

EDITORIAL REVIEW 16

# Analysis & Opinion

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## Background

There was controversy and debate between February and May 2018 about [this article](#) by the ABC's Chief Economics Correspondent, Emma Alberici. In the form in which it was originally published, it was judged by news management and the editorial policy team to have breached the ABC's impartiality standards by crossing the line from analysis into opinion in some sections. This was confirmed by a subsequent [investigation](#) by the ABC's Audience and Consumer Affairs team. It was taken down, rewritten and republished in its present form, and now represents an important and well-constructed analysis of the company tax debate. Nevertheless, the highly politicised public debate about it led to scrutiny of the ABC's standards on opinion and analysis. Given this renewed focus, it is useful to examine whether the ABC is meeting its standards in this area.

As the ABC has expanded further into long-form publishing online, its reporters have had much greater opportunity to provide analysis on a range of important topics. This has chiefly come in the form of online articles included in our *Analysis and Opinion* pages. This has increased the need to reflect on the differences between analysis and opinion. The issue has been addressed in [existing editorial guidance](#).

## Why Do Analysis at all?

In undertaking this review, it is useful to begin by asking why the ABC provides analysis at all.

The answer can be found in the ABC's statutory purpose and charter.

Among other things, the ABC is charged with the responsibility to create content which contributes to a sense of national identity, which informs, and which reflects the cultural diversity of the Australian community.

In doing so, we are required to be accurate and impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism, and to maintain the independence and integrity of the ABC.<sup>1</sup>

At a time when the flow of information around the world threatens to become more polarised, more partisan and more opinionated, there has never been a greater need for an ABC that provides context, analysis and background. Similarly, the rise of virtually unlimited access to instant news and headlines 24 hours a day has created a strong need for content which explains and contextualises current events.

The ABC employs some of the best and most experienced journalists and content makers in Australia, and if we are to do our job it is essential that we utilise that experience and skill base to deliver impartial, intelligent and insightful information about international and Australian events.

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<sup>1</sup> ABC Act, Sections 6 and 8

Done properly, impartial analysis is an important and necessary part of the ABC's content offering to the Australian public.

## Impartiality

The ABC's commitment to impartiality is fundamental to its role as a public broadcaster. Its public funding base and statutory independence ensures that it is not beholden to any political, sectional, commercial or personal interests. To preserve that independence, the ABC Act requires the ABC Board to 'ensure that the gathering and presentation by the Corporation of news and information is accurate and impartial according to the recognized standards of objective journalism'.

The ABC has therefore always made it clear to its journalists that they should not allow their own opinions to drive their reporting. While analysis and context are important parts of quality journalism, they should always be impartial and backed by demonstrable evidence.

The ABC's editorial standards in relation to impartiality say:

- 4.1 Gather and present news and information with due impartiality.
- 4.2 Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.
- 4.3 Do not state or imply that any perspective is the editorial opinion of the ABC. The ABC takes no editorial stance other than its commitment to fundamental democratic principles including the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, parliamentary democracy and equality of opportunity.
- 4.4 Do not misrepresent any perspective.
- 4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.

## The Difference between Facts, Analysis and Opinion

A **fact** is information about which one can be certain – it is demonstrably true and can be verified.

An **opinion** is a view or a judgement about which it is not possible to be certain, because it is not based solely on the certainty of facts. It always involves an element of subjective judgement. It is, by nature, contestable.

**Analysis** is neither of these things. Analysis is a process, a process that involves assessing and weighing up evidence. It is a way of dealing with the facts to understand and contextualise them. It involves breaking something down to its constituent parts so that it can be better understood. Analysis can be undertaken on a broad, wide-ranging issue, or it can focus on one specific aspect of a broader issue. In each case, the views relevant to that broad or specific issue must be fairly and accurately explored, and the facts teased out.

The ABC provides detailed [guidance](#) to employees on how to navigate the boundaries between analysis and opinion. It provides the following definitions:

### ***Analysis***

The primary purpose of analysis (including live commentary) is to aid understanding and provide richer context and information, rather than to pass judgement or sway opinion. Analytic content attempts to offer the audience a deeper understanding of an issue, often through detailed examination of the facts and by making connections between them which may not be immediately apparent. This includes providing context and background against which current events can be better understood.

### ***Opinion***

Opinion content is based on the particular views and perspectives of the identified person or group expressing it. Whether stand-alone programming or a clearly signposted contribution to a broader piece of content, opinion can be based on personal preferences, sectional or commercial interests or a wide range of other factors. It is simply a means for expressing a view.

It is important to keep in mind that every day the ABC publishes and broadcasts opinion from a suitably diverse range of perspectives, by using external contributors as authors, on panels and as interview talent. That externally commissioned content may or may not be impartial. Often it is not, as it is not required to be. Our commitment to impartiality involves ensuring that commissioned opinion comes from a range of perspectives.

What we don't do is provide opinion from our own employees, except for very specific and limited circumstances. When it comes to our own journalists, we ask them to set aside their own opinions and, instead, analyse the facts.

The guidance note sets out the hallmarks of good ABC analysis:

- The presenter/reporter/author possesses special knowledge, skill, training, or experience, or longstanding professional engagement with the same or similar subject matter.
- It is clearly based around demonstrable facts and evidence.
- It is clearly intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than debating it or prosecuting one particular side of a case.
- The presenter/reporter/author has actively sought and included an appropriate range of relevant content, not just that which might support one particular conclusion. Analysis can, however, include observations justified by the weight of evidence.
- The language is more descriptive than judgemental and the tone is explanatory and reasoned. It should indicate awareness of complexity, rather than instructing with an air of certainty.

Nothing in these hallmarks precludes strong journalism that makes judgements based on the impartial weighing up of the facts, but it reinforces the importance of doing so impartially. It relies on some of our most experienced content makers with significant subject matter expertise to use their knowledge and experience to interpret events, but to do so by analysing the facts impartially and backing up their analysis with demonstrable evidence that carefully considers and is fair to all relevant perspectives.

## Purpose of the review

Written analysis is a growing area of output for the ABC, as we respond to audience needs by offering content on new platforms and in new ways.

This review is intended to enable more and better analysis by ABC employees, by examining recent examples of ABC analysis and exploring both strengths and weaknesses.

The ABC employs some of the most senior and respected journalists in Australia, and it is important that they can create content that benefits from their experience, professionalism and judgement.

If understood properly, the ABC's editorial standards should not limit or reduce the impact of the work done by our journalists. The standards recognise that good journalism includes strong analysis, but that analysis is more powerful and valuable to audiences if it is free from opinion or partisan perspectives.

## Methodology

Based on the editorial standards and guidance, I have settled on four key editorial requirements that a piece of ABC analysis must meet to be published.

1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.
2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.
3. An appropriate range of perspectives have been considered.
4. The tone and the language are more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

I have reviewed ten articles by ABC journalists against those criteria and noted any areas where I consider they have gone close to or exceeded the boundaries for acceptable ABC analysis.

The articles have been selected randomly to reflect the range and diversity of our published content, and to ensure that a representative sample of some of our key journalists are included.

After briefly discussing each example, I then provide an overall summary of conclusions about what makes a strong and editorially appropriate piece of ABC analysis.

## Managing Director's comments

This is an important and timely review in view of recent discussions about whether ABC journalists should be providing opinions (and I clearly agree with Alan's conclusion that they should not) and what is analysis and how do we ensure it doesn't stray into the perception that it is opinion.

Analysis is an important part of the ABC's output, but it is absolutely essential that it be impartial and in line with the ABC's integrity and independence.

The review, while providing welcome reassurance that we generally meet this standard, also provides useful advice on the areas where care is needed to avoid straying into opinion.

It will be useful for all of our journalists and content makers to read and absorb the advice it contains, and I have asked the content divisions to distribute it widely.

Michelle Guthrie

July 2018

## The Content

1. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-06/churchs-words-ring-hollow-in-light-of-merciless-legal-tactics/8763302> a Paul Kennedy piece on child sexual abuse
2. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-08/virginia-election-yawning-chasm-widens-in-us-politics/9130506> a John Barron piece on Trump's America
3. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-22/can-wesfarmers-dig-bunnings-out-of-its-uk-hole/9470804> a Stephen Letts piece on Wesfarmers
4. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-18/sa-election-liberal-win-should-not-be-understated/9559588> a Simon Royal piece on the SA Election result
5. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-13/barnaby-joyce-andrew-probyn-nationals-moral-authority/9426100> an Andrew Probyn piece on Barnaby Joyce
6. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-12/harvey-weinstein-time-to-believe-womens-stories-of-abuse/9042992> a Julia Baird piece on domestic violence
7. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-19/annabel-crabb-jacinta-ardern-pregnant/9344218> an Annabel Crabb piece on politics
8. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-18/america-tears-down-its-racist-history-we-ignore-ours-stan-grant/8821662> a Stan Grant piece on racism
9. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-27/how-bad-are-our-banks/9194984> an Ian Verrender piece about the banking Royal Commission
10. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-26/steve-smith-there-can-be-redemption-after-ball-tampering/9587086> a Tracey Holmes piece on cricket



## Item 1: “The Catholic Church’s words ring hollow in light of merciless legal tactics” by Paul Kennedy

This article, like many in this review, needs to be understood in context. The long running Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was covered extensively by the ABC. Evidence presented by victims fighting for justice was also the subject of a 2017 ABC documentary *Undeniable*, produced and presented by Paul Kennedy, an ABC journalist and presenter. Paul is also the co-author of a book *Hell on the Way to Heaven*, which tells the story of one family’s experiences of sexual abuse and the Catholic Church.

This article was published on the same day as a news report on a specific compensation battle involving Bishop Bird and the Ballarat Catholic Church - <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-06/catholic-church-ballarat-diocese-abuse-compensation-claim/8766482> . It focussed on a particular aspect of the ABC’s long-running coverage: the response of the Catholic Church to child sexual abuse claims in light of the Ballarat case.

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

The thrust of Paul’s analysis was to contrast some of the Church’s public statements about compassion for survivors of sexual assault with their actual past behaviour.

In support of that, the article relied heavily on demonstrable evidence, including a specific example from the 1990s, comments made in an interview on *Four Corners* in 1996, evidence provided by members of the Catholic Church under oath at the Royal Commission, and a more recent *Four Corners* program dealing with the Church’s activities in the United States.

Most of these contained documented evidence which was on the record, and in some cases transcripts of interviews or direct quotes were included.

### 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

While the article is clearly pointing out that the Church’s publicly-stated compassion is at odds with its legal tactics in actual cases, this is being driven by the weight of evidence and therefore appropriate in a piece of ABC analysis. In the same way that an ABC current affairs program will make serious allegations based on evidence uncovered, there is a reliance on information fairly and impartially assembled to drive these conclusions. rather than starting with a perspective and seeking information to support it.

These specific, documented examples are presented to provide context by balancing the Church’s statements about its behaviour with its actual behaviour.

### 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

In this particular article, the key issue to consider is whether the Church's own perspective has been adequately represented. The Church's public promises of compassion are flagged right at the start, and examples of Church behaviour which contradict that public promise are clearly set out. The heavy lifting in this piece is done by the demonstrated facts, which is appropriate.

The Church's perspective is also referred to towards the end, where one bishop's plan to be personally listed in legal cases as a defendant is noted, while at the same time contrasted with the actual legal tactics employed by the Church when such cases actually proceed.

While the specific comments of Bishop Bird are not provided in great detail, I am comfortable that they are appropriately included in the news story on the same day, which was displayed as a 'related article' on the page where the analysis appears. However, it is not necessarily the case that everyone who read Paul's analysis would necessarily have found their way to the accompanying news piece. It would have been more effective to embed an actual link to the news article in the analysis piece.

### 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

The tone of some of the language used in this piece is noticeably strong.

Examples of emotive and judgemental language in the piece include:

*"merciless legal tactics"*

*"ruthless reputation"*

*"outrageous threat"*

*"the intimidation worked"*

*"cities of riches"*

It is difficult when dealing with an issue as powerful and moving as child sexual abuse to avoid using strong words to condemn it, and in many cases those words will be justified. However, the language here was used to describe the Church more generally as a powerful and wealthy organisation, rather than the behaviour of individual, abusive priests. It can undermine the strength and editorial integrity of analysis if there is any sense that emotive and loaded language is being used to bolster the case.

In many of the cases highlighted above, the judgemental adjective (*merciless, ruthless, outrageous*) could have been omitted or the way of describing an institution or event modified (the *tactic* rather than the *intimidation*, the *assets* rather than the *cities of riches*) to ensure the focus remained on the power of the information being presented rather than any sense that the author was prosecuting a particular view.

This is not to say that strong and colourful language is out of place in a piece of ABC analysis. When the facts are beyond dispute, they can be expressed forcefully. But great care should be exercised in the choice of words where there is a risk that a statement of fact turns into a statement of opinion.

This attention to language is important because of this fundamental principle – ABC analysis is impartial. To the extent that it reaches conclusions or makes arguments, those conclusions and arguments are drawn from a fair consideration of the evidence and nothing else.

## Conclusion

This article was, for the most part, a strong, important and evidence-based piece of analysis that met the ABC's standards and provided valuable context to assist in understanding a key part of an important story.

It could have been improved through the provision of clearer links to or statements about the Church's own defence of its current approach, and with more attention to the tone and choice of language in some sections.

## Item 2: “The yawning chasm at the heart of US politics is growing wider” by John Barron

This article analysed the most recent election results in the US and commented on their likely implications.

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

The article summarised the results of the gubernatorial elections in Virginia and New Jersey, with a particular focus on Virginia. Reasons for focussing on those polls were clearly set out.

In addition, when references were made to other relevant factors (including President Trump’s popularity ratings and the campaign positions of certain candidates), they were factual and informative.

### 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

The clear aim of this piece was to analyse the wider implications of recent political events in the US. There was nothing that came across as particularly anti-Trump or pro-Trump. While it was concluded that the divisions in US politics were getting wider and more polarised, this was driven entirely by fact-based discussion.

### 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

The implications of recent political developments were carefully spelled out for both Democrats and Republicans. Given how large President Trump looms in current US political commentary, it was particularly noteworthy that this piece explored the risks and opportunities facing both major parties as they deal with populists within their ranks and manage the pressure to abandon the political centre and embrace their ‘true believers’, rather than simply focussing on the President and the GOP.

### 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

At all times, the language and tone of the piece was explanatory and informative, and avoided any cheap shots, inflammatory attacks or effusive praise.

A reference to President Trump not just rewriting the political rule book but ‘burning down the library it was stored in’ was a good example of how writing can be colourful and engaging without being partisan or judgemental. Both Donald Trump’s supporters and detractors would agree he

rewrote the rule book, and the language serves not to judge that process but to point to the magnitude of it.

Despite Democrats winning both elections discussed in the article, John made a point of exploring negative consequences for the party in the outcome as well as the downside for Republicans.

Phrases like “(the Democrats) should not be getting carried away thinking this points to a major comeback” and “For Republicans, there are also some unsettling conclusions to be drawn” demonstrated a determination on John’s part to explore the complexity of the situation and draw out useful deeper analysis for the ABC audience.

## Conclusion

This article ticks all the boxes for ABC analysis that is fair, fact-based and insightful and adds depth to the coverage of recent developments in US politics.

## Item 3: “Can Wesfarmers dig Bunnings out of its UK hole, or is it better just to bury it?” by Stephen Letts

This article explores the problems Wesfarmers has experienced since expanding its hardware empire into the UK market.

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

The article is driven by examination of the available evidence. After analysing the latest financial results of Wesfarmers’ UK hardware business (write-downs and operating losses), it provides a short history of the company and its guiding philosophy and then compares its experience with that of its prime competitor, Woolworths, highlighting both similarities and differences.

### 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

The headline poses the question (whether Wesfarmers’ strategy will succeed or fail), and this approach of asking tough questions and avoiding simplistic or blinkered replies is consistent throughout the piece. Stephen Letts assembles a wealth of evidence to indicate that the Bunnings operation in the UK is in trouble. He looks at the economic performance of the group, he compares it with earlier predictions, he describes the generally pessimistic response of media reporting in the UK and quotes retail analysts predicting doom and gloom. Driven by the weight of demonstrable evidence, the article is clearly suggesting this may well be the most likely outcome. But Stephen also includes several quotes from the company itself putting its case for why success is still possible. He also sets out the dire recent experience of Wesfarmers’ major competitor and pulls no punches in analysing its own failures.

Rather than assemble this evidence before delivering his final opinion to readers, Stephen chooses instead to present and analyse the evidence and then leave others to assess it and draw their own conclusions. This makes the piece stronger and doesn’t add ABC opinion into the mix.

### 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

There was an appropriately wide examination of different perspectives in the piece, as outlined above.

### 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

It is interesting to compare the tone in this piece with the tone in item 1, to see the impact that humour can have in leavening any sense of opinionated judgement.

The piece is colourful and entertaining. It refers to company reporting season as “confession season”, calls Wesfarmers’ statement a “clumsy trip”, refers to Woolworths’ Masters experience as a “debacle” and manages to weave in a reference to barbed-wire canoes at the end.

However, the impact of these phrases is not to make the piece seem adversarial, largely because they refer to events which are universally accepted as having been problematic – Wesfarmers itself has acknowledged their UK experience as a mistake they need to learn from.

## Conclusion

This piece is a good example of ABC analysis which is impartial and informative, without being dry or pulling its punches. In a highly readable way, Stephen has set out the size of the challenge facing Wesfarmers, provided some background on the company’s history and philosophy and, while making it clear how badly the venture is currently performing, also finds time to draw useful comparisons with the competition and point fairly to the company’s stated belief that it can turn things around.

## Item 4: “SA election: Liberals show strength in adversity to break electoral drought” by Simon Royal

This article analysed the outcome of the South Australian state election, where the Liberals won power after sixteen years in Opposition.

It looks at the implications for the Liberals, Labor and for Nick Xenophon’s SA Best party.

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

The piece drew all its conclusions from the actual election result, tying its key observations back to what happened at the polls and adding historical data for context. Whenever conclusions were drawn (“it is impossible to overstate the importance of this win to the Liberals”, “losing this election will not destroy the Labor Party”, the result was “a huge disappointment for Mr Xenophon”), they were clearly tied back to the facts.

### 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

The focus of the piece was on assisting with understanding. One of the most valuable things ABC analysis can do is place recent events in a historical context, and Simon does this by teasing out patterns and conclusions from the last 50 years of political results. Wherever broad conclusions are reached – ‘perhaps political disorder is not the new normal’, ‘it’s an achievement Labor has hung on to so many seats, the Mount Gambier result was ‘an oddity’, these are either preceded or followed by evidence and explanation. There are no signs that information has been selected to serve a thesis, but rather the other way around: all results have been fairly considered, placed into historic context and then teased out. The result is an excellent summary of the South Australian political situation, particularly for those outside the state reading it on the ABC’s national website.

### 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

Major implications for the three key parties are given adequate time and space.

### 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

There are no tone issues with this piece. One technique to note, used to great effect throughout, is to use open questions or speculative language to raise issue for consideration, rather than making assertions.

For example, Simon says that *perhaps* political disorder is not the new normal, or *perhaps* South Australians are just a bit contrary. He describes something as *telling* but leaves readers to assess for



themselves just how telling. Finally, the phrase *'it appears'* is employed three times in the last few paragraphs as Simon teases out his observations.

The advantage of using words in this way is not to pull punches or lessen the impact, but to invite the readers to involve themselves more closely and weigh up the information for themselves.

## Conclusion

A neat and informative piece of election analysis that draws out depth and insight from the weight of information explored.

## Item 5: “Barnaby Joyce has lost his moral authority within the National Party” by Andrew Probyn

This article was written during the controversy over the National Party Leader Barnaby Joyce. It appeared just over a week before Mr Joyce stepped down from his position as Leader, and a week after he had broken his silence and given an interview to 7.30.

The piece concluded that Mr Joyce’s future as leader was ‘doubtful’.

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

As the ABC’s Political Editor, Andrew was expected to provide analysis on such a vital, unfolding political controversy as the future of Barnaby Joyce. Rather than analyse the developments already on the public record, Andrew considered the situation by reference to Mr Joyce’s background and role in the party.

The demonstrable evidence in this case related to evidence of his status and reputation within the party as a maverick who commanded loyalty by being ‘genuine’ and ‘trustworthy’.

Reference was made to his demonstrated qualities as a leader and his determination to stand on principle (crossing the floor 47 times in his career), before turning to consideration of the impact of recent events on public perception.

### 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

The article did not prosecute a case (for example, it did not argue that Joyce *should* stand down as Leader of the Nationals), but rather it assessed the impact and import of a scandal currently in full flight and considered whether, when and why it might lead to Mr Joyce’s political downfall.

It is worth noting that Mr Joyce did, in fact, step down as leader just over a week after this article was published. Perhaps more significantly, the day after this article appeared, the Prime Minister described Mr Joyce’s behaviour as representing a significant error of judgement and called on him to consider his position.

### 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

Most notably, the article did not include any direct comment from Mr Joyce himself. However, it did embed Mr Joyce's 7.30 interview into the article and clearly link to it, providing ample opportunity for readers to see for themselves Mr Joyce's views on the controversy.

In terms of the key contribution of this piece, which was to provide important context on the nature of Mr Joyce's leadership, this included reference to the views of political insiders within the National Party as well as the perspective of the former Liberal Prime Minister, Tony Abbott.

I consider this to have been sufficient and appropriate, given the nature of the piece.

### 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

There is no doubt that this article passes judgement on Mr Joyce, in that it declares he has 'lost his moral authority', had an 'appalling outing' when he was interviewed on 7.30, and is a 'diminished political figure.'

I would, in most circumstances, counsel against using such judgemental and critical language in a piece of ABC analysis unless it is so clearly apparent to any reasonable observer that it can be seen as a statement of fact rather than a contestable observation.

In this case, the events that prompted the article were extraordinary and controversial, and they played out in the most public way as a significant national controversy.

It should be noted that, when explaining the limits of ABC-style analysis, the current guidance note observes that ABC journalists will "often draw upon immediate evidence and long experience to provide a combination of reportage and professional judgement or analysis within their stories. The example it goes on to provide is "an experienced political reporter describing a development as 'surprising', based on years of observing parliamentary process."

I would include Andrew's comments about the impact of the Joyce scandal in this category of analysis, particularly as the article does not go on to advocate for Mr Joyce's departure as leader, but simply concludes that it puts his future as leader under a cloud. To refer to events having diminished Mr Joyce's political standing and damaged his moral authority would seem to me to be beyond dispute.

The single line in the story where I suggest a different wording might have been preferable was the reference to the 7.30 interview as an '*appalling outing*'.

By carefully setting out the reasons why the interview further damaged Mr Joyce (it lacked contrition, there was no apology to his wife, etc...) Andrew makes a strong case for pointing out that it did Mr Joyce more damage and it may indeed have appalled some (if not most) viewers. But 'damaging' may have been a better word than 'appalling' to better reflect the facts of the matter and avoid the risk that some might see this as a suggestion that it appalled every single person who watched it – a conclusion that may not be the case.

## Conclusion

A sharp and well-argued piece which provided useful context on the impact of this controversy. Taken as a whole, this piece met the ABC's standards on impartiality.

## Item 6: “You don’t need to be a father to stand up to abusers. You need to believe women” by Julia Baird

This article reflects on recent events surrounding the “MeToo” movement, and in particular on the view expressed by some men that they appreciate the issues facing women better because they have daughters of their own. It was a piece commissioned in response to controversy over remarks by the actor Matt Damon.

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

The article begins with a personal reflection based on Julia’s past experiences living near a red-light district and observing behaviour first hand. However, it quickly moves on to reference recent events internationally that relate to sexual harassment and sexual assault of women, including the well-known and well-documented cases of Bill Cosby, Bill O’Reilly and Harvey Weinstein.

Julia also refers to public comments from observers and commentators including Matt Damon, E. Alex Jung, Abigail Shirley, Jess Dweck and Tippi Hedren.

All the key points of analysis made in the report flow directly from the demonstrable evidence presented, rather than from her own personal experiences. I will deal with the relating of personal experiences in a later section of this review, but in this instance their inclusion did not undermine the impartiality of the analysis.

### 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

The article addresses a specific issue, which is the challenges facing women who report sexual abuse or sexual assault, and the difficulty they face in being heard.

In particular, the article goes on to engage with recent reported comments by actor Matt Damon, and to question the notion that men who have daughters are better able to understand or relate to the issue.

All the evidence collected and presented in the article is in support of these key points, and they are significant and relevant additions to the prominent public debate on this issue. There is undoubted merit, and ample evidence, for much of this, and it adds a dimension to the debate which is important.

### 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

It is crucial to an understanding of this piece to appreciate the context in which it was written. Matt Damon's comments, which are referenced in full in the piece, had led to a strong and uniformly negative public reaction, most notably on social media. This piece was commissioned from Julia by News to provide context and explanation for this reaction.

The reason that is important is because the article includes the following observations:

- "The idea that men can simply say "Yeah I get it, I have a daughter" in response to shocking accounts of abuse has this week been rightly exposed as trite and pat."
- "This is especially true when men aren't also saying "I have sons — I need to work out how to teach them to respect women, and I recognise that will be bloody hard in this world."

When I first read these comments, long after the article had been written, I took them as general statements about men and their attitudes. This was especially true of the second statement, which can be read as an assertion that men do not talk about their sons in relation to respect for women.

If they are understood as general statements about male behaviour, then (as the "Not All Men" campaign makes clear), there are counter arguments and alternative perspectives which need to be acknowledged in the interests of fully exploring all sides of a complex issue.

However, the reality is that the piece was providing context and explanation for a current quite specific controversy, where a famous actor had been criticised for his comments and Julia's piece was unpacking the reasons for the strong and uniformly negative response.

With that in mind, it is clear that the statements highlighted above are specific to the circumstances that prompted the article. Damon had made comments that reference his daughters, there had been no mention during the controversy of comments involving sons, and this was being unpacked in order to explain and contextualise the response Damon's comments received. In that context, an appropriate diversity of perspectives was achieved by referencing Damon's comments in full and then analysing and contextualising the reaction by reference to recent and more historical contexts.

This illustrates an important aspect of ABC analysis. While our guidelines talk about the importance of weighing up evidence and considering key relevant perspectives, analysis can serve as a 'deep dive' into one specific (and sometimes overlooked or underexplored) aspect of a longer and more complex issue.

The issue of the sexual abuse of women is a significant and ongoing one, and not all analysis needs to cover all aspects of that issue.

If this piece were a general article about the role of men in dealing with the issue, then it would have been appropriate to include a wider range of perspectives, including the views of those men who *do* talk to their sons about respect for women. However, in the context of specifically analysing the reaction to Matt Damon's comments, Julia's piece included the key perspectives it needed.

One note of caution, though, is that ABC analysis can and does remain available online for extended periods, and the necessary context can sometimes be lost. It is often helpful to consider ensuring that headlines and other supporting information ensures the origin and nature of the piece remains clear over time.

To a casual reader who accesses this article some time after it was originally published, the headline ““You don’t need to be a father to stand up to abusers. You need to believe women”, when coupled with the first few paragraphs, doesn’t clearly establish the piece as an analysis specifically focussed on the reaction to Matt Damon’s remarks.

#### 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

The tone of this piece was broadly explanatory by setting out a range of recent (and not so recent) events and placing them into a context that helped explain the changing dynamic around sexual harassment and abuse.

### Conclusion

This piece met the ABC’s standards for impartiality and the guidelines on analysis. It was powerful and strongly worded, but in focussing on one particular episode in a long-running issue, it included an appropriate range of views and served to tease out and explain the background to explain the nature of that episode.

## Item 7: “Jacinda Ardern: For female PMs, having a baby is an offence only rivalled by not having one” by Annabel Crabb

This article discusses the challenges facing female politicians who have children while in office (and in particular, female Prime Ministers).

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

This is an interesting article to discuss because, although it is making a serious point about the dual standards affecting women in politics, its primary means of making that point is humour.

This needs to be kept in mind as a number of statements which are in the form of absolute declarations of fact (having a baby while PM is “an offence”, male ministers have “never stepped into a supermarket”) are clearly meant to be humorous exaggeration and reasonable and sensible readers would understand that to be the case.

To the extent that the article draws on examples and information to make its point, it does indeed rely on demonstrable evidence. There are references to past situations involving Ros Kelly, Anna Burke, Tanya Plibersek and Julia Gillard, and references to specific comments and events.

### 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

As a piece about current politics, even a humorous and light hearted one, the article seeks to raise important issues and is therefore required to be primarily focussed on assisting with understanding rather than prosecuting a case.

I believe this piece achieves that by avoiding definitive assertions and instead raising broad concerns that few, if any, could possibly disagree with.

For example, the piece points out that for women in public office childlessness raises as many issues as childbearing in office, and in ways that they do not arise for men. Annabel provides examples of that by the experiences of Tanya Plibersek to those of Christopher Pyne. However, the article does not suggest this is always the case for every mother and every father in politics, and in fact goes on to make the point that things are changing on this front and it is no longer unusual for female MPs to take maternity leave or for male partners to be primary caregivers.

The thrust of the piece is to suggest that this issue is evolving and that Ms Ardern’s experiences will become part of a long history of change .



### 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

Although Annabel didn't gather specific identifiable perspectives from politicians or interest groups, she sought and included a range of nuanced examples to provide diverse perspectives. For example, one female politician was criticised for working while she was the mother of young children, while for another some years later the issue was the lack of availability of parental leave for her male partner.

The article also made the point that, like Ms Gillard before her, Ms Ardern would most likely face criticism that was legitimate and warranted as well as unfair attacks.

By avoiding definitive statements about particularly contentious matters and couching the analysis in more careful language "if there is a lesson... let it be this", her pregnancy will add "a layer of scrutiny to what was already a tricky job", as well as ending with a plea to focus on the positives in the situation, the requirement to seek out and present diverse perspectives is not as strong: these observations are designed to add depth and understanding rather than advocate for a course of action.

### 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

The tone in this case is, as discussed before, essentially humorous and disarming, and there is no sense in the piece that Annabel is advocating for a cause, other than the generally accepted position that women, like men, should be able to have both a job and a family. Rather, she is pointing to the obvious contradictions facing female leaders and the silliness that can lead to.

## Conclusion

Although unusual as an analysis piece for the ABC as it uses humour as its primary tool, there is nothing in this piece that breaches the standards around opinion and analysis, and its net effect is to increase understanding of a significant issue.

## Item 8: “America tears down its racist history, we ignore ours” by Stan Grant

This article analyses the controversy over calls, both in the United States and in Australia, to remove statues or take other steps to adjust our historical remembrance of past events.

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

The noteworthy issue to examine here is the extent to which the personal history and experience of the author – an Indigenous man – feeds into the analysis and whether this risks turning an analysis piece into something closer to personal opinion.

Certainly, Stan makes it clear that he has a very personal perspective on the matter. It is declared and explored explicitly. After describing the Captain Cook monument in Hyde Park and the inscription which declares him to have “*discovered* this territory, 1770”, Stan goes on to point out that his own Indigenous ancestors were living here when this alleged ‘discovery’ took place.

However, acknowledging one’s own perspective and views in a piece of analysis does not, in my view, turn it automatically into opinion. (This issue is explored later in this review). If the article becomes a vehicle to justify that personal perspective, gathering evidence *selectively* to support that perspective, then it is clearly opinion. But if personal views are tested and balanced by reference to relevant demonstrable evidence then it may well be that the piece, in both structure and intent, is impartial analysis, and the declaration of a personal perspective does not get in the way of impartial analysis.

To that end, having declared his personal perspective. Stan Grant proceeds to accurately set out the nature of recent events in the US, provide examples of problematic historic monuments and references in Australia (Coxs River, the War Memorial) and examine a range of views on the issue, from those who want change to those who want things left as they are and who warn about the risks of ‘clinging to historical wounds’.

Describing the dilemma as a ‘bracing question’ for Indigenous people, Stan concludes by questioning whether some middle ground might be possible, where controversial statues remain but descriptions are corrected or updated to more accurately reflect what many now see as the facts.

## 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

The central purpose of the piece is to call for people to think more deeply about the central issues, rather than a prosecution of a case.

Even though Stan was writing as an acknowledged Indigenous voice in the debate and even though he concluded by suggesting a way forward, that way forward was set out as a middle path that wrestled with and resolved the genuine conflicting tensions around acknowledging the past, and moving on from past wrongs, while also correcting the record. In other words, transparently acknowledging and refining history rather than tearing it down.

Even in drawing that conclusion, Stan presented it as more of a question than a declaration ('what could be more apt than to correct'), a style of writing which encourages nuance and consideration rather than partisan conclusions.

## 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

Apart from declaring his own starting perspective and referring in a critical way to some of the partisan posturing around the issue, Stan relies in the main on more thoughtful academic perspectives, and here he is careful to draw out an appropriate diversity.

He balances the views of the black writer Ta Nehisi Coates with that of journalist David Rieff and finally the more nuanced thoughts of French historian Ernest Renan. In each case, the aim is to deepen debate, through the genuine exploration of a range of perspectives.

## 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

Throughout the piece, the tone is carefully reasoned, thoughtful and inclusive.

## Conclusion

This has been a challenging piece to assess, as it has been traditionally considered anathema to impartial journalism for the writer of a piece to declare a personal view. There have long been those who would argue that the sign of a good piece of impartial journalism is that the reader could not possibly guess what personal views the journalist writing it may have.

This still holds true in many situations, but when it comes to considered and thoughtful analysis, I believe it matters less whether one declares a perspective born of the author's status, and more how that declaration is handled and what impact it has on the way the article is constructed.

I will examine this question of how personal experience and views can best be incorporated into impartial ABC journalism later in this review, but for now it is sufficient to conclude that, in this case,

I believe the article met the ABC's requirements for impartial analysis by ensuring that Stan's personal situation became a stepping-off point for a piece of careful and fair analysis.

## Item 9: “Royal Commission into banking: The inquiry that could kill the Government” by Ian Verrender

This article analyses the (then) upcoming Royal Commission into banking, examining the reasons why it may be necessary and the likely outcome.

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

There is an interesting balance struck in this piece.

On the one hand, it is liberally peppered with inflammatory and judgemental language – banks’ profits are ‘bloated’, with ‘rampant profiteering’, ‘fee gouging’ and ‘blatant’ disregard for the law.

Under normal circumstances, this kind of derogatory and opinionated language would mark a piece down as anything other than impartial.

However, it is noteworthy that this flamboyant language is merely the precursor to a careful, fair and detailed summary of quite damning evidence.

For the most part, the evidence comes from a summary prepared by a former Deutsche Bank analyst of recent problems and issues facing Australian banks and are summarised in reasonable detail by Ian in his piece. He even provides the balancing view of the evidence that ‘Australia’s banks are among the world’s best behaved’, but the overall weight of information presented in the piece strongly supports the central conclusion of the analysis, that the fundamental principle of accountability justifies the need for an inquiry. Ian rests his case on the weight of evidence rather than on his eye-catching language. For example, facts like the \$1 billion in fines and compensation paid by Australian banks, and the 55,000 breaches of terrorism financing laws by the CBA are crucial elements in the analysis.

### 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

This article could be interpreted as intended to prosecute a case rather than to understand an issue, the ‘case’ being the argument for a Royal Commission.

However, given the timing of publication (just days before the Commission was announced, and after it became apparent that manoeuvring within Government ranks made such an outcome almost inevitable), I believe it is more properly understood as an exploration of how and why a Royal Commission had become inevitable.

### 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

Ian's piece includes the views of those who continued to argue against the need for a Royal Commission into the banks, both in the article itself and in related news coverage provided in prominent links.

One omission from this report, however, is a voice from the banks themselves, defending their activities or arguing against the need for a Royal Commission.

While the focus of the analysis was quite properly on the political debate around the need for a Royal Commission and in this sense a range of views are included or referenced, it would not have done any harm to include more clearly the view of the banks themselves.

### 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

This is the one area where the piece could have been improved.

It is beyond dispute that the piece is littered with highly judgemental language, as outlined earlier.

On balance, I am not convinced that this constitutes a breach of editorial policy as the analysis does not depend on this tone to convince – at all times, it rests on the weight of evidence, which is set out in some detail.

However, I think softening some language may have been wise, to avoid any sense that the piece was personal opinion. For example, the references to bloated salaries and massive bonus payments are not central to the argument about corporate accountability and demonstrated malfeasance, and lead to a perception of an anti-bank bias that the piece would be stronger without.

## Conclusion

The strong tone and excessive language of this piece does entail some perception problems and would have been better without it, but at its heart the piece relies on a fair analysis of the overwhelming weight of evidence in order to perform its primary function, which is to remind readers of the history leading up to and justifying what would turn out to be an inevitable Royal Commission.

## Item 10: “Steve Smith, there can be redemption. This is your challenge now” by Tracey Holmes

This is another unusual piece, in that it is structured as a hypothetical ‘open letter’ from Tracey to Steve Smith.

In it, she analyses his situation and considers whether the punishment he received fits the crime and whether he can rebuild his career and reputation.

### 1. It is based on demonstrable evidence.

There is actually very little evidence of any sort in this piece, which is less a piece of detailed analysis and more a musing on an uncontested state of affairs.

However, to the extent that it draws conclusions, they are based on a fair and impartial analysis of the plain facts of the matter – the ball tampering, the strong public reaction and the disciplinary action taken by cricket authorities.

### 2. It is intended to assist with understanding an issue rather than prosecuting a case but can include observations justified by the weight of evidence.

I don’t get the sense that this piece is prosecuting a case, but rather assisting with understanding by laying out why the whole affair has been taken so seriously by the public and the authorities, teasing out strands that explain its symbolic importance. Tracey utilises her professional expertise and long experience as a sporting commentator and journalist to analyse the situation.

### 3. An appropriate diversity of perspectives has been included.

Using the device of an open letter, Tracey has engaged with a range of perspectives, including that Smith should never be captain again, that he should never play again, or that the punishment has been too harsh.

### 4. The tone/language is more explanatory and reasoned than judgemental.

Throughout the piece, the tone was entirely reasonable and explanatory.

## Conclusion

Although this was an unusual piece in its construction and approach and more of a meditation on the nature of Australians' love of sport than a piece of detailed analysis, it was nonetheless moderate, reasoned and did not rely on strong advocacy of a particular perspective.



## Personal stories

As mentioned briefly in the discussion of Item 8 in this report (“America tears down its racist history, we ignore ours” by Stan Grant), there are issues to consider when ABC employees include their personal perspective or personal anecdotes in analysis articles.

Inevitably, as soon as a piece of ABC journalism includes a by-line, a certain amount of personal information or background is inevitable. Identifiable people may not come with an agenda, but at the very least they come with a gender, a name, often a geographic location and a history of previous stories they have filed.

The key factor to ensure compliance with editorial standards around impartiality is that identifiable ABC reporters do not allow their personal interests to improperly influence their editorial work.

For the most part, in straight news reporting, no references to personal situations, personal views or personal experiences are included.

In longer pieces – particularly online – personal context often arises, and it is these instances that I am keen to consider as part of this review.

To that end, I have selected three recent examples of highly personal ‘feature’ articles by ABC content makers. I do not propose to individually analyse them as I have with the other pieces, but rather to consider them as a whole and make some observations.

The articles are:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-26/richmond-fan-gets-afl-premiership-and-to-mount-everest/9664942> - Guy Stayner’s piece about his support for the Richmond Football Club.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-23/child-sex-abuse-royal-commission-one-of-the-lucky-ones/8296986> - Antony Funnell’s piece about his experiences attending a Catholic Church, and the implications of that on his views about the Royal Commission into institutional sexual abuse.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-15/same-sex-marriage-how-my-dad-changed-his-mind/9152518> - Jason Om’s piece about coming out as gay to his father, and the impact of that in the context of the same sex marriage debate.

The first piece is not connected in any way with a controversial or divisive issue, and so there is no need to spend much time on considering whether it undermines ABC impartiality. It simply relates a very human personal story about Guy and his son.

The second two pieces are more sensitive as they both feed into current controversial public issues – institutionalised sexual abuse on the one hand and the same-sex marriage debate on the other.

However, in both cases I do not believe that the authors are trying to use their personal experiences to argue a case, but rather to add to the richness and range of content available on a topic. In tone and content, both pieces are consistent with our advice that ABC contributions should assist

understanding of an issue rather than prosecuting a case, that they should have an awareness of complexity rather than an air of certainty.

In the case of Antony's piece about growing up in the Catholic education system, he relays his own personal experience (he was not abused and does not know of anyone who was) while acknowledging that this is not definitive, and he considers himself one of the 'lucky ones'. He also makes clear that as well as being exposed to brutality in the form of regular corporal punishment he was also left with a lifelong sense of Catholic social justice. He also acknowledges that corporal punishment was not only legal at the time but widely accepted across both private and government schools.

In the case of Jason's piece about his relationship with his father, he carefully explores the range of views in his own Asian family about his homosexuality and the broader issue of same sex marriage, as well as charting the evolution of his father's views. In doing so, time is taken to tease out and reflect the cultural and generational factors feeding into his father's approach. It is also worth noting the timing of the piece – it came after the vote was over but before the decision had been announced.

While none of these pieces are really 'analysis' at all in that they do not purport to factually and impartially examine a complex issue, neither are they 'opinion' in the sense that they use a range of information and personal views to prosecute a case. They are all consistent in avoiding the temptation to advocate for a cause but focus instead on providing a personal insight which has the effect of provoking thought and an understanding of the nuance and complexity in a situation.

Provided News is comfortable that the nature of these pieces is apparent to audiences through the way they are headlined, the tone and any other flagging or labelling, I do not believe they represent a threat to the independence, integrity and impartiality of the ABC provided such personal reflections are not used to sway or improperly influence consideration of the facts in our news coverage.

## Final Conclusions

None of the articles examined in this review breached ABC editorial policies.

Many of them provided valuable and insightful contributions to important areas of public debate, and they reinforce the value of encouraging experienced ABC journalists and content makers to use their skills and experience to provide impartial analysis for ABC audiences.

However, in considering all the articles in this review as a whole, a few areas of risk emerge:

- The tone and the language used can often lead to problems. One of the most common observations made in many guides to good writing is that ‘adjectives and adverbs are not your friends’. When you are writing analysis, adjectives and adverbs can often be a lazy way of trying to convince your audience of the power of your work or the accuracy of your facts, rather than letting the facts speak for themselves. It is far easier, for example, to say a politician behaved appallingly or a certain decision was rash or foolish than to set out the facts and the context clearly and allow the audience to draw the obvious conclusion. In many cases, a piece of writing full of judgemental adjectives and colourful adverbs is one that relies on assertion and rhetoric rather than facts and analysis. The result is a piece that is less powerful.
- It is important to properly and fairly represent all the relevant views that you include in your analysis. Even if the weight of evidence leads you to suggest that a view is weak or unsupported, it is still important to properly and fairly characterise that view. Bad analysis sets up straw men in order to knock them down: good analysis explores key perspectives with fairness and clarity and the result, once again, is a stronger and more compelling piece.
- If you are intending to include a personal perspective in a piece of analysis, it is important to think very carefully about why you are doing that. If it is to add strength to an argument you want to make, then you are heading towards writing opinion rather than impartial analysis. On the other hand, if you subject your own experiences or preconceived view to the same kind of scrutiny and analysis as all other factors (as Stan Grant did in his piece discussed earlier), then you are on much safer ground.

A great deal of attention and angst is often focussed on coming up with a simple definitional difference between what is “opinion” and what is “analysis”.

Part of the problem is that the word “opinion” in general use outside the ABC is attached to everything from a highly prejudiced and fact-resistant view presented in a polarised and partisan way, to a carefully considered and factual ‘professional opinion’ of the kind presented by a doctor or a lawyer after carefully weighing up the information in front of them.

This leads many people to suggest that ABC employees should be seen as providing ‘professional opinions’ where they carefully consider matters and then set forth their views and conclusions as strongly as they like. In this view, anything less would involve ‘pulling our punches’.

This is a mistake, as it ignores the fundamental need for impartiality. No amount of expertise or experience relieves an ABC journalist of the obligation to be impartial in their analysis, rather than inserting their own views, no matter how considered those views are.

In summary, while there will always be a degree of case-by-case judgement on all aspects of analysis articles (how much context is required, how many views need to be included, what kind of language can be used, etc...) there are two fundamental principles which, if observed, will almost always keep ABC journalists on the right path:

### **1. INTENT**

Why are you writing the piece? If the aim is to advocate for a cause or a position, then you are almost certainly heading in the wrong direction. Advocacy is a task for opinion writers. ABC analysis aims to sift through the evidence and start a conversation, rather than end one.

### **2. PROCESS**

Having satisfied yourself that your intent is the right one, then make sure your process is right too.

It is a process that involves setting aside your own views and experiences (even if you start by openly acknowledging those views and experiences) and impartially exploring the evidence. Along the way, that evidence will allow you to draw connections, explain situations, provide context and the weight of that evidence may also lead to certain inescapable conclusions, conclusions which are fact based and incontrovertible. It is a process that involves being fair to all perspectives along the way.

By following these two fundamental principles, ABC analysis will build the public's trust in our journalism by delivering independent and impartial contributions to the nation's debate.