to feel they were living in a dangerous society.

In determining the significance of this difference, it should be noted that many of the stories in this category relate to petty crime. It makes sense, given the ABC’s commitment to stories of editorial weight and significance, that many of these minor stories (distinguished principally by their opportunity to show CCTV footage, dashcam vision or other potentially entertaining or shocking images) will be ignored by the public broadcaster. However, it is interesting to consider whether the cumulative impact of ignoring these routine, daily occurrences in the lives of local residents leaves a gap in the ABC’s news coverage. There may well be opportunities for the issues of minor crime and safety in the community to be addressed by the ABC in a deeper and more significant way, so that the issue is tackled without resorting to the ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ approach often taken by commercial news organisations.

*General Interest/colour (October 17)*

<b>ABC</b>	<b>Ch7</b>	<b>Ch9</b>	<b>Ch10</b>
Exhibition at AWM	Qantas unveils new	Qantas unveils new	Long and slightly

documents experiences of special forces on overseas service.	Dreamliner aircraft in LA.	Dreamliner aircraft in LA.	gleeful package on multiple troubles at Channel 9
	Duchess of Cambridge attends Paddington Bear opening	John McCain awarded Liberty medal	Duchess of Cambridge attends Paddington Bear opening
	Singer Ed Sheeran hit by car and breaks arm	Exhibition at AWM	Singer Ed Sheeran hit by car and breaks arm
	Greyhound fitted with prosthetic leg	British artist with autism recreates NY skyline	Update on Weinstein saga
	Boxing kangaroos are caught on tape	Killer whales spotted on north Coast	Qantas unveils new Dreamliner aircraft in LA.
	Debenhams to open in Australia		Crocodile who ate old lady slain
	Gomez y Guzman to deliver food by drones		
	Surprise wedding proposal for Adelaide teacher		

This table illustrates a very typical evening within the ‘general interest or colour’ category. The ABC’s one colour story (also covered by Channel 9) was about as serious as a general story gets, featuring the war front experiences of Australian troops. The commercials, on the other hand – particularly Channel 7 – were awash with celebrity stories, animal tales, dancing duchesses and commercial announcements (from Debenhams and Gomez y Guzman) masquerading as news. This category is heavily driven by the availability of footage and usually consists of very brief items stacked in twos and threes before the ad breaks. The exception here are the three, almost identical stories on Qantas Dreamliner. Qantas flew journalists from each channel from Australia to Los Angeles, where they obligingly filed enthusiastic stories on the launch party, and the CEO lounging in the first-class cabin, talking up the aircraft. ‘This is the best plane Qantas has ever flown’.<sup>12</sup>

The challenge for the ABC is how to ensure its bulletins include light and shade, a mix of entertaining and enlightening stories to leaven the more serious contributions on the economy, politics and social issues. One obvious option open to the ABC would be an increased use of stories from regional offices. The extraordinary success of *Back Roads* has demonstrated a strong interest from ABC viewers in quirky, unusual or interesting regional and rural stories and the ABC is better placed than other broadcasters to utilise its vast network of regional reporters.

At the same time, the initiative to establish a Western Sydney bureau also provides an opportunity to explore more grass roots stories of significance to all Sydneysiders, and it may be useful to consider reinvigorating and expanding this source of content.

### Case Study Three: Coverage of ‘Hip-pocket’ stories

One of the criticisms sometimes levelled at the ABC is that it is more likely to cover worthy social issue stories than the kind of everyday hip-pocket issues that affect average Australian families.

This was most notably raised by the then Chairman of the ABC, James Spigelman, in an address to the National Press Club in December 2013, when he said *“allegations of bias are, I believe, more often a function of the topics chosen for reporting, than of the content. Journalists – all of you, not just those at the ABC – tend to have a social and educational background, perhaps particularly in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, that may make them more interested in, say, gay marriage than, say, electricity prices. As a public broadcaster we must endeavour to engage with those sections of our community who are concerned with the latter.”*

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<sup>12</sup> These stories later featured in a MediaWatch item on coverage of the Qantas launch: <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s4754065.htm>

Although those remarks were clearly aimed at all journalists and not just those at the ABC, they raise an important issue. The ABC has been aware of this potential risk for some time – [Editorial Review Three](#) in August 2014 examined story choices on ABC Radio – but it is sensible to consider this once more in the context of this review.

Do the results reflect a lesser or different focus by the ABC on hip-pocket issues when compared to our competitors across television and radio?

The number of ABC stories assessed as covering hip-pocket issues, compared with commercial broadcasters and SBS, is summarised below:

<b>A B C T V</b>	<b>A B C M e l b</b>	<b>A B C S y d</b>	<b>A B C B r i s b</b>	<b>N I N E</b>	<b>S E V E N</b>	<b>T E N</b>	<b>S B S</b>	<b>2 G B</b>	<b>2 W S</b>	<b>3 A W</b>	<b>4 B C</b>
2	1	1	0	4	4	2	2	1	2	6	0
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%

Although the numbers are small, there are some indications of a greater focus from some commercial broadcasters (Channels Seven and Nine and radio station 3AW) when compared with ABC news services in the same market. These warrant closer examination.

**SYDNEY TELEVISION COVERAGE**

During the period of the review, **ABC** television news in Sydney had one package exploring the consumer impact of higher power prices and another very short item on a controversy about expiring gift cards.

In contrast, Channels **Seven** and **Nine** also covered higher power prices (sometimes more than once) but they also covered a range of additional consumer-focussed hip-pocket stories, including house prices, regular updates on Sydney petrol prices, changing rules on Opal cards and credit ratings, new developments in retail (Amazon exploring an expansion into pharmacies, Aldi opening new stores), consumer health issues, affordable suburbs to buy into and previews of Christmas sales.

## MELBOURNE RADIO COVERAGE

The numbers of stories were much smaller in this comparison, but while the **ABC** only covered calls for more regulation of gas prices, **3AW** did a couple of different stories on house prices surging as well as a story on a new Australia Post shipping service.

There appear to be two reasons for the greater number of hip-pocket stories observed on *some* commercial news services compared to the ABC.

The **first** is that, on occasion, the ABC will treat a story as political or economic one, while commercial competitors will focus far more on the direct impact of that story on Australians.

For example, on 10 October, the ABC's TV News in Sydney covered the latest developments in the national debate about energy, climate and the environment as a straightforward political story out of Canberra, including quotes from a Tony Abbott speech in London and reaction from both Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Deputy Opposition Leader Tanya Plibersek. Channel Nine, on the other hand, while still using its political reporter to package the story and include mention of the Abbott speech and some political reaction, chose instead to focus the story strongly on hip pocket issues, including data on competing energy packages and ways for families to save money. This turned what could have been classified as a political story into a hip pocket story.

This difference in approach was evident again on 17 October, when the ABC did a straight piece of political reporting on the announcement by the Government of a new power policy followed by political reactions from a range of State Governments and an interview with the Prime Minister. This was classified in our analysis as a "Federal Politics" story. Channel Seven, as it happens, took a similar political approach that night but Channel Nine once again added to its political coverage by beginning its story with a profile of a business, interviewing the owner and exploring the impact of power policies on his business. Once again, in the assessment of the reviewers, it turned what might have been classified as a political story into a hip-pocket one.

The **second** reason for the greater number of hip-pocket stories on the commercial broadcasters seems to be that there are certain kinds of stories that are not on the ABC's radar. These are a mixture of short summaries containing information relevant to consumers or commuters, and longer pieces exploring developments in retail, housing and other sectors.

Some examples identified within the review include:

- \* Channel Nine's regular brief updates on petrol prices across Sydney;
- \* Channel Seven stories about a new fuel comparison website, and a review of the most affordable suburbs in Sydney to buy into;

- \* A Channel Nine story on Aldi's plans to expand by opening new stores in Sydney;
- \* A 3AW report on a new shipping service being provided by Australia Post;
- \* A Channel Seven story about unclaimed superannuation; and
- \* Stories on both 3AW and Channel Nine on surging house prices.

It is clear that some of these stories may not be suitable for ABC news bulletins as they contain excessive commercial references and can amount to little more than thinly disguised advertorials. A case in point was a lengthy story on Channel Nine on October 17 that covered a Kmart fashion show held to promote the clothing on sale in their store. There appeared to be nothing remotely new or newsworthy in this, and it would have breached the ABC's editorial standards. But most other stories in this hip-pocket category were worthy of consideration, and their absence (for the most part) in ABC news bulletins suggests there may be merit in looking for more opportunities to chase stories that are relevant to the hip-pockets of Australians and also to look for ways of including in our current political and economic stories more consideration of hip-pocket implications.

### Final Summary and Observations:

The four questions posed in the brief for this review have been formally addressed in the Background and Scope section at the beginning of the document, and implicitly considered throughout the rest of the paper.

Over and beyond that, the overall picture of ABC broadcast news priorities that emerges from this broad review is an encouraging one.

The regular, top-of-the-bulletin focus on federal politics, social issues and international issues (with a solid serving of sport later in the bulletins) fulfil the ABC's obligations to provide an independent news service that is 'accurate and impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism.' On the evidence collected as part of this exercise, the ABC does a very good job in covering the issues and events that well-informed citizens need to understand.

To the extent that the ABC covers significant social issues more often or more thoroughly than other news media, there is no evidence that this is happening at the expense of covering important economic or hip-pocket issues. Rather, it happens at the expense of covering more general interest stories which affect fewer people, or replaying footage for footage's sake. Having said that, however, there are a number of issues that the ABC should consider in order to improve the diversity and mix of its news stories and ensure it is as relevant as possible to the audiences it seeks to serve.

1. There is an opportunity for the ABC to cover economic/hip pocket issues more often and in a different way. At the moment, we focus on the politics of these stories (covering them from Canberra with a heavy emphasis on the politics of the economic and financial issues) or on the broad economic implications (covering them with specialist business reporters at a national level). Both of these approaches produce important and legitimate coverage. However, we should also be more consistently concerned with effects on average citizens and spend more time speaking to ordinary Australians about their daily challenges (including health expenses, public transport, wages and child care). While this approach can result in stories which are small scale and local, when handled properly they can also resonate strongly across wide sections of our audience.
2. There is an opportunity for the ABC to increase the number of lighter, human or general interest stories it runs without trivialising or 'dumbing down' its bulletins, by drawing on the network of rural and regional reporters the organisation employs. Handled well, this could become a defining and promotable feature of our bulletins, especially on TV but also on longer Radio bulletins. This is already happening on occasion to good effect, but should be expanded.
3. There is an opportunity for the ABC's local news bulletins to become even more local, and identifying and reporting on issues that are more directly relevant to the community. This can be a challenge for a state-wide television or radio bulletins, but coupled with a greater inclusion of regional stories, there may well be an opportunity to identify stories of local significance which are currently under-served to ABC audiences.

These recommendations do not amount to wholesale change, but rather to strategic means of tweaking the mix of content here and there, or to shift the treatment of stories (away from the political and/or national) to increase the relevance and usefulness of news at a local level while maintaining our strong commitment to reporting the issues and events that matter.