EDITORIAL REVIEW 21

COVID-19: Source Patterns & Case Studies

CONTENTS

An assessment of a selection of ABC coverage from 30 March to 29 April 2020 for representativeness and quality, to answer the following question:

Would the selected content have equipped a reasonable person to make up their own mind about the issues covered?

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In March and April 2020 as the COVID-19 public health emergency shut down much of the economy and people went into lockdown, information hungry Australians turned to mainstream media and particularly the national broadcaster. ABC News digital, iview, *The Drum* and *News Breakfast* all surpassed previous audience records, while other television news and current affairs shows recorded their strongest results in years. The COVID-19 crisis also dominated ABC talk radio networks across the country.

From the popular *Coronacast* podcast, to the 24/7 rolling coverage on ABC News broadcast and digital platforms, to the daily touchscreen transmission rate graphs of Casey Briggs – the ABC provided comprehensive reporting and analysis.

In this unprecedented situation it was imperative for the national public broadcaster to meet its obligations to uphold the journalistic principles of accuracy and impartiality and maintain the ABC's independence and integrity.

The relevant ABC editorial standards state:

- *1.1 Maintain the independence and integrity of the ABC.*
- *1.3 Ensure that editorial decisions are not improperly influenced by political, sectional, commercial or personal interests.*
- *2.1 Make reasonable efforts to ensure that material facts are accurate and presented in context.*
- *2.2 Do not present factual content in a way that will materially mislead the audience. In some cases, this may require appropriate labels or other explanatory information.*
- *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.*
- *4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.*

This review is not a fact check of every story or interview, nor does it measure every piece of content against relevant editorial standards or consider production issues.

It examines source patterns and assesses the quality and thoroughness of selected content.

It provides a quantitative analysis of source types following the approach used in the Bridcut Review for the BBC Trust in 2007[1]. This measures the representativeness of sources - as a hallmark of impartiality.

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[1] BBC Trust (2007) From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century Report, UK.

And, taking an educative focus, it provides qualitative analysis through several case studies, including an examination of the differences in ABC News reporting in state coverage; differences in treatment between the ABC Melbourne and ABC Brisbane morning radio shows; relevant specialist content on Radio National; and ABC reporting of the launch of the COVIDSafe app.

1.1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The quantitative analysis of the sampled weeks and platforms showed a diversity of perspectives across ABC platforms.

While any inaccuracy in reporting is regrettable, no systemic issue was identified and given the scale and dynamic nature of rolling coverage, the standard of accuracy was good.

After considering the quantitative data and qualitative case studies, the reviewers concluded that overall, the selected ABC COVID-19 coverage was comprehensive, quality was generally excellent, and it would have equipped a reasonable person to make up their own mind about the issues covered.

There are some suggested areas for improvement:

- Care should be taken to ensure that the role of an ABC subject specialist journalist is not confused with that of an expert source or principal relevant perspective. It is important that the audience is always clear on the difference between the advice of a health, medical or science professional and informed reportage.

- Given the reliance on general reporters (as opposed to subject specialists) to contextualise events and provide analysis in support of national rolling coverage, refresher training on navigating the difference between facts, analysis and opinion should be considered.

- ABC staff are encouraged by management to be active on social platforms which raises the ongoing issue of the degree to which they can safely participate in debate on highly contentious subjects, like COVID-19, on personal social media accounts. Such activity requires careful judgement and the reviewers recommend further training on the personal use of social media.

- While there are air checks after broadcasts within teams and weekly catchups of content directors, it's worth exploring if there are ways good ideas can be shared more dynamically between capital city radio teams during major rolling coverage.

- While there is always a need to hear from a broad range of external expert voices, more can be done to ensure the best utilisation of in-house specialists during rolling coverage, ensuring they surface on mainstream platforms as well as on speciality programs.

2.0 IMPARTIALITY: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The core of this review is an examination of a selected subset of ABC content on three key COVID-19-related topics over three sample weeks. By analysing the sources and perspectives on these topics, the reviewers considered whether an appropriate diversity of views was provided to ABC audiences, in accordance with our impartiality standards.
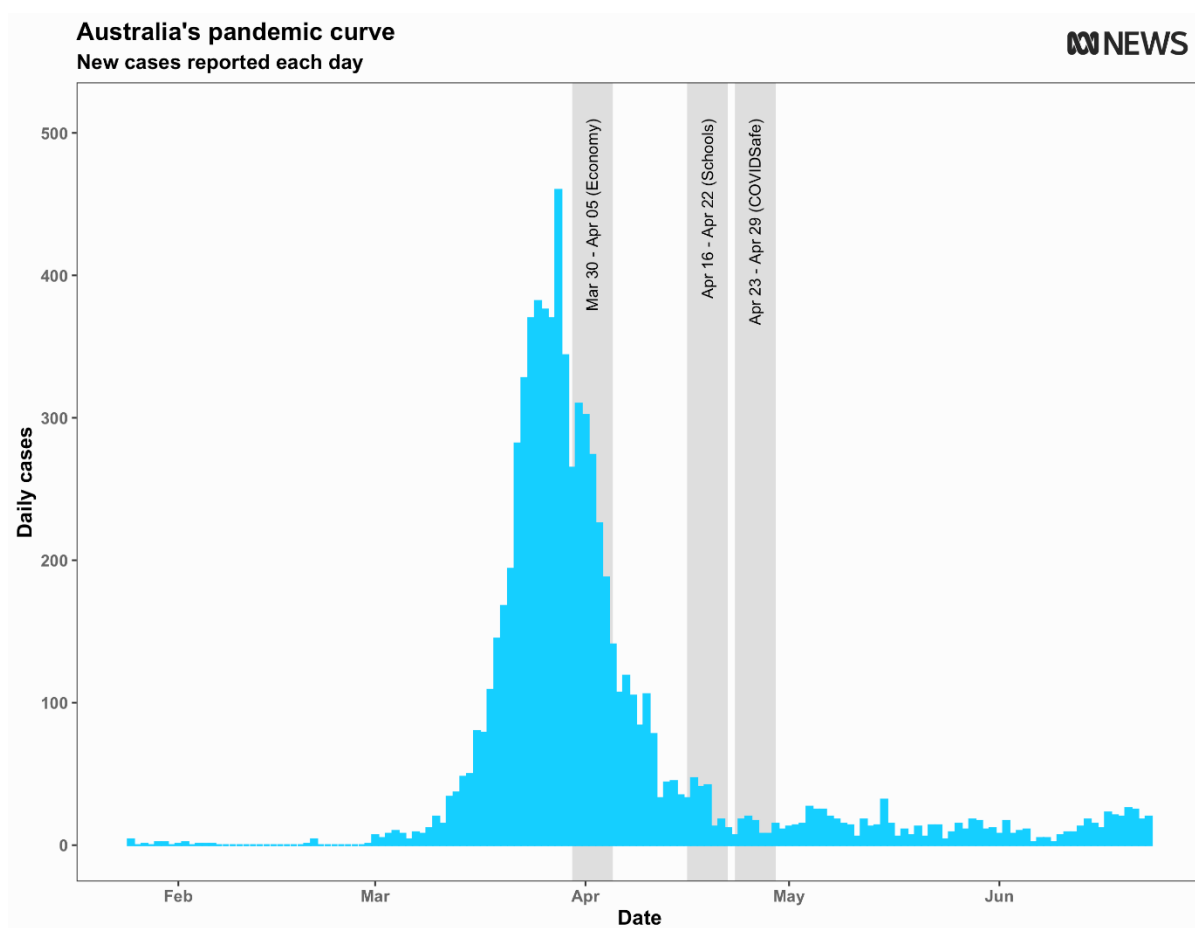
2.1 SOURCE TYPES METHODOLOGY

The quantitative analysis is based on over 230 pieces of content published across the three big content divisions of the ABC (Entertainment & Specialist; Regional & Local; News, Analysis & Investigations), on the following programs and platforms:

- ABC News digital (analysis and opinion) – News
- *AM* – News
- *News Breakfast* – News
- *7pm News* – News
- *7.30* – News
- *Q&A* – News
- *Coronacast* – E&S/News
- *Hack* – E&S
- RN Specialist Programs – E&S
- ABC Melbourne morning radio – R&L
- ABC Brisbane morning radio – R&L

Content was sampled across three weeks of coverage on the following topics and date ranges:

- Discussion about the economic cost of the shutdown, near the first peak of the national emergency (see figure 1) in the week of 30 March – 5 April 2020, when the Federal Government announced the JobKeeper program.

- The debate over school attendance, in the week of 16 – 22 April 2020, when national cabinet met to thrash out differences in policy.

- The launch of the COVIDSafe tracing app, in the week of 23 – 29 April 2020.

For further context, this graph maps the three sample weeks against Australia's Coronavirus transmission rate.

Australia's pandemic curve
New cases reported each day

ⓐ⃝ **NEWS**

(Daily cases axis: 0, 100, 200, 300, 400, 500; Date axis: Feb, Mar, Apr, May, Jun)

Shaded week labels: Mar 30 – Apr 05 (Economy); Apr 16 – Apr 22 (Schools); Apr 23 – Apr 29 (COVIDSafe)

Coding was carried out by five coders (the editorial policy advisor team) and the reliability of the coding was verified by a sixth member of the team.

Every report or piece of content on the week's selected topic, published on the platforms and programs in scope during the sampled weeks, was coded.[2]

Re-broadcasts of the same piece of content were not coded. Content duration was not a consideration and if a source was used multiple times within the same story, the source was coded once.

An ABC journalist was counted as a source when they provided analysis rather than delivering a 'straight' report.

A total of 233 stories were coded with ABC News digital accounting for the largest number of stories in the sample, followed by *News Breakfast* interviews.

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[2] For clarity: programs falling in scope which did not address the week's selected topic were not coded. To illustrate: one episode of *Q&A* was broadcast within each of the three sample weeks, but only the 30 March episode was coded, because it dealt with that week's selected topic (the economic cost of the lockdown). The 20 April episode was not coded because it did not cover the schools debate, and the 27 April episode was not coded because it did not cover the COVIDSafe app. As it happens, the schools debate was the main topic of the 27 April episode and the COVIDSafe app was the subject of a segment in the 20 April episode. It is important to understand that the coded sources do not represent the totality of the ABC's coverage of the selected topics, even within the specific programs/platforms falling in scope in the sample weeks.

TABLE 1: Number of stories by program and platform

Platform and Program	Number of stories	% of overall samples
ABC News online and opinion pieces – News	89	38%
AM – News	18	8%
Coronacast – E&S	2	1%
News Breakfast interviews – News	44	19%
7.30 – News	8	3%
Q&A – News	1	0%
Hack – E&S	14	6%
ABC Melbourne morning radio – R&L	15	6%
ABC Brisbane morning radio – R&L	21	9%
RN specialist programs – E&S	7	3%
7pm News – News	14	6%
TOTAL	**233**	**100%**

Of the three chosen topics 56% or 131 stories dealt with issues relating to the debate of the cost of the economic shutdown.

TABLE 2: Number of stories by topic

| Topic	Number of stories	% of overall samples[3]
Shutdown economic debate	131	56%
Schools debate	60	26%
COVIDSafe app	42	18%
TOTAL	**233**	**100%**

2.2 DISTRIBUTION OF SOURCES

Figure 3, Overall Distribution of Source Type – breaks down the 459 sources coded across the sampled weeks and topics, categorising them by type. Federal, state and territory politicians dominated at 28% collectively, with business and company sources the next most common source type at 11%. Journalists (ABC and non-ABC) also featured prominently at 11% collectively, along with academics and experts at 10%. Members of the public were coded as sources on 43 occasions or 9% of the total sample, roughly a third of the appearances by politicians and slightly less than journalists and academics.

The results reflect the nature of the COVID-19 health crisis and frequency of daily updates by federal ministers, state premiers and chief ministers. It is perhaps surprising that medical experts and chief medical officers only accounted for 6% of sources in the sample, but it's important to emphasise that this is a content snapshot and a reflection of the topics chosen for analysis which did not include the rate of

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[3] These percentages do not reflect the proportion of overall coverage the three topics received on the ABC; they only reflect the proportion of stories across the selected weeks which dealt with each respective week's chosen topic.

infection or the hunt for effective therapies or a vaccine. It does not purport to be an analysis of the ABC's COVID-19 coverage in its entirety.

Figure 3: Overall distribution of source type
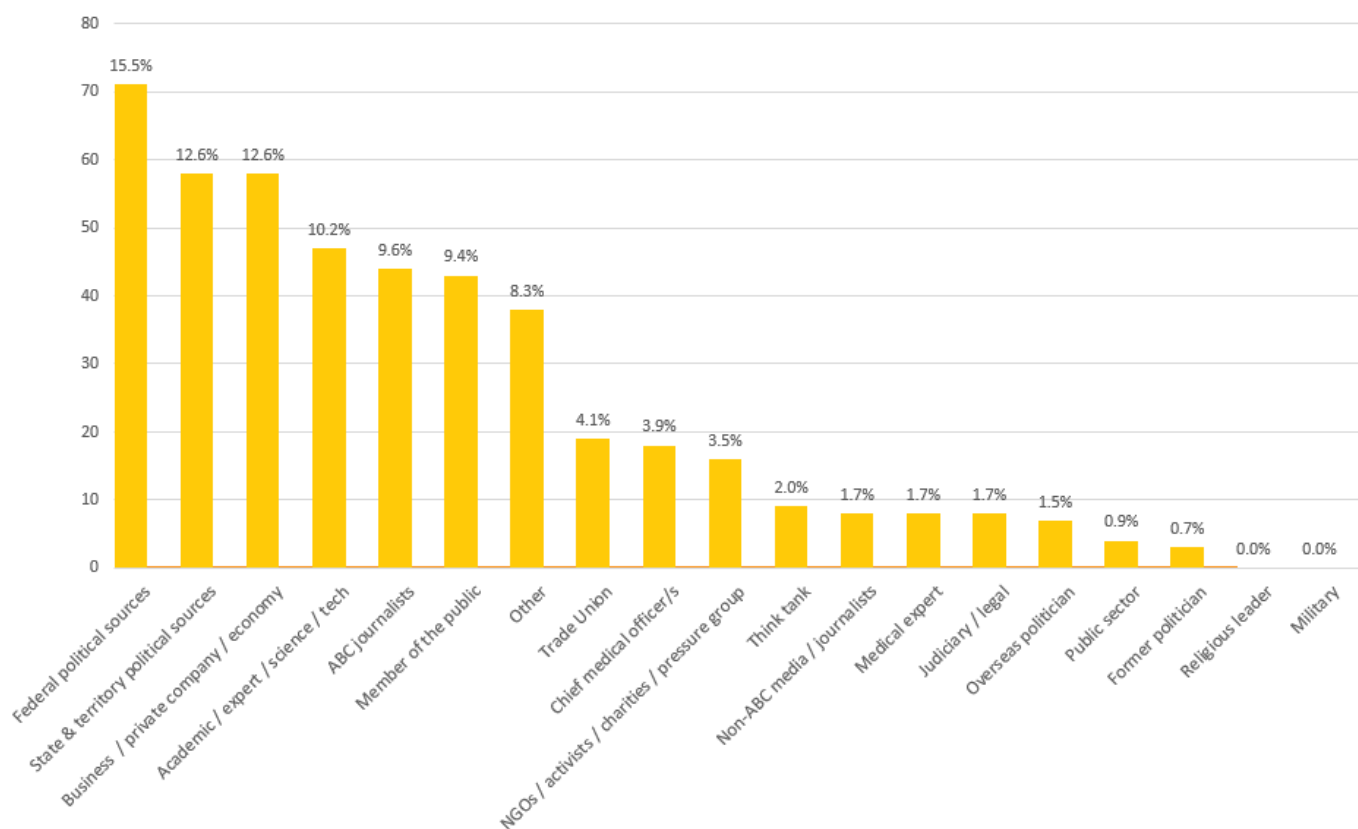
Overall distribution of source type		
Source type	Number of appearances	% of overall samples
Federal political sources	71	15.5%
State & territory political sources	58	12.6%
Business / private company / economy	58	12.6%
Academic / expert / science / tech	47	10.2%
ABC journalists	44	9.6%
Member of the public	43	9.4%
Other	38	8.3%
Trade Union	19	4.1%
Chief medical officer/s	18	3.9%
NGOs / activists / charities / pressure group	16	3.5%
Think tank	9	2.0%
Non-ABC media / journalists	8	1.7%
Medical expert	8	1.7%
Judiciary / legal	8	1.7%
Overseas politician	7	1.5%
Public sector	4	0.9%
Former politician	3	0.7%

Religious leader	0	0.0%
Military	0	0.0%
TOTAL	**459**	**100%**

Figure 4 differentiates political source types and shows that the Prime Minister was by far the most dominant single political source in the sampled content. This would be considered an alarming share-of-voice analysis in the context of an election campaign, but is more understandable in a national emergency, with the suspension of parliament/s and creation of a bi-partisan national cabinet.

In a similar vein **Figure 4** also shows that incumbency mattered across federal, state and territory jurisdictions as Liberal and Labor leaders went into crisis leadership mode. Opposition leaders and frontbenchers were used as sources far less in the sample period.

Figure 4: Most prominent types of political sources

- Premiers / Chief Ministers
- Federal Cabinet Ministers
- Prime Minister
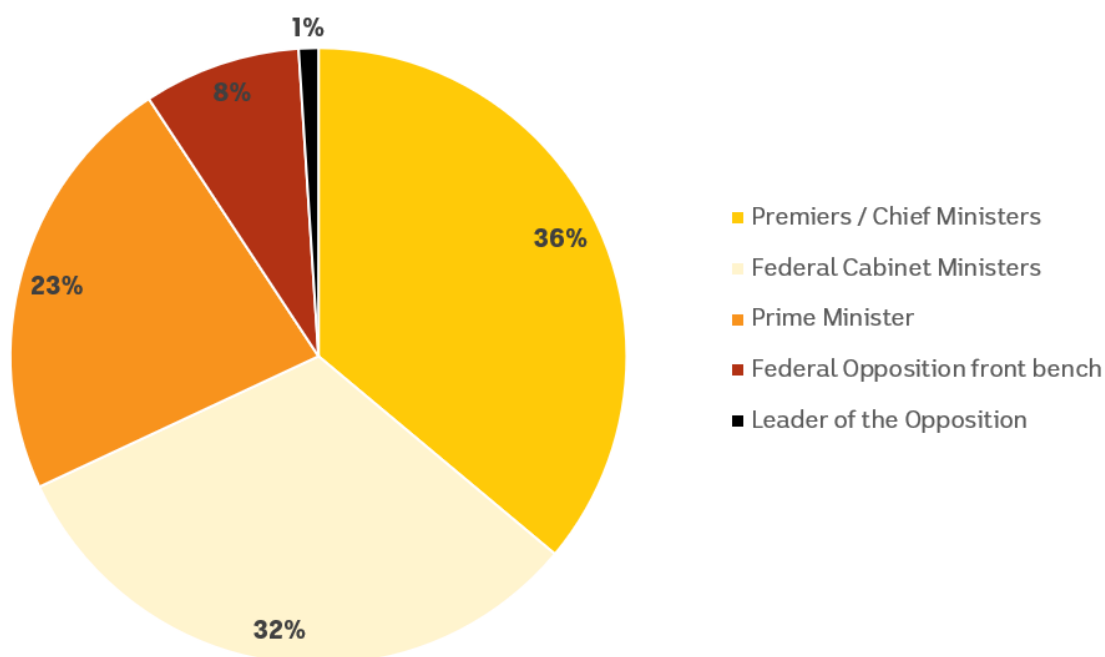- Federal Opposition front bench
- Leader of the Opposition

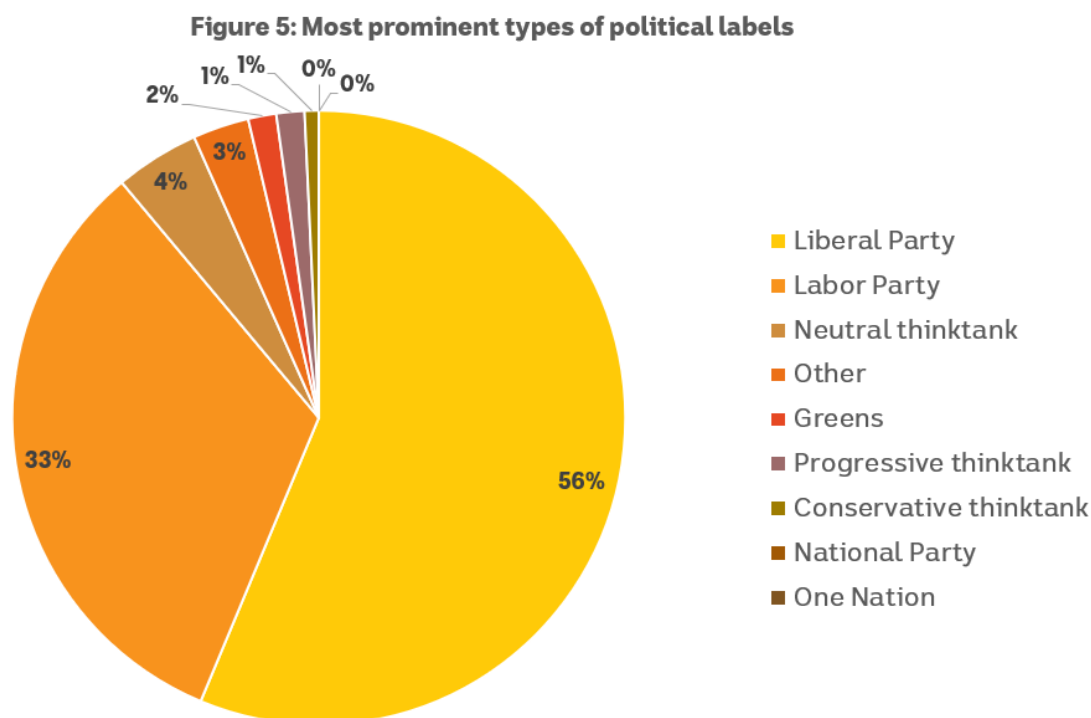**Figure 5** shows source types differentiated by the major political parties and reflects the prominence of the Prime Minister and federal cabinet ministers as live or quoted sources, along with Labor and Liberal state premiers and chief ministers. It is worth repeating that while there was no National Party source coded, the content sample represents only a small part of overall ABC COVID-19 coverage.

Figure 5: Most prominent types of political labels

Legend:
- Liberal Party
- Labor Party
- Neutral thinktank
- Other
- Greens
- Progressive thinktank
- Conservative thinktank
- National Party
- One Nation

Pie chart values: 56%, 33%, 4%, 3%, 2%, 1%, 1%, 0%, 0%

2.3 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS CONCLUSIONS

The data demonstrates a breadth of sources used across ABC platforms over the sampled period, with federal, state and territory political leaders dominating. The Prime Minister was the most used single political source. In stark contrast the Federal Opposition Leader scarcely registered in the selected content, though Labor premiers and chief ministers featured. ABC coverage reflected that adversarial party politics were largely set aside over this period, with source patterns demonstrating federal, state and territory oppositions were far less prominent.

Business, media and academic sources featured prominently, with medical experts and chief medical officers heard from less often over the sampled weeks on these particular topics. It was notable that business and economy sources were heard from as often as state and territory politicians, possibly reflecting the level of economic and employment disruption across the community, though it's important to note that the duration of relative contributions wasn't measured.

Members of the public were commonly used as case study sources in ABC coverage, and while they were only the sixth most featured source type, it should be noted that the 'other' sources category included parents and students who were interviewed.

Programs and platforms had different source profiles. *News Breakfast* was more reliant on journalists than other outlets; ABC Melbourne and Brisbane morning radio heard from more members of the public relative to other outlets; and ABC News online and *AM* featured more business and economy sources comparatively.

3.0 COMPLAINTS ANALYSIS

Beyond the quantitative analysis over the three selected weeks and three topics, and with the assistance of the ABC's Audience and Consumers Affairs team, the reviewers also considered the audience response to the ABC's COVID-19 coverage over March and April, specifically the nature of complaints received.

3.1 COMPLAINTS

Factual inaccuracy (103) and claims of bias (75) were the most common written editorial complaints relating to COVID-19 coverage lodged over this period. The Audience and Consumer Affairs (A&CA) unit investigated 79 of these complaints and referred 99 to content teams for their direct response.

Of the complaints investigated by A&CA, one was partly upheld (on accuracy grounds) and 22 were either resolved or resolved in part because the relevant content teams had taken prompt and appropriate action to remedy the cause of complaint. Ten of the resolved complaints were instances of multiple complaints from audience members in relation to three items of content.

The complaint that was partly upheld related to a 7pm News story: on 18 March in some states the news reported that Virgin Airlines had "grounded its entire international fleet" but failed to make clear that the decision had not yet taken effect. A correction was published on the ABC's Corrections and Clarifications webpage.

Summaries of all complaints upheld and resolved by Audience and Consumer Affairs are published on the ABC website.

Almost half of the editorial complaints of bias were allegations that a broad range of content was biased against the Federal Government. There were also claims of bias in relation to contributions of ABC presenter Dr Norman Swan and economist Professor Gigi Foster; both of these contributors are discussed in the case studies below. No impartiality complaints were upheld and one was resolved in part:

A video featuring Dr Norman Swan which was posted on ABC Online on 15 March, and the associated headline, was presented in an unusual format, stripped of the interviewer's questions, which did not provide sufficient context for Dr Swan's remarks. The content was removed, including the headline which described some of Dr Swan's remarks as a 'recommendation'.

The absence of any upheld impartiality complaints relating to COVID-19 coverage within the period tends to support the findings of the quantitative analysis. Had there been any significant viewpoints egregiously excluded or unduly favoured, it is likely this would have come to light via complaints from the audience.

4.0 CASE STUDIES

Alongside the quantitative analysis of content in the three sample weeks, and consideration of complaints dealt with by A&CA over the period, the final element of the review is a qualitative analysis of key themes and cases which emerged through

the coding process. The following case studies are intended as snapshots of notable issues which the reviewers regarded as worthy of review and discussion.

4.1 CASE STUDY 1: VIEWPOINTS ON THE COST OF THE ECONOMIC SHUTDOWN

During the first peak of the health emergency in late March there was some public commentary about whether the cure (the economic shutdown or lockdown) was worse than the disease.

Much of the debate about the efficacy of a national lockdown occurred outside the sample period but the reviewers considered whether ABC coverage had reflected this effectively.

In the review period *AM* interviewed AGL CEO Brett Redman, newly appointed Optus CEO Kelly Bayer Rosmarin and former governor of the Bank of England Lord Mervyn King who told the program it would be dangerous to assume that lengthy restrictions could be continued for as long as six months and governments needed to focus on developing a clear exit strategy. Professor Peter Collignon from the ANU Medical School was interviewed by *AM* and *7.30* calling for a balanced approach and warning against clamping down too hard too soon. These interviews were also posted online.

The specialist programs available on Radio National and as podcasts are intended to complement the ABC's day-to-day news and current affairs coverage of topical events. Often these programs are not reproducing the stories running elsewhere, including on the five current affairs programs heard on the network each weekday, but using their expertise to highlight other matters of importance within their subject areas. On other occasions however, teams will offer audiences deeper information and sharper angles on the leading news stories of the week.

Even prior to the government's stimulus announcements on 30 March, several RN programs had begun to consider the arguments for and against government intervention. These included *Between the Lines*, a program largely devoted to international politics. On 26 March, presenter Tom Switzer hosted a discussion on the pros and cons of intervention between Danielle Woods from the Grattan Institute and Simon Cowan from the Centre for Independent Studies. Ms Woods was more positive about the benefits of government 'largesse' (a word used by Mr Switzer) while Mr Cowan was more anxious about the long-term impact on the free market of untargeted support. He criticised French President Emmanuel Macron for suggesting that not one business would be allowed to go under, calling instead for more strategic and targeted support. Both speakers were concerned about the prospect of Coronavirus debt being left to future generations and in favour of allowing individuals to access superannuation to tide them over. Despite some minor differences in degree, this was a fairly comfortable discussion based on a shared agreement that large parts of the economy should be shut down for health reasons. Simon Cowan considered that the 'herd immunity' argument had been rightly put to bed, and that the 'significant health and social' benefits of taking the medical advice and locking down outweighed (if only temporarily) the potential for a significant recession.

Two days later, on 28 March, *The Economists* also looked at the issues around

stimulus packages. *The Economists* is a seasonal program on the RN schedule presented by Peter Martin from the Conversation and Professor Gigi Foster from UNSW. Professor Foster made headlines after her appearance on *Q&A* on 20 April, but she had in fact made the same controversial points on *The Economists* some weeks earlier.

Professor Foster's argument was that we had become too focused on the older people who would die from the virus, but that actually more lives, across all age groups, would be lost as a result of economic shutdown. She maintained that significant improvements to human health and welfare over the last century were attributable to significant increases in GDP and that economic shutdown would lead to poverty, which in turn would lead to greater mortality. It was her view that the argument we would need to trade 'lives for money' to survive this crisis was wrong. 'It's not lives against money, it's lives against more lives.' In response to a question from her co-presenter, she stated definitively that the cure was worse than the disease at that moment.

Although this caveat was often overlooked in the controversy, Professor Foster made it clear that older people should be kept at home out of harm's way ('we need to be aggressively targeting isolation'), while only the young and middle-aged stayed out in the world to keep the economy firing.

The Economists returned to this discussion about the value of human life in the following week, in their first program made after the stimulus details had been revealed. Surprisingly for some listeners perhaps, Gigi Foster burst out of the blocks to declare her support for the level of fiscal stimulus, on the assumption that it would be needed for only a short time to keep the economy ticking over and preventing the catastrophic decline in GDP she foresaw if we were shut down for too long.

The program had received correspondence in the intervening week from people accusing her of heartlessness. One person had written in to say that 'If Gigi Foster was looking after my bank account it would be great but I'd be dead'. This did not stop her from doubling down on her view that the old should be quarantined while the young went off to school and work. She argued that depressing demand and spending in Australia would have catastrophic consequences for workers in the developing world. The conversation also expanded to include the likely increase in domestic violence during lockdown and a general and expensive decline in mental health. The bulk of the program though was spent in discussion with two other academic economists explaining classical economic modelling and the assumptions it relies on (in the context of Coronavirus) which was very interesting. While challenging, these two programs illustrated the value of specialist shows offering a range of perspectives and working hard to draw a general audience into a complex conversation.

These and other contributions across various ABC platforms and programs demonstrated a diversity of perspectives and sources on the question of the cost of the economic shutdown.

4.2 CASE STUDY: NORMAN SWAN

No ABC presenter or journalist had the public profile of Dr Norman Swan during March and April. His *Coronacast* podcast, co-presented with science reporter Tegan Taylor, delivered record downloads for ABC News. On the web the purpose of the podcast was described as:

We break down the latest news and research to help you understand how the world is living through an epidemic.

Widely praised for his no-nonsense answers to audience questions and for his analysis on other ABC programs, he was also criticised for sometimes advocating approaches that contradicted the position of the Federal Government and for being alarmist.

On an episode of *Coronacast* on 13 March examining whether it was time to ban mass gatherings Dr Swan was critical of the Prime Minister's plan, later cancelled, to go to the football.
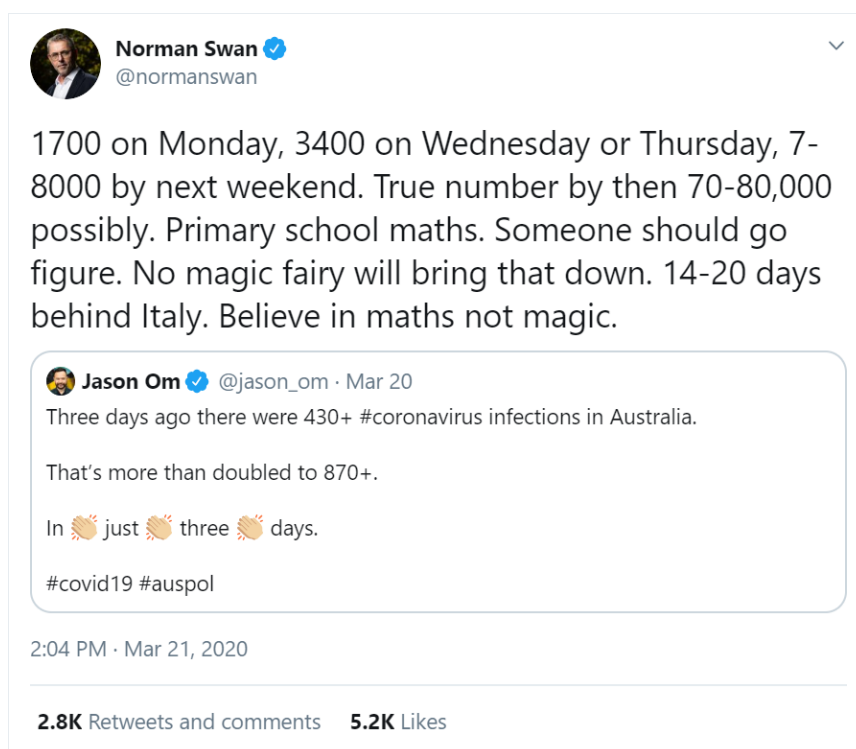
"He thinks that's fine and the answer is if you were to ask an Italian in Northern Italy when you were at 150 cases in Italy, what would you wish you'd done and what would you think if the Italian Grand Prix had gone ahead and various football matches would you actually have cancelled? What do you think the answer is going to be? It is outrageous that we're building yet again, basically we are spending money on the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff and we're not building the fence and our governments are losing credibility because they're doing stupid stuff.."

On 16 March during a *News Breakfast* interview when answering an audience question on whether schools should shut, he replied "*I have a personal view on this – there is no time to waste.*" He added: "*And my feeling is that to be blunt, we're dicking around, and we've just got to shut stuff around now.*"

Days later on *Q&A* he quoted Imperial College London modelling on flattening the transmission curve saying: "*...closing schools, in their model and they're one, some, of the best modellers in the world – actually had the biggest effect.*"

Dr Swan also told the *Q&A* audience that "*...the predictions at the moment, if this hockey stick doesn't change that much, is that we'll be out of ICU beds in New South Wales – Victoria will be behind that – by April 10th.*" Deputy Chief Medical Officer Professor Paul Kelly, who was also a program guest, disagreed.

On 21 March on his personal Twitter account he posted:

Norman Swan ✔
@normanswan

1700 on Monday, 3400 on Wednesday or Thursday, 7-8000 by next weekend. True number by then 70-80,000 possibly. Primary school maths. Someone should go figure. No magic fairy will bring that down. 14-20 days behind Italy. Believe in maths not magic.

> **Jason Om** ✔ @jason_om · Mar 20
> Three days ago there were 430+ #coronavirus infections in Australia.
>
> That's more than doubled to 870+.
>
> In 👏 just 👏 three 👏 days.
>
> #covid19 #auspol

2:04 PM · Mar 21, 2020

2.8K Retweets and comments   **5.2K** Likes

These examples represent only a fraction of Dr Swan's many contributions across ABC platforms and social media.

Eight complaints investigated by Audience and Consumer Affairs alleged that Dr Swan was either biased or inaccurate.

In response ABC News advised:

Norman Swan's expertise and experience as an analyst of medical policy is second to none in the Australian media. As with any experienced journalist commenting on his area of expertise, it is expected that he will explain the issues and comment, based on the evidence, on the likely outcomes of different initiatives and policies.

His analysis, therefore, did not unduly favour any particular perspective. Nor does it represent an editorial position by the ABC.

None of the complaints about Dr Swan's contributions were upheld by A&CA.

His commentary was certainly forthright at times, but his contributions were based on expert views about the likely effect of different responses to the pandemic. He was comparing Australia with the growth rate of COVID-19 cases in Northern Italy to demonstrate an alternative possible outcome, or he was quoting modelling – as in the case of Imperial College London.

Dr Swan acknowledged alternative viewpoints and didn't misrepresent them. He also acknowledged his errors, correcting misstatements on school closures in Hong Kong and the number of younger people in intensive care in Italy.

The ABC takes editorial responsibility in proportion to its control of the media environment in which it operates. Views expressed on personal social media accounts are subject to social media policy not editorial policy. Dr Swan's 21 March tweet, copied above, wasn't inconsistent with that policy or its standards.

Based on the evidence of what was published on ABC platforms and his comments in other media interviews it was evident he was acutely aware of the need for accuracy and the responsibility he had assumed.

In an interview in late March Dr Swan told The Guardian "*My role as a broadcast journalist is to analyse information and pass it on to the community.*" He added *"And also as a journalist to hold governments to account.*"

The reviewers agree. It would be inappropriate for the ABC to refrain from questioning the government's approach or to ignore other evidence-based views on alternative responses to the virus.

Another related issue was how ABC programs and platforms presented Dr Swan to audiences. In summarising its research on the complaints, the Audience and Consumer Affairs unit noted:

"*A&CA also considered language used by the ABC in framing these contributions and specifically whether Dr Swan was at times treated as a principal relevant perspective or as an expert rather than as a specialist journalist – a distinction which Dr Swan had himself emphasised in various items of content. A&CA noted that Dr Swan had been clearly identified and promoted by the ABC as a trusted voice on COVID-19 and this heightened the need to ensure impartiality and accuracy issues were carefully managed.*"

One example was in the introduction to a segment on *The Conversation Hour* on ABC Melbourne radio on 16 March, where he was inaccurately described as an 'expert' on Coronavirus. Dr Swan corrected the reference as soon as it was put to air, making it clear that he should not be referred to as an expert. The online version of the segment was corrected.

On another occasion a video featuring Dr Swan was posted online stripped of interview questions and with a headline describing some of his remarks as a 'recommendation'. ABC News acknowledged there was insufficient context and the content was removed.

The role of an ABC subject specialist journalist should not be confused with that of an expert source or principal relevant perspective.

4.3 CASE STUDY: BRISBANE AND MELBOURNE MORNING RADIO

Using the data gathered through the coding process of the quantitative analysis on source patterns the reviewers took a closer look at Brisbane and Melbourne morning radio over the three sample weeks, assessing the coverage for its quality and thoroughness. There were two immediate and overarching observations arising from this comparison. First, it became clear that even though the pandemic was affecting the entire nation, different effects were being felt at different times in different states. For example, the staggered school holiday calendars meant that community debate over school closures and e-learning peaked at different times. In Melbourne, the coverage was particularly intense in the fortnight after the sample period. Second, capital city radio is not a 'one size fits all' proposition. Over decades, the metropolitan stations have responded to the varying cultures in each city. In this particular

instance, it is relevant that ABC Melbourne has always had a pronounced big picture current affairs focus in the key Morning and Drive shifts, whereas Brisbane has been a little more laidback and more focussed on community angles.

4.3.1 WEEK 1: JOBKEEPER

The Brisbane and Melbourne local morning radio shows run from 8:30am to 11:00am, Monday through Friday. Brisbane provided intense coverage of the 30 March economic stimulus package over the first few days but then largely dropped the issue, while Melbourne's coverage was more consistent across the week with fewer segments overall but more evenly distributed.

There was a heavy focus in both programs on the impact of the wage support announcements for small business, particularly on tradies.

Brisbane presenter Rebecca Livingstone focused entirely on the business sector, speaking first to Amanda Rohan, general manager of Advocacy and Policy at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Queensland. Later interviews were conducted with the CEO of Flight Centre, Graham Turner and Ian MacFarlane from the Queensland Resources Council. The program also included an educative interview with Alan Kohler on the big picture, providing listener-friendly explanations of terms such as debt financing, stimulus, recession, and the potential effects of both the pandemic and the package on the long economic term outlook and on superannuation.

Morning talkback and text contributions were exclusively from small business owners struggling with the effects of the shutdown. At one point, the presenter encouraged a small business owner on the Sunshine Coast who wanted to expand his business but couldn't afford a loan, to ring the government:

My goodness, Russell. If you are a business that is looking to grow or expand or to take on employees, I would be making a phone call as high up the chain as you can be to get assistance with that because whether it is the Queensland Treasurer or the Federal Treasurer, they will want you to stay in business.

Overall, the program delivered a good range of interviews with peak bodies and large and small business owners, with the presenter clearly and genuinely interested in the effects of these governments announcements right into the grassroot edges of the business sector. While this led to some interesting insights, it might also have been valuable to talk to some employees, if not a union official or a relevant analyst about the potential knock on effects on workers of some aspects of the Government payment scheme. The reviewer also noted that Graham Turner was not asked about his decision to stand down 3800 employees only days earlier.

In Melbourne Virginia Trioli opened on the Monday morning with this statement:

We'd like to hand the program over to you, you must have been in the situation for a number of days if not weeks now. Perhaps as an employee, but also as an employer. I have spoken to so many who have with tears in their eyes had to let their workers go and wondering whether they'd ever be able to re-employee them or get their business back on their feet again. What does this mean to you? Would you be able to call up your workers? Have you done that already and said, "Come on down I'm going to keep you on the books, we're going to somehow keep this business ticking over for some time."

During the course of the program she read out a number of listener texts on aspects of the package and took calls from two men in casual employment who were not able to claim JobKeeper and were already struggling to stay afloat.

On the Wednesday (1 April), the business-focussed interview was with Paul Guerra, the chief executive officer of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The focus was very much on how tradies were faring, whether as small business owners or sole traders, and questions covered not only the mechanics of JobKeeper but also some useful practical information on the rules for tradies working in private. Mr Guerra was also asked a question about potential profiteering by some of his members.

And, and what if some of our listeners then become aware of some gouging that goes on as a result of it? If all of a sudden, that service call doubles in price? Would that be a justifiable price increase, or should it, should we be watching out for that and reporting it accordingly?

This was a good example of an interview which was cordial without becoming cosy.

The following day featured a weekly segment with former Victorian state politicians from the Labor and Liberal parties, Bronwyn Pike and John Pesutto. The conversation was reflective but robust, traversing the ideological differences between the parties on the free market, economic stimulus, and personal liberties in a time of emergency.

4.3.2 WEEK 2: SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

The most substantial interview on school closures and virtual learning on Brisbane mornings was with outback mother Louise Brown who offered practical advice for parents looking for tips on managing online learning at home, based on her long experience on a remote property supervising distance education.

Across the week Brisbane mornings did not engage with the argument being waged elsewhere on the rights and wrongs of asking teachers to return to the workplace when other workers were not. Instead the program focused on what was happening on the ground in Queensland and aimed to provide audiences, particularly parents with practical information. The program did a very good job in this respect.

By contrast Melbourne mornings was more prepared to engage with the politics swirling around schools that week. Stand-in presenter Ali Moore spoke briefly to the David Howes, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Education. During a brisk interview about issues including 'vulnerable children', parental responsibility and the challenges of online teaching, Ali also asked about the rift between the state and federal governments:

It's a little confusing though, isn't it? Because it's been very clear in Victoria that if you can learn from home, you must learn from home. And the exemptions for that are vulnerable children or children of essential workers. And then you've got the Federal Education Minister saying all schools must be open.

Another interview with Scott Sweeney from Strathcona Girls School was practical for the most part, focusing on the best ways for parents to support Year 12 students studying for the VCE. The discussion centred on online learning and towards the end

there was a question about the apparent division between politicians which the interviewee largely deflected. More could have been made about the issues of equity and access.

4.3.3 WEEK 3: COVIDSAFE APP

On Monday 27 April the Brisbane morning show interviewed Australia's Chief Nursing and Midwifery Officer, Alison McMillan. McMillan was clearly one of the team of government officials sent out to talk up COVIDSafe and encourage downloads. This interview began with the app and then moved to the recent relaxation of lockdowns in many parts of Australia and fears that infections would begin to climb again as people got out and about.

Rebecca Livingstone's questions to Ms McMillan on the app were well-informed and incisive, and clearly posed on behalf of listeners wondering whether to download or not.

Who made it? Is it a private company or is it government?

How do you think it will help, uh, us stay safe from Coronavirus?

You have to give permission ... for [...] information to be used, which sounds good in theory. But hackers have managed to break into some of the most secure networks around the world. Why should people believe that this particular system is safe?

Is it a crime for the government to take that information?

In terms of the uptake, Alison, uh, 40% of Australia... that's about 10 million people you need to download this app and then leave it running on their phones.

Is it effective if the uptake is low?

When Singapore rolled out similar technology the uptake wasn't that high. Are there any other countries who are using an app like this?

Will the restrictions be eased more quickly if there is a high uptake of the app?

At the conclusion of the interview, there was a long call out to the audience asking them to ring or text with their views and experiences. One listener had already texted to complain that his phone was old and the app was killing his battery.

The program then ran a grab of the Queensland Minister for Health admitting on the *Breakfast* show earlier that morning that he would not be downloading the app until he was confident that the Federal Government had nailed the security and privacy issues around it.

On the back of this admission Rebecca introduced Dan Angus, Associate Professor of Digital Security at QUT and conducted another well-pitched interview, this time concentrating on issues around source codes, privacy and security.

During the back announce, Rebecca revealed that she had downloaded the app herself and asked again for calls (*'Will you download COVIDSafe? It's safe to tell me this morning'*).

There were apparently a lot of text messages received on COVIDSafe throughout the morning, with plenty of people making the observation that they'd already given up their privacy by using any number of other apps. Dave from Caloundra argued that 'at least this app requires access for altruistic purposes. People need to think a little deeper'. The range of views was quite broad, with some strongly in favour ('installing this app is a no-brainer'), others concerned about the app racing through their pre-paid plans and reinforcing their social isolation. Rebecca was chastised by a number for her own actions and felt the need to justify herself:

A couple of people this morning saying that they uh think I've done the wrong thing, but I'm listening to the healthcare experts, um... Thinking about the fact I have a lot of information online already, and I really want to do everything that I can, uh, to try and help track and trace people's connections.

Overall, it was an excellent example of a local radio program which added value to the story of the day with two solid interviews with well-qualified speakers and generated a lively but respectful discussion with the audience. Despite admitting that she had downloaded the app herself, Rebecca was genuinely interested in hearing from all comers and there was no sense of compromised impartiality.

Melbourne also went big on COVIDSafe that day, with Virginia Trioli leading from the opening moments:

The Federal Government wants you to download the COVIDSafe app, which will track if you've ever come into contact with somebody else who has an infection. So the question this morning: Have you downloaded that app? And if, like so many Melbournians, you got out and about over the weekend, and you want to be able to do so, do you then feel it's logical to download that app? Do you want be out in the community much more than you have been? Is that a safety device? Is that some way then of at least checking with a... You've come into contact with... Or, or maybe even passed on an infection unwittingly yourself? Love to hear from you this morning. It's a really divisive one.

I've downloaded it. And when I asked on Twitter last night "Are you?" I have to say that the overwhelming response that I got was "not a snowball's chance in hell of me downloading it," said many of you.

This sharper edge continued through the morning. Like Brisbane, Melbourne spoke to a software expert to explain how it worked and to comment on the privacy implications. Freelance mobile developer Matthew Robbins had been asked to come in after posting a long Twitter thread explaining his frustration at the Government withholding the source code, which had inspired him to get right in under the hood of COVIDSafe and find it for himself. Despite this impetus, his findings weren't anti-government enough for one listener who wanted to know whether Mr Robbins was being paid by the Coalition to spruik. ('I wish', he said.) Virginia reported that 'there was so much suspicion' in the SMS and phone calls that were coming in. After taking several of them, she wrapped up the segment with this:

Um, do be careful. It is called COVIDSafe. The name of the app. Do not go downloading some random app or any copycat app. COVIDSafe is the one if you want to download it and I'm not advocating one thing or the other this morning I'm simply saying what

I've decided as a citizen to do. Uh, and, and make sure that it does have the Australian government symbol there and insignia on it. And it certainly won't charge you to download. If anyone's asking for money to download that app run a million miles.

At several other points in the morning, calls were put to air for and against. There was no evidence that Virginia's own decision was either influencing or inhibiting her audience.

4.3.4 FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Both of these programs provided their audiences with valuable material on the three debates in question, complementing the news and current affairs reporting being produced elsewhere on the ABC. While Melbourne's coverage was perhaps more engaged with a bigger picture and was generally a little tougher, Brisbane's stronger focus on practical assistance was also effective.

While the content directors of each capital city station do meet regularly, the reviewers are interested in whether more could be done to sample content from each other during these periods when big national stories are running in order to learn from the strengths and limitations of the different styles.

4.4 CASE STUDY: NSW, QLD & WA NEWSROOM COMPARISON ON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Much of the controversy around returning to schools was played out at a state level. The schools themselves are operated by state governments and consequently in this area the unions and other stakeholders operate at state level. It was also noteworthy that the Federal Opposition was largely in lockstep with the government and made very few public comments on schools.

Consequently, the discussion mostly focusses on state coverage and in particular on NSW, Queensland and Western Australia. They have been chosen because there were some interesting differences in their coverage and, because of timing in relation to school holidays, the issue was more important in the relevant sample week (16 to 22 April) in those states than elsewhere.

The method is principally qualitative. The coding revealed a strong predominance of official voices and parents/students in the coverage.

For further insight interviews were conducted with the three relevant ABC state news editors: Andrew O'Connor (WA), Donna Field (QLD) and Mark Davies (NSW).

4.4.1 COVERAGE

On 16 April, school reopening was a national story. The PM moved the focus back to the states in his press conference that day emphasising that it was the responsibility of the states to determine their own schools policy, while he and the CMO reiterated the advice that schools should remain open. This was reported in the main TV news story from Canberra (Greg Jennett) without comment from other sources. The Prime Minister was also interviewed on *7.30* that night where the issue was discussed for more than three minutes.

By the end of that week there was relatively little debate among the different political parties and national-level stakeholders of the fundamental issue about whether most children should be kept from school. The debate and scrutiny moved on to the implementation of policies that had largely been decided.

From the 17th, the political issues relating to schools were predominantly covered at a state level. There were no national TV news or current affairs packages for the rest of the week on the schools issue. The data shows that the state premiers were by far the most dominant voices in reporting of the issues.

There were, however, some differences of emphasis between the states' coverage. In NSW the coverage mostly, but not entirely, consisted of announcements by the premier and some anecdotal stories of parents dealing with teaching at home. In NSW there was only one local package focussing on schools on the *7pm News* for the rest of the period. The coverage was predominantly on digital.

In both Queensland and Western Australia teachers' unions, the independent school sector and, to some extent, state opposition spokespeople and the AMA were more prominent.

At this time NSW was the epicentre of the outbreak with major running stories on the Newmarch nursing home and the Ruby Princess debacle.

In the estimation of NSW News Editor Mark Davies, education was not the main local COVID story in a context where deaths flowing from infections in nursing homes and from cruise ships were a daily occurrence. Those events were the subject of considerable controversy at state level and dominated the news.

Mark also felt that there was generally less controversy over schools than in other states and was content to allow the focus of most stories to be on practical information and the experiences of parents and students.

The degree of controversy was perceived to be higher in WA and Queensland than NSW. Queensland News Editor Donna Field noted that "people were passionate" in the community with differing strong views on whether students should go to school or not.

According to WA News Editor Andrew O'Connor, the expectation was that most children would go to school, but there was a strong sense of apprehension about the risk to older teachers.

It seems unlikely that that passion and apprehension was absent in NSW and anecdotal evidence from local radio and social would suggest it wasn't.

In all states there was plenty of scope to highlight the different views in the community and among stakeholders to create a sense of drama and controversy. In normal circumstances most news editors in most media organisations would embrace that. However, all three editors felt their primary responsibility during a national emergency was to provide authoritative information and to ensure any debate on public health matters was evidence-based and responsible.

For instance, Donna Field said that she felt it was important "to take the emotion out [of the debate]". Andrew said, "the public needed answers to substantive questions, not pyrotechnics".

This story is a good example of how WA treated the issues. The bulk of the story is dominated by the WA Premier and Education Minister explaining the policy of reopening, followed by an anecdote from a Year 12 student and finally, towards the end, criticism by the teachers union of lack of policy clarity and the difficulties of implementing the policy.

This Queensland story was similar, although it gave greater prominence to unions and the LNP opposition's criticism of the government for creating confusion and to the union's call to the public to keep their children at home if they could.

While it wasn't covered to the same extent, in NSW the criticism from unions was not ignored either. Ashley Raper's story for *7pm News* on 21 April included criticism of the complexity of the proposed arrangements by the NSW Teachers' Federation's Angelo Gavrielatos.

The teachers' unions were the main dissenters and critics of government policy at this time. There was very little partisanship on the issue, except to a small extent in Queensland. The only noticeable partisanship from governments was revealed in the willingness of Gladys Berejiklian and Peter Dutton to criticise the unions directly, which ALP politicians refrained from doing.

In addition to coverage of the political and policy debates among politicians, experts and other stakeholders, the state newsrooms and national teams, such as *7.30*, reported on the experiences of teachers and families from a wide range of backgrounds and localities coping with the demands of teaching children at home. A notable example was Lucy Carter's report on *7.30* on 21 April.

Another notable example was the reporting in Queensland of the problems of remote learning for disadvantaged families who couldn't afford internet access and computers. This story was prominent on the *7pm News* and News Online.

These reports added an important diversity of perspectives that contributed to understanding of the issues underlying the political and medical debates.

4.4.2 FINAL OBSERVATIONS

The larger debate between opening schools or closing schools had largely run its course by 17 April. There seemed to be something close to a political consensus that most but not all children should not go to school. Apart from WA where the AMA continued to argue for a more stringent policy than that adopted by the government, the public health debate in relation to schools was not prominent at this time in the coverage. Consequently, the focus was on implementation of the various state policies.

In the coverage, dissent on government policy came mostly from teachers' unions. The other important source of differing perspectives flowed from the varied experiences of students and their parents and teachers. This was mostly well covered. However, it is at least arguable that the coverage failed to fully capture the anger and dismay of some parents and teachers. This was partly a judgement of the relative news value of different aspects of the story and partly motivated by prioritising authoritative sources.

In times of national emergency, it is appropriate and not surprising that governments and their spokespeople have an oversized presence in media coverage. The highest priority is rightly to disseminate reliable information. The data shows that's what happened in this period on this subject. Other perspectives were presented and there was scrutiny of the governments' performance. But there remains a question of whether the range of community perspectives was duly presented.

4.5 CASE STUDY: COVERAGE OF COVIDSAFE APP

The final case study takes a closer look at ABC coverage of the COVIDSafe app to consider overall quality and thoroughness.

Covering the release of the COVIDSafe app presented challenges for journalists and other content makers. As a topic of news coverage, the decision by the Australian Government to design and build a contact tracing app was a complex one, with interlocking technical, legal, and epidemiological considerations.

The context of the COVIDSafe app is important to note: the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed since the review period; previous Government initiatives relating to digital health services (e.g. My Health Record) were controversial; and media outlets are increasingly criticised for lacking specialist reporters for stories that require them.[4]

International experience shows the development of a contact-tracing app is not an inevitable component of pandemic response.[5] Hindsight complicates the picture: at time of writing, the COVIDSafe app has identified six close contacts not already identified by manual contact-tracing methods.[6] Authorities maintain this is not inconsistent with the app being successful, as lower case numbers in Australia mean less to trace.

Coverage of the COVIDSafe app can be broadly described in three categories: privacy, efficacy, or procurement / governance concerns.

This snapshot is primarily concerned with digital coverage from the review period 24 April – 2 May.

Date	Event
27 March	Media reports on potential Australian app based on Trace Together
10 April	Google/Apple exposure notification framework (ENF) announced
14 April	ABC reports possible COVIDSafe app
26 April	Initial COVIDSafe release

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[4] Why the demise of specialist reporters is a loss for any democracy, The Conversation

[5] Australia has COVIDSafe. Here is how other countries are using contact tracing apps in the fight against Coronavirus, 28 April

[6] COVIDSafe app yet to trace useful number of unique cases despite second wave, SMH, 26 July

8 May	COVIDSafe source code released
12 May	Privacy Amendment (Public Health Contact Information) Bill introduced
13 June	First Google/Apple ENF apps released
28 June	DCMO Coatsworth rules out ENF incorporation for COVIDSafe

4.5.1 EFFICACY

Where efficacy was considered in early coverage it was often tied not to the app itself but to the broader idea, initially advocated by Government, that 40 per cent of Australians would need to sign up to COVIDSafe for the app to effectively augment manual contact tracing processes.[7] Later, the Prime Minister during the review period linked uptake of the app to easing of restrictions.[8] Most reports made reference to Singapore, which had previously aimed for a 75 per cent adoption target for their Trace Together app, and achieved a mid-May adoption rate of 25 per cent.[9] Figures from June indicate some 6 million Australians had downloaded COVIDSafe, pointing to a similar rate of adoption.[10]

ABC specialist reporters identified app-specific efficacy concerns from the day of its release.[11] In June, the Digital Transformation Agency released COVIDSafe testing data showing the likelihood of successful communication between two devices using the app ranged as low as 0 to 25 per cent under some conditions.[12] Despite this, some COVIDSafe coverage did not reference efficacy concerns. Some coverage, particularly of National Cabinet press conferences, accepted positive characterisations of the app without reference to efficacy concerns.[13]

Broader concerns with the rollout of COVIDSafe were also explored, with one Rural story noting difficulties in regional and rural uptake of the app, as its authentication required connection to a mobile data network.[14] Over the course of the review period, number of downloads became a central point of concern in political reportage, even as additional efficacy issues emerged.[15]

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[7] Coronavirus lockdowns could end in months if Australians are willing to have their movements monitored, 14 April

[8] National Cabinet to bring forward meeting on lifting Coronavirus restrictions, Prime Minister Scott Morrison says, 1 May

[9] Coronavirus: why aren't Singapore residents using the TraceTogether contact-tracing app?, 18 May

[10] How many people have downloaded the COVIDSafe app and how central has it been to Australia's Coronavirus response?, June 2

[11] COVIDSafe's effectiveness on iPhone in question as Government releases Coronavirus contact tracing app, 26 April

[12] COVIDSafe app tests revealed iPhone performance issues at launch that weren't shared with the public, 17 June

[13] Coronavirus Australia live news: Paul Kelly says COVIDSafe app 'fully functional' with all states, territories signed up, 13 May

[14] Remote Telstra customers unable to activate the COVIDSafe app, despite best efforts, 1 May

[15] Coronavirus app tracing capability not yet operational, despite 4 million downloads, 2 May

4.5.2 PRIVACY

Prior to the app's release, some online coverage noted privacy concerns but did not consider efficacy or procurement issues. "There have been some concerns about where app users' data will be stored and who can access it," a summary of a National Cabinet meeting stated, prior to the app's release.[16]

Privacy was generally a more prominent consideration in digital news coverage of COVIDSafe over the review period than efficacy or governance. This was not necessarily zero-sum: specialist reporters, which had pointed out efficacy issues from the day of release, also filed stories specifically dealing with concerns about privacy.[17] General coverage often did not include technical perspectives, limiting analysis of the app to political and medical sources.[18]

In the few opinion and analysis pieces published by News Digital over the review period, political or privacy concerns were more likely to be featured over efficacy or governance issues. The app was described as a "fascinating test" of Australia's supposedly anti-authoritarian character, or praised for its ability to force politicians to "put ideology aside".[19] Opinion and analysis content published over this period was notable for its lack of sources relative to specialist coverage, averaging one source per story compared to an average of five or six sources per story by a specialist reporter.

4.5.3 GOVERNANCE

The most concentrated reporting on COVIDSafe procurement and governance in the review period came from two stories, both published by the Investigations unit.[20] Even here, though, they were chiefly concerned with privacy – particularly, with the potential for user data to be accessed by Amazon. One story, published prior to the app's release, made reference to public service concerns around the app's tender process. Generally, issues such as scrutiny of the tender process and value for money concerns were not pursued in further ABC reporting, though some other domestic media later ran stories on this topic.[21]

4.5.4 FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Over the review period, the ABC's specialist coverage of the COVIDSafe app was exemplary on issues of efficacy and privacy. General coverage tended to favour

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[16] [All the key points from the Prime Minister's latest Coronavirus press conference](#), 24 April

[17] [Will the Government's Coronavirus app COVIDSafe keep your data secure? Here's what the experts say](#), 27 April

[18] [Government's Coronavirus tracing app released, Health Minister says misusing data could result in jail](#), 26 April

[19] [There's a lot riding on the Coronavirus tracing app — and not just the nation's health](#), 26 April; [The Coronavirus crisis is creating unusual allegiances as Australia fights to make it to the other side](#), 26 April

[20] [Australia's Coronavirus tracing app's data storage contract goes offshore to Amazon](#), 24 April; [Experts warn there are still legal ways the US could obtain COVIDSafe data](#), 28 April

[21] [Big bucks on open source COVIDsafe app](#), InnovationAUS, 6 May

privacy concerns and utilise fewer technical sources. Governance issues, such as procurement and ongoing costs associated with the app, were covered less often.

The complex nature of the COVIDSafe subject, combined with the information asymmetry prior to its release or the release of its source code, led to minor accuracy errors: two digital stories – one posted weeks prior to the app's release, and one contemporaneous with it – conflated Bluetooth contact logging with GPS location tracking.[22] These were swiftly and prominently corrected.

In future coverage of digital health service provision by government, the ABC might consider better ways of integrating its specialist reportage into broader news flows to ensure efficacy and governance components are addressed as well as privacy. The absence of technical perspectives in stories about technology should not be considered lightly.

Finally, a number of ABC presenters revealed to audiences their personal choice to download the COVIDSafe app, acknowledging alternative views and stopping short of advocacy. However, some went further on social media. Engaging in contentious debates on personal social accounts carries particular risks for high profile ABC staff and requires careful judgement. Further training has been recommended.

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ABC News Editors Mark Davies, Donna Field and Andrew O'Connor

Craig McMurtrie Editorial Director, July 2020.

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[22] Coronavirus lockdowns could end in months if Australians are willing to have their movements monitored, 14 April; Australia's Coronavirus tracing app's data storage contract goes offshore to Amazon, 24 April