

FED TOR AL POLICIES

Quality Assurance
Project 6:

**Accuracy
(Radio News)**

Final Report
March 2009

Advise. **Verify.** Review



ABC
Australian
Broadcasting
Corporation

Editorial Policies

The Editorial Policies of the ABC are its leading standards and a day-to-day reference for makers of ABC content. The [Editorial Policies](#) -

- give practical shape to statutory obligations in the ABC Act;
- set out the ABC's self-regulatory standards and how to enforce them; and
- describe and explain to staff and the community the editorial and ethical principles fundamental to the ABC.

The role of Director Editorial Policies was established in 2007 and comprises three main functions: to advise, verify and review.

The verification function principally involves the design and implementation of quality assurance projects to allow the ABC to assess whether it is meeting the standards required of it and to contribute to continuous improvement of the national public broadcaster and its content.

Acknowledgements

Director Editorial Policies acknowledges the work of Denis Muller, Project Manager, who has further developed the methodology created initially for *QA2: Accuracy* (April 2008). Thanks also to the team of reviewers who undertook the detailed checking processes. Jennifer Sterland, Editorial Policies Information Co-ordinator, was undaunted by the complexities of finding and processing the required data, and through her consistent professionalism she enhanced the effectiveness of the project overall. John Cameron, Director News, and Steven Alward, Head of Policy and Staff Development for the News Division, again gave the co-operation that makes these projects contributions to the continuous process of increasing the quality of ABC content.

This report is published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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Foreword

Radio news, preceded by the familiar Majestic Fanfare that is one of the aural fixtures of Australian life, is a staple of the ABC's service to the public.

This is the first of the Editorial Policies quality assurance projects to examine the accuracy of a sample of radio news.

The result is a positive one. In a sample of 128 items of domestic Australian news from November 2008, 91.4 percent were accurate for plain facts, and 93.8 percent were accurate for context. In this project, the project manager, a person with 40 years' experience in journalism, made draft findings, put them to the News Division, considered the News Division's responses, and then made determinations.

The exchanges between the project manager and News Division are reproduced in detail in Appendix I, partly to ensure fairness and rigor, partly to allow others to obtain the benefit of the discussion. Continuous improvement requires that the fruits of review be circulated and made routine. Views will differ in particular cases, but the ability to debate, consider and maybe reconsider is itself an aspect of quality assurance work in a field like journalism, where the product/service, news and information, is unique, and where a degree of subjectivity is inescapable .

Systematic analysis of the various factors that affect accuracy in journalism has traditionally been neglected, perhaps because of the sheer pace of media work, perhaps also because of the reticence of journalists to discuss in public the processes that go into making their very public product/service.

This project has yielded suggestions for further enquiry. The results indicate differences in the accuracy of radio news produced in metropolitan newsrooms compared to regionals, and on weekdays compared to weekends. However, the sub-samples of regional and weekend items were too small to be conclusive and a future project will explore them further.

Anecdotal feedback during this project confirmed some of the informal responses from outside the ABC to earlier quality assurance projects. Newsmakers and others with some connection to the items in the sample can initially be puzzled about what the ABC is doing in these projects. Quality assurance work like this is so unusual in Australia that it can take our project's reviewers some time to explain the aims and methods of the projects and eventually to get through to the relevant persons in order to do the necessary checking. Some people spontaneously express their surprise that a media organisation would undertake this kind of project. Over time, these reactions will diminish along with the novelty, especially if other media organisations undertake similar work as part of their own self-regulation. (The ABC would be pleased to share its methodologies.)

If other media organisations were to assess their accuracy with comparable methods and transparency, then fair comparisons between accuracy in the news service of the ABC and of other media organisations may become possible.

PAUL CHADWICK
Director Editorial Policies

Note by Director News

News notes the finding that there is a high to very high level of accuracy in this survey of radio news content. It is also noted that the level of "material inaccuracy" is under two per cent. Ideally, this percentage should be lower. The differences between the metro and regional findings, coupled with the comparison between weekdays and weekends, will be the subject of further examination.

JOHN CAMERON
Director News

Quality Assurance Project 6

Accuracy of Radio News – Final Report

March 2009

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I. Introduction

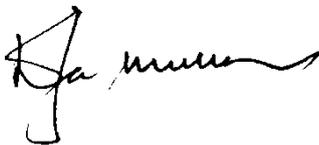
The Australian Broadcasting Corporation commissioned this firm in 2007 to assist it devise and implement a new system of editorial quality assurance. The system consists of a number of separate projects, of which this is the sixth. Its focus is on the accuracy of radio news. The methodology was devised by the Principal of this firm, Dr Denis Muller, in collaboration with the ABC's Director Editorial Policies, Mr Paul Chadwick. The implementation of it was carried out independently of the ABC by Dr Muller, reporting to Mr Chadwick.

This final report:

- contains an executive summary;
- presents the rationale, objectives and guiding principles for the project;
- describes the methodology, and
- presents conclusions and findings.

In accordance with procedural fairness, a draft of this report was circulated to News Division for comment. Those comments have been taken into account in arriving at the findings. The full response from News Division is included as Appendix I.

We thank the ABC for inviting us to participate in this very interesting and important work. We regard it as a privilege to be asked to assist the national broadcaster in strengthening its capacities in such a vital area. We are accountable to the ABC through Mr Chadwick for the proper conduct of this project. We would be happy to discuss this report through him and by arrangement with him at any mutually convenient time.



DR DENIS MULLER
Principal

March 2009

II. Executive summary

A. Scope and method

The scope of this quality assurance project was confined to plain-fact and contextual accuracy of items broadcast in ABC Radio news bulletins. It did not cover balance, fairness or impartiality, which have been treated separately in the ABC's Editorial Quality Assurance (EQA) program. The bulletins covered by this study were all produced by News Division. It is acknowledged that News Division produces content for multiple ABC platforms; this study was confined to radio.

The plain-fact and contextual accuracy of each item reviewed was assessed against the following scale developed for EQA Project 2 and subsequently adopted by News Division for its own purposes:

- Wholly accurate
- Substantially accurate
- Immaterially inaccurate
- Materially inaccurate

Each item was individually reviewed by two experienced journalists from outside the ABC. Their reviews were conducted independently of each other, and then compared by the Project Manager. Where the assessments were discrepant, he assessed the evidence presented by the reviewers and, where necessary, reviewed the item himself to arrive at a preliminary finding.

The reviews consisted of reading the transcripts from the broadcast and, where audio was available, listening to the items as broadcast and comparing their content with documentary source material referred to in the item or on which it was evident the item was based.

The items assessed were sampled from items on domestic Australian news prepared wholly within Australia, based mainly on identifiable documentary source material, and broadcast on six randomly chosen dates in November 2008, covering two weekdays (10th and 19th) and two weekends (8th-9th and 22nd-23rd). This allowed the sample to reflect quite accurately the actual distribution of news bulletins on weekdays and at weekends.

One hundred and fifty items qualified for inclusion and all were included. In the event, there were 22 items for which documentary source material could not be found or did not exist. These items turned out to be based instead on oral material, mainly personal or telephone interviews. In accordance with the methodology, these were eliminated from the study, leaving a final sample of 128. A future project could examine the accuracy of a sample of items from non-documentary source material or from a combination of documentary and non-documentary sources.

B. Findings

There is a high to very high level of accuracy overall in ABC Radio news items. As Table 2.1 shows, of the 128 items sampled, 91.4% were accurate for plain facts, and 93.8% were accurate for context.¹

TABLE 2.1: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 128)

Total accurate		Total inaccurate	
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context
%	%	%	%
91.4	93.8	8.6	6.3

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

¹ Throughout this report, four instances of material inaccuracy are referred to. One of these is provisional because the reporter was abroad at the time News Division was preparing its response, and could not be contacted for discussion. In the meantime, the finding stands.

Table 2.2 breaks down these percentages into the four degrees of accuracy used to assess the items. This table shows that of the 128 items sampled, 77.3% were wholly accurate for plain facts, and a further 14.1% were substantially accurate. It also shows that 78.1% were wholly accurate for context, and a further 15.6% substantially accurate.

TABLE 2.2: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 128)

Plain facts				Context			
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
77.3	14.1	5.5	3.1	78.1	15.6	4.7	1.6

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Table 2.1 also shows that of the 128 items sampled, 8.6% were inaccurate for plain facts and 6.3% for context. Table 2.2 breaks these figures down to show that 5.5% were immaterially inaccurate for plain facts, and 3.1% were materially inaccurate; 4.7% were immaterially inaccurate for context and 1.6% materially inaccurate.

Of the 14 items that were found to be inaccurate (either immaterially or materially), five were found to be inaccurate for both plain fact and context. In each case it was the plain-fact error that so altered the nature of the information conveyed that it inevitably created a contextual inaccuracy because it altered the essential relevance of the information to the audience, or created a false sense of alarm, or a misleading idea of the breadth of a problem or the reach of a solution. In other words, it placed the facts in a different light, or created a new context within which the listener would have assimilated the information.

The incidence of wholly accurate items in metropolitan bulletins is noticeably higher than in regional bulletins, as Tables 2.3 and 2.4 show.

TABLE 2.3: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR METRO BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 103)

Plain facts				Context			
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
83.5	8.7	5.8	1.9	82.5	12.6	2.9	1.9

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

TABLE 2.4: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR REGIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 19)

Plain facts				Context			
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
47.4	47.4	--	5.3	47.4	36.8	15.8	--

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

While the sample base for regional items is modest, it does indicate a real difference between accuracy standards in metropolitan and regional bulletins.

What is particularly noticeable about the regional figures is the relatively high incidence of items that are “substantially accurate” as to plain fact and context, and “immaterially inaccurate” as to context, when compared with metropolitan data. This suggests that in regional areas, journalists get it nearly right, but not quite right, somewhat more often than their metropolitan counterparts.

Findings for SERN/national² bulletins are based on a very small sample and therefore are indicative only.

² For an explanation of SERN/national, see Section 5.5.

TABLE 2.5: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR SERN/NATIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 6)

Plain facts				Context			
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
66.7	--	16.7	16.7	100.0	--	--	--

It is difficult to draw any conclusions about the accuracy levels of SERN/national bulletins from these figures. We would hazard that the accuracy profile of SERN/national bulletins probably more closely resembles that of metropolitan than regional bulletins because they are produced in metropolitan newsrooms. Against that (as is noted below) the incidence of inaccuracies in weekend bulletins is disproportionately high, so more work would be needed to arrive at any conclusive findings about SERN/national bulletins.

[Weekdays and weekends](#)

A comparison between weekday and weekend bulletins across metro and SERN/national categories shows that weekend bulletins contain a disproportionately high rate of inaccuracies: while accounting for 24.4% of total bulletins, they contain 50% of the inaccuracies.

C. Nature of inaccuracies

To assist in understanding the nature of the inaccuracies found, a typology was developed. There were five types:

1. **Imprecision:** Errors of fact; careless or ambiguous expression; failure to appreciate important distinctions or the actual meaning conveyed.
2. **Pushing it:** Nudging the facts so that an exaggerated sense of drama or importance is achieved.
3. **False alarm:** Creating a sense of crisis where none really exists.
4. **Oversimplification:** Paraphrasing or short-cutting that leaves out a material fact or distinction and thus alters the substance of the story as received by the audience.
5. **Unwarranted omission:** Omitting some information, resulting in an incomplete or misleading account.

These are the product of deep-seated operational and cultural factors in the profession. They can be influenced by the extent and quality of professional development and pre-publication review, among other things. Of course, these measures have resourcing implications, which may be particularly acute in regional newsrooms and at weekends.

In this study, as in EQA Project 2 (accuracy of radio current affairs content), we found no evidence of serious professional dishonesty: no flagrant misrepresentation, no invention of material. Nor was there any evidence of serious incompetence or recklessness of the kind that results in gross errors.

III. Conclusions

This study concludes that:

1. ABC Radio News produced by News Division and broadcast via metro, regional and SERN/national bulletins attains a high to very high level of factual and contextual accuracy.
2. The overall very high levels of accuracy mask some important variations in accuracy levels between metro and regional bulletins, and between weekday and weekend bulletins, with regional and weekend bulletins showing disproportionately high incidences of inaccuracy.
3. Because of the limited samples of regional and weekend bulletins, further investigation of this phenomenon is indicated.
4. The nature of the errors indicates that they were honest mistakes or examples of poor practices that are embedded in journalistic culture. There were no egregious lapses or instances of professional dishonesty.
5. Total reliance on documentary sources for assessing accuracy has provided a useful basis for this project, but assessments would be enhanced if assessors were able to speak with sources, if they deemed it desirable in the interests of obtaining a fuller appreciation of an item's accuracy.
6. As now, assessors should not make any contact with ABC journalists as part of the assessment process.
7. The additional step in this project of arriving at conclusive findings after a second exchange of draft findings with News Division has proved workable and useful.
8. As a result of this additional step, the following changes were made to the draft findings:
 - ◆ One draft finding of material inaccuracy was cancelled, and the item counted as wholly accurate. This change was made on the basis of persuasive evidence that the item in question had been based on accurate additional information obtained by the reporter from a source other than the documentary source.
 - ◆ One draft finding of immaterial inaccuracy was cancelled, and the item counted as substantially accurate. This change was made on the basis that the error in question was one of expression rather than meaning, fact or understanding, and would not have conveyed an inaccurate impression.
9. Consequently, the total number of inaccuracies was reduced from 16 to 14. Both reductions affected items in weekday metro bulletins, so made no difference to the general pattern of findings concerning regional and weekend bulletins.
10. The double-blind assessment system yielded highly reliable data, with inter-assessor congruence correlations of 0.85 on plain-fact assessments and 0.87 on contextual assessments.

IV. Rationale, Objectives and Guiding Principles

A. Rationale

The ABC aspires to the highest standards in all its work, and the standard of its news and current affairs work is of particular importance because of the large role played by the national broadcaster in the practical functioning of Australian democracy.

Of central importance to the health of any democracy is trust in those who wield public power. These include journalists and media outlets. That trust cannot exist without professional and institutional accountability. Although the ABC already has well-developed internal mechanisms of journalistic accountability, it is increasing its commitment.

The role of the ABC Director Editorial Policies includes the development of fair and rigorous methodologies to verify that content is meeting the standards required by the *ABC Act* and the ABC's Editorial Policies, and to contribute to continuous improvement.

B. Objectives

The objective of the project is to reliably measure, and report on, the performance, in respect of accuracy, of ABC Radio news, and to further refine the methodology for conducting this type of quality assurance project.

C. Guiding principles

All projects conducted under the Editorial Quality Assurance (EQA) program are guided by six principles.

Principle 1 – Respect for editorial independence

Section 27 of the *ABC Act* requires the ABC to develop and maintain an independent news service. The word “independent” is crucial both as a general principle and as a principle of particular application to this project.

Section 2 of the ABC's Editorial Policies gives independence the status of a key value in the ABC, applicable generally across the organisation.

Independence in the context of this project refers particularly to editorial independence. This is a contested term, having been interpreted by some outside the media as meaning journalistic licentiousness, and by others as an essential element of ensuring reasonable diversity of media content in a country in which the ownership and control of the commercial media is highly concentrated. Of greater relevance to the ABC is the concept of independence for the national public broadcaster from the government of the day.

From the ABC's Editorial Policies it is unambiguously clear that when related to the ABC's news service, the term means journalists must be able to make decisions on editorial content free from improper or undesirable influences:

Para 5.1.7 of the Policies states that news programs should depend fully on public funding. This means they are independent of commercial interests and pressures.

Para 5.1.6 refers, if somewhat obliquely, to the requirement that decisions on content be based on the professional expertise and judgment of staff and not on personal opinion.

Para 5.2.2 (d) states that editorial judgments will be based on news values, not on political, commercial or sectional interests or personal views.

From these the consultants have distilled what they conceive to be the essence of editorial independence as it relates to the ABC's news and current affairs programs:

From these we have distilled what we conceive to be the essence of editorial independence as it relates to the ABC's news and current affairs programs:

News and current affairs content will be decided by the ABC's professional journalists applying established news values and public-interest considerations, unconstrained by political, commercial, sectional or personal interests, and conforming to the Editorial Policies of the ABC.

This definition is broadly consistent with other definitions of editorial independence, for example *The Age* Charter of Editorial Independence.

The first guiding principle of this quality assurance project is that those conducting it recognise and respect the editorial independence of ABC journalists.

Everything done in this process is directed at strengthening that independence, not weakening it. For that reason it is considered of paramount importance that those carrying it out be accountable to the ABC's Director Editorial Policies and, through him, to the Managing Director, who is also Editor-in-Chief.

Principle 2 – Professional accountability

Journalists, including ABC journalists, should be accountable for the way they exercise their powers and meet the responsibilities that come with them. At the same time, mechanisms of accountability must not inhibit the proper exercising of editorial independence.

Principle 3 – Natural justice

The quality-assurance process must adhere to the requirements of natural justice. No adverse findings will be conclusively made until the program team concerned have had a full and proper opportunity to respond to any draft finding. That response will then be taken into account in arriving at conclusive findings.

Principle 4 – An educative focus

This is an educative and developmental accountability process, not a censorious or punitive one. Individual journalists' identities will not be used in association with the results.

Program-by-program results will be reported to the Director Editorial Policies in aggregate form. The purpose is to provide the basis for education and professional development across a program team, a Division and, where relevant, across the whole ABC. The purpose is not to single out individuals for criticism or praise.

Principle 5 – Reasonableness

Data will be assessed in light of what was reasonable to achieve in the circumstances, particularly by reference to the time or other practical pressures under which the material was gathered, produced and broadcast or published online.

Principle 6 – Transparency

The design and operation of the process will be transparent and made available to the relevant Divisions in advance of implementation.

V. Methodology

A. The overall process

This methodology was piloted in EQA Project 2, which examined the accuracy of three Radio Current Affairs programs, *AM*, *The World Today* and *PM*, and reported in April 2008. As was noted in that report, News Division raised some questions about the methodology, in particular the reliance for assessment purposes on documentary source material only.

This limitation was anticipated in the design and, to overcome it, a three-stage process was created:

Stage 1 consisted of the review based on documentary source material.

Stage 2 consisted of the presentation to News Division of preliminary findings, with an invitation to provide additional material and explanation.

Stage 3 consisted of a review of the preliminary findings, taking News Division's response into account, and the writing of a final report.

It was intended that Stage 2 would provide an opportunity for the review to look at material beyond the documentary source material, but without the intrusiveness that would inevitably be part of any system in which the reviewers contacted News Division staff.

In other respects, the methodology was considered to have worked sufficiently well to meet the research objectives. The grounds for this are set out in the April report.³

Similar procedures were followed this time, but with a further step. In the original project, the researchers made no findings in respect of the responses of News Division in relation to specific items said to be less than wholly accurate. The Division's response was simply summarised in the body of the report and reproduced in full in an appendix.

This time the Project Manager has made judgments, rather than leave it to the reader to do so. Having received News Division's response in Stage 2, the Project Manager made draft findings, giving reasons, about the accuracy or inaccuracy of the material in question, and returned this to News Division for further comment.

The draft findings were reviewed in the light of comment from News Division and amended. The amended findings were returned to News Division for final comment. This too was taken into account in arriving at the findings in this report, which are considered by the consultants to be conclusive. News Division's responses are published in full in Appendix I. Had there been an unresolved disagreement between the Project Manager and News Division, this would have been made plain in the Conclusions section of the report. No such unresolved disagreement arose.

B. Scope

The scope of this quality assurance project was confined to plain-fact and contextual accuracy of items broadcast in ABC Radio news bulletins across all networks served by News Division. It did not cover balance, fairness or impartiality, which have been treated separately in this EQA program.

The importance of factual accuracy and context, and standards for the assessment of performance in these matters, are to be found in Section 5 of the ABC's Editorial Policies, specifically:

Para 5.1.4: News records what is happening. Facts and context dominate.

³ Report of Quality Assurance Project 2: Accuracy, April 2008, pp 4, 5, 12 & 13.

Para 5.2.1: All news and current affairs content will be accurate . . .

Para 5.2.2 (c) (i): Every reasonable effort, in the circumstances, must be made to ensure that the factual content of news and current affairs is accurate and in context.

Para 5.17.1: The overriding objective for the ABC is to report the facts clearly, accurately . . .

For the purposes of this study, accuracy had two elements:

1. Plain facts: names, titles, dates, amounts, and so on.
2. Contextual accuracy: the fidelity of the broadcast material to the context in which the facts were presented in the documentary source material, and the use of facts in a way that does justice to the range of factual material available from the documentary sources.

Factual content is defined as:

Material which conveys bare information directly verifiable by reference to a source other than the item under investigation, and not containing explanation, interpretation, analysis, or opinion.

This definition is consistent with, although not exactly the same as, that used by the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

The study did not go beyond these boundaries. It specifically did not make judgments about the overall impression created by the item, nor did it make judgments about news value, interpretation, comment, tone or semiotics.

C. Assessment criteria

The plain-fact and contextual accuracy of each item reviewed were assessed against the following scale developed for EQA Project 2 and subsequently adopted by News Division for its own purposes:

Wholly accurate
Substantially accurate
Immaterially inaccurate
Materially inaccurate

These are defined as follows:

Wholly accurate: *No apparent errors at all.*

Substantially accurate: *No more than one apparent error which makes no substantial difference to the overall accuracy of the information conveyed.*

Immaterially inaccurate: *An error or errors that are not reasonably likely to result in harm to those directly affected by the report, a material misunderstanding among listeners, or damage to the ABC's reputation.*

Materially inaccurate: *An error or errors that make a substantial difference to the overall accuracy of the information conveyed in that it is reasonably likely to result in harm to those directly affected by the report, material misunderstanding among listeners, or damage to the ABC's reputation.*

It is recognised that there are varying degrees of harm. The threshold for the harm referred to in these definitions is that the harm would not be inconsequential. For instance, an inaccuracy may not harm a

company's share price, but it may be reasonably likely to cost the company considerable time and expense to rectify the effects.

D. Process of assessment

It is acknowledged that there is some element of subjectivity in the assessments, and the same system of inter-assessor reliability as was used in EQA Project 2 was used to minimise it.

Each item was individually reviewed by two experienced journalists from outside the ABC. Their reviews were conducted independently of each other, and then compared by the Project Manager. Where the assessments were discrepant, he assessed the evidence presented by the reviewers and, where necessary, reviewed the item himself to arrive at a preliminary finding.

The reviews consisted of reading the transcripts from the broadcast and, where audio was available, listening to the items as broadcast, and comparing their content with documentary source material referred to in the items or on which it was evident the item was based.

Reasonableness test

The assessment will use a reasonableness test, taking into account the following factors:

- How much time did the program team member/s have to prepare the report?
- At what time of day was the report prepared?
- How much prior knowledge about the subject was available to the program team member/s at the time of preparing the report?
- What was the status of that knowledge?
- How much expertise did the program team member/s have in the subject-matter?
- What steps were taken by the program team member/s to verify the facts?
- What constraints, if any, existed within the program for the ventilation of the item?
- If there were constraints, to what extent did they lie within the control of the program team member/s concerned?

The application of the reasonableness test does not mean that the existence of inaccuracies is ignored, unreported or excused, but that the circumstances in which they occurred are able to be described. This is an important aspect of ensuring that quality assurance projects produce results that can be fed back into continuous improvement.

News Division was invited to take any relevant element of the reasonableness test into account when responding to the preliminary findings.

E. Reliability

There was a very high congruence between the pairs of assessors, with correlations of 0.85 on plain-fact assessments and 0.87 on assessments of contextual accuracy. These figures show, as they did in EQA Project 2, that there is a high level of professional consensus on what constitutes accuracy and inaccuracy on the four-point scale used. They also show that the findings have a high level of reliability.

F. Database

The assessments were carried out on items broadcast in news bulletins produced by News Division and broadcast on Local Radio, Radio National and Classic FM networks.

The items assessed were sampled from items on domestic Australian news prepared wholly within Australia, based mainly on identifiable documentary source material, and broadcast on six randomly chosen dates in November 2008, covering two weekdays (10th and 19th) and two weekends (8th-9th and 22nd-23rd). As will be seen later, this allowed the sample to reflect quite accurately the actual distribution of news bulletins in any given week.

For sampling purposes it is important to keep in mind that this Quality Assurance project was directed at individual items of news. Therefore, the unit of analysis was individual items of news.

The arrangements for disseminating these items of news are set out in documents entitled *New Common Radio Spine of Bulletins* and *SERN Bulletins*. The acronym SERN means South-East Radio National. SERN/national bulletins refer to a news service that the ABC provides for Radio National and Classic FM listeners in regional New South Wales, regional Victoria and parts of regional Tasmania. This service is necessary because of the transmitter configuration in those areas. Importantly, these bulletins, which are produced mainly from the Adelaide newsroom, but also at times from the Perth and Sydney newsrooms, are also national (or 'bed') bulletins that are run on Radio National, Local Radio and Classic FM across the country at various times of the day and are available if there is a transmission or other problem relating to a locally produced bulletin.

Apart from bulletins provided specifically for triple j (which were not included in this study), there are three distinct categories of news bulletins, the content of which emanates from News Division:

1. Metro
2. Regional
3. SERN/national

The news content in these categories is shared across networks in many ways, a factor that was not relevant to the sampling of individual items, since it was the items and not the bulletins or networks that provided the unit of analysis for this study.

What was relevant about these categories was that they broadcast different proportions of news items from different sources within News Division. To look at the performance of this segment of ABC Radio news as a whole, then, it was necessary to include data from each category in a way that reflected broadly their contribution to the total. However, there was a complication. Regional radio has 47 call signs, and broadcasts via something like 50 stations (some call signs cover more than one station). The consultants were advised by News Division that most of these stations contributed locally generated content to their news bulletins. However, if all the regional stations had been included in this study, the sample would have become distorted by the inclusion of a very large number of bulletins for the sake of including local items from each one. It would also have made the sample unmanageably large.

For those reasons, in the regional radio category, a partly random, partly deliberative sample of call signs was drawn, followed by two other sampling steps common to all categories:

1. A sample of bulletins.
2. A sample of items from these bulletins.

Sample of regional radio

From a list of all 47 ABC regional radio call signs, seven were chosen using standard randomising procedures. Two more were then added to ensure a full geographic spread.

Sample of bulletins

Metro

There are eight capital-city newsrooms, one each in Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Darwin, Hobart, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. All were included to ensure a comprehensive national spread.

On weekdays, the main block of bulletins each week day are at breakfast, lunchtime, late afternoon and late evening. Of these, the 07.45, 12.00, 18.00 and 22.00 were the bulletins included in the study because taken together they carry a broad range of stories. Hence, it was intended to include 64 bulletins (4 bulletins x 8 newsrooms x 2 days), but in the event there were 63.⁴

In the course of assembling the sample of items, it became clear that there was considerable overlap in bulletin content among metros and between metro and regional stations. All such overlaps were eliminated.

Weekend Metro bulletins are confined to the period 06.00 to 13.00 each day. At other times, metro stations take SERN/national bulletins. On the bases of volume and spread of time, 07.45 and 12.00 bulletins on Saturdays and Sundays were included. Hence, there were 64 weekend bulletins (2 bulletins x 8 newsrooms x 4 days).

Regional

Each weekday, regional radio stations run a number of regional bulletins of five minutes' duration. One of the main bulletins is at 07.30 and this is the one that was included in the study. Hence, there were 18 bulletins from regional radio (1 bulletin x 9 stations x 2 days). At weekends, they take their news from the SERN/national bulletins, which are dealt with separately.

SERN/national

These bulletins fulfil two distinct functions. They are produced largely in Adelaide, augmented by some from Perth and Sydney. They provide a larger proportion of bulletins on weekends than on weekdays. They also provide the national news service to Local Radio and Radio National through the early hours of weekday mornings, as well as contributing to the news service provided through a number of regional stations in the SERN area (as described above) during weekdays as well as at weekends. During weekends, they provide the national news service to Local Radio, Radio National and Classic FM across Australia from 14.00 on Saturdays and Sundays to 04.00 the next day.

These characteristics warranted SERN/national bulletins being treated as a sub-category of their own in this study.

Weekday SERN/national bulletins were chosen on a time-of-day basis as well as on a volume basis, since these bulletins are unique in their time-of-day spread. There was also a geographic consideration, because although Adelaide produces most of them, Perth and Sydney also contribute.

The weekday SERN/national bulletins included were 03.00 (5 minutes, Perth), 07.00 (10 minutes, Adelaide), 12.00 (10 minutes, Adelaide), 17.00 (10 minutes, Adelaide), and 21.00 (5 minutes, Sydney). Hence, there were 10 SERN/national weekday bulletins (5 bulletins x 2 days).

Weekend SERN/national bulletins were also chosen on the bases of volume, time-of-day and geography: 03.00 (5 minutes, Perth), 07.00 (10 minutes, Sydney) and 22.00 (5 minutes, Perth) for each of Saturday and Sunday, plus 17.00 on Saturday and 19.00 Sunday (each 5 minutes, Adelaide). Hence, there were 16 SERN/national weekend bulletins (4 bulletins x 4 days).

The distribution of sample bulletins, by category, matches closely but not exactly the actual distribution of bulletins, as Table 5.1 shows.

⁴ On one evening Canberra did not appear to produce its own 22.00 bulletin.

TABLE 5.1: DISTRIBUTION OF BULLETINS, ACTUAL AND SAMPLE

WEEKDAY DISTRIBUTION				
Bulletin source	Actual		Sample	
	n	%	n	%
Metro	224	74	63	69
Regional	54	18	18	20
SERN/national	25	8	10	11
WEEKEND DISTRIBUTION				
Metro	72	73	64	80
Regional	--	--	--	--
SERN/national	26	27	16	20

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

This table compares the proportions of news bulletins in the sample (the last two columns) with the actual proportions. For example, 69% of the bulletins in the sample were metro, compared with the 74% that they actually constitute in the overall total of bulletins. This means that metro weekday bulletins were under-sampled by 5 percentage points. Weekday regional bulletins were over-sampled by 2 percentage points and weekday SERN/national bulletins by 3 percentage points.

Weekend metro bulletins were over-sampled by 7 percentage points and weekend SERN/national bulletins under-sampled by the same margin.

Sample of items

From the sampled bulletins, items were sampled on the basis that they were on domestic Australian stories prepared wholly within Australia and based to a significant extent on documentary source material.

In the event, 150 stories qualified for inclusion and all were included, so the sample size was the same as in EQA Project 2. As it turned out, in this project, the sample of items was in fact a census – that is, all qualifying items were included from a sample of bulletins that closely replicated the actual distribution of bulletins.

Because the items were drawn from what is demonstrably a representative sample of bulletins, it is valid for the purposes of this study.

In the event, reviewers found that some items either had not been based on documentary source material, or the documentary sources were impossible to identify and find. By the end, 22 items had had to be dropped for this reason, leaving a final sample of 128.

The wastage rate among regional stories (25%) was greater than among metropolitan stories (22%). However, the wastage does not materially affect the findings.

A further point is that a smaller proportion of weekend news items qualified for inclusion in the first place, there being fewer document-based items on weekends. Weekend bulletins tend to be filled largely by police-rounds stories – crimes, accidents and acts of God – and by sport. Many of the main weekday sources of news – parliament, the courts, executive government, business – dry up on weekends. These also tend to generate more document-based stories. Fortunately there was no wastage of SERN/national items, but even so the sample was very small and great caution should be exercised in drawing conclusions from the SERN/national data alone.

Running items

A running item is an item that develops during the day and is broadcast in materially different versions in more than one bulletin that day. Because these different versions contained different factual content, a proper assessment of the factual accuracy of the item required all these versions to be assessed. However, they remained one item for the purposes of the sample.

It followed that once an item had been included in the sample, all versions of it which contained materially different factual content, and were broadcast on the day selected for the study, had to be included, even if they were broadcast on bulletins that fell outside the sample.

It also followed that simply because a running item from a bulletin became drawn into the sample, it did not mean that that whole bulletin was drawn in, unless it was already in the sample. It was the accuracy of items, not of bulletins, that was assessed here.

To summarise: Once an item was in, it stayed in through all its materially altered versions, even if that meant drawing it in from bulletins that otherwise lay outside the sample. And it counted as one item, no matter how many versions were assessed.

G. Data analysis procedures

A simple count was done of items falling within each criterion of accuracy, and these are reported both in raw numbers and as a proportion of the total number of items from each category of bulletin.

Results are reported for each category individually and summed across all three categories as well.

In the event of an error recurring -- for example, in a running story where the error survived through more than one version -- the error was counted as one error, but the recurrence noted. To have done otherwise would have been to alter the unit of analysis from items to errors. One instance of a recurring error was found.

A different class of error arose in another instance, where a comparison between the script and the audio revealed that the newsreader omitted the word "to", altering completely the meaning of the sentence and making it wrong. This has not been counted as an error for the purposes of this report, since the item as reported was accurate, even if the process of broadcasting it was flawed. Once again, the instance has been noted.

H. Further procedures

The draft findings were circulated to News Division for comment. These comments were taken into account in reviewing the draft findings, and two changes were made, as described in the Conclusions section of this report. The revised draft findings were returned to News Division for further comment, and the consultants were advised that News Division had no further comment.

Thus it is those revised draft findings which have become the conclusive findings.

News Division's response to the initial draft forms Appendix I.

VI. Findings

A. The overall picture

There is a high to very high level of accuracy overall in ABC Radio news items. As Table 6.1 shows, the overall proportion of items found to be wholly or substantially accurate for plain facts was 91.4% and for context 93.8%. The overall proportion found to be immaterially or materially inaccurate was 8.6% for plain facts and 6.3% for context. As will be shown later, the incidence of material inaccuracy was very low: 3.1% for plain facts and 1.6% for context.

TABLE 6.1: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 128)

Total accurate		Total inaccurate	
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context
%	%	%	%
91.4	93.8	8.6	6.3

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Table 6.2 and Figure 6.1 break down these percentages into the four degrees of accuracy used to assess the items: wholly accurate, substantially accurate, immaterially inaccurate and materially inaccurate. These terms are defined in the methodology section of this report.

The data show that of the 128 items sampled, 77.3% were wholly accurate for plain facts, and a further 14.1% were substantially accurate. They also show that 78.1% were wholly accurate for context, and a further 15.6% substantially accurate.

Of the items sampled, 5.5% were immaterially inaccurate for plain facts, and 3.1% materially inaccurate; 4.7% were immaterially inaccurate for context and 1.6% were materially inaccurate.

These figures show that contextual accuracy is better than plain-fact accuracy.

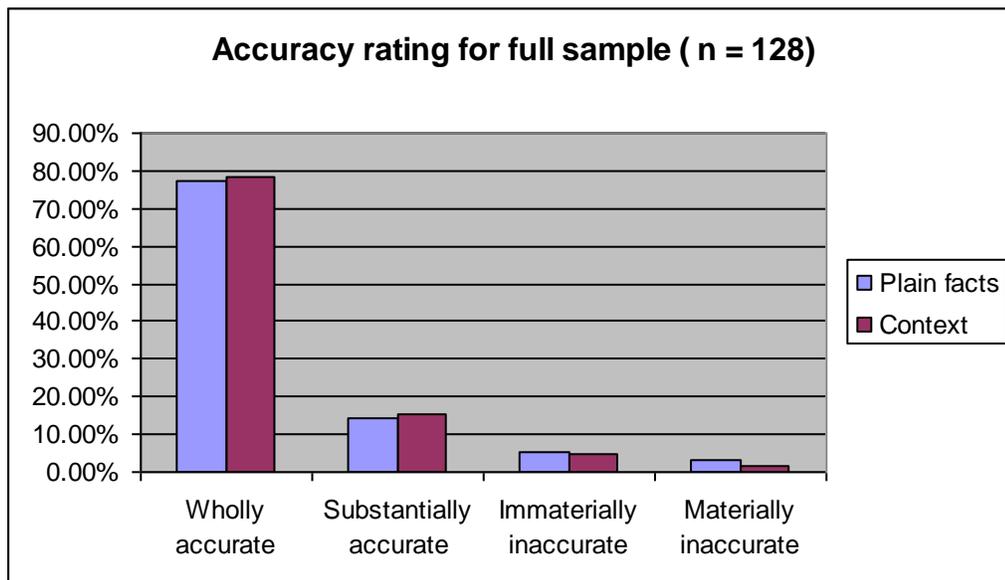
Of the 14 items found to be inaccurate (either immaterially or materially), five were found to be inaccurate for both plain fact and context. In all cases, it was the plain-fact error that so altered the nature of the information conveyed that it inevitably created a contextual inaccuracy because it altered the essential relevance of the information to the audience, or created a false sense of alarm, or a misleading idea of the breadth of a problem or the reach of a solution. In other words, it placed the facts in a different light, or created a new context within which the listener would have assimilated the information.

TABLE 6.2: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 128)

Plain facts				Context			
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
77.3	14.1	5.5	3.1	78.1	15.6	4.7	1.6

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

FIGURE 6.1



B. Analysis by bulletin type

The incidence of wholly accurate items in metro bulletins is noticeably higher than in regional bulletins. Items in SERN/national bulletins appear to show a high level of accuracy, although conclusions about these need to be tempered with caution because the sample was small. Findings from each category of bulletin – metro, regional and SERN/national -- are presented below. They show the performance by each category individually. There is also a comparison between metro and regional categories.

Metro

Tables 6.3 and 6.4 and Figure 6.2 show the findings for metropolitan bulletins.

TABLE 6.3: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR METRO BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 103)

Total accurate		Total inaccurate	
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context
%	%	%	%
92.2	95.1	7.7	4.8

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

As Table 6.3 shows, accuracy rates for metropolitan bulletins are very high for both plain facts and context. Table 6.4 breaks down these broad findings into the four degrees of accuracy.

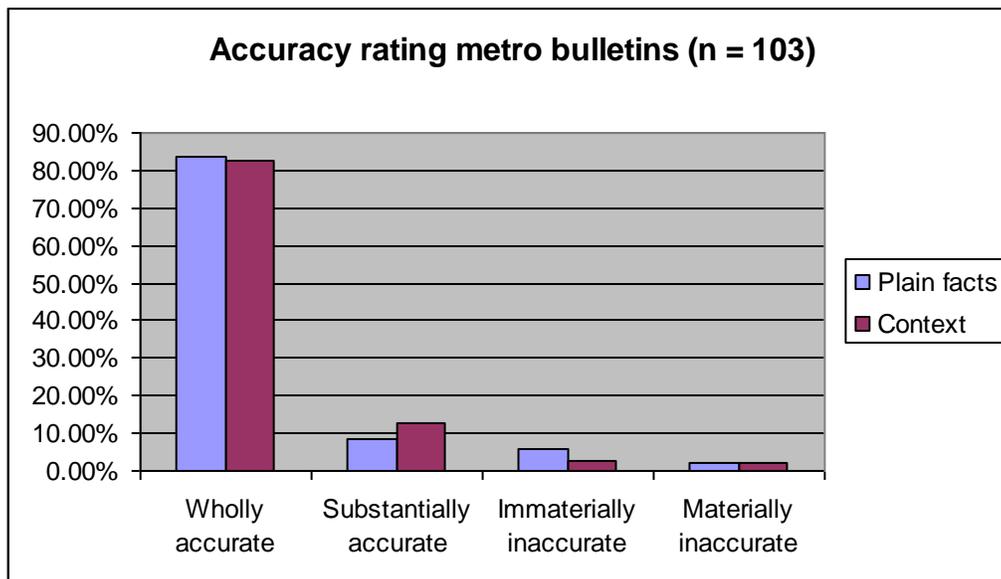
TABLE 6.4: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR METRO BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 103)

Plain facts				Context			
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
83.5	8.7	5.8	1.9	82.5	12.6	2.9	1.9

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Figure 6.2 presents these figures graphically.

FIGURE 6.2



Three irregular instances occurred in relation to metropolitan items.

In Item 3 an inaccuracy in an early version was repeated in a later version. This was the only item in which a recurring error was detected.

In Item 85 the script was correct, but the reader left out the word “to”, inadvertently reversing the meaning. The text stated: “Last month, the university said it had to cut enough staff to save \$23 million” (our emphasis). The underlined “to” was omitted in the reading, leaving the sentence stating that the cuts had been achieved. This demonstrates that while the reporting can be accurate, a material inaccuracy can be introduced in reading. This error has not been counted among the inaccuracies because the focus of the study was on the reportage, not reportage and reading.

In Item 78 the news item avoided an error carried in an earlier report on the AM program, which said Holden was closing for three months when the correct period (as given in the news item) was five weeks. This discovery was made incidentally in the course of tracking down documentary material. The study did not involve assessing accuracy by comparing one program with another. What this did indicate was conscientiousness on the part of those preparing the news item, either in correcting the previous item or in obtaining independent information and not simply picking up information from another program.

Regional

The findings for regional bulletins are given in Tables 6.5 and 6.6, and in Figure 6.3.

TABLE 6.5: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR REGIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 19)

Total accurate		Total inaccurate	
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context
%	%	%	%
94.8	84.2	5.3	15.8

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

It can be seen that the level of *overall* accuracy in regional bulletin items is higher than in metropolitan bulletins. However, this masks an important difference. As Table 6.6 and Figure 6.3 show, the incidence of “wholly accurate” items in regional bulletins is considerably lower than in metro bulletins.

Table 6.6 breaks down the overall regional figures into the four degrees of accuracy.

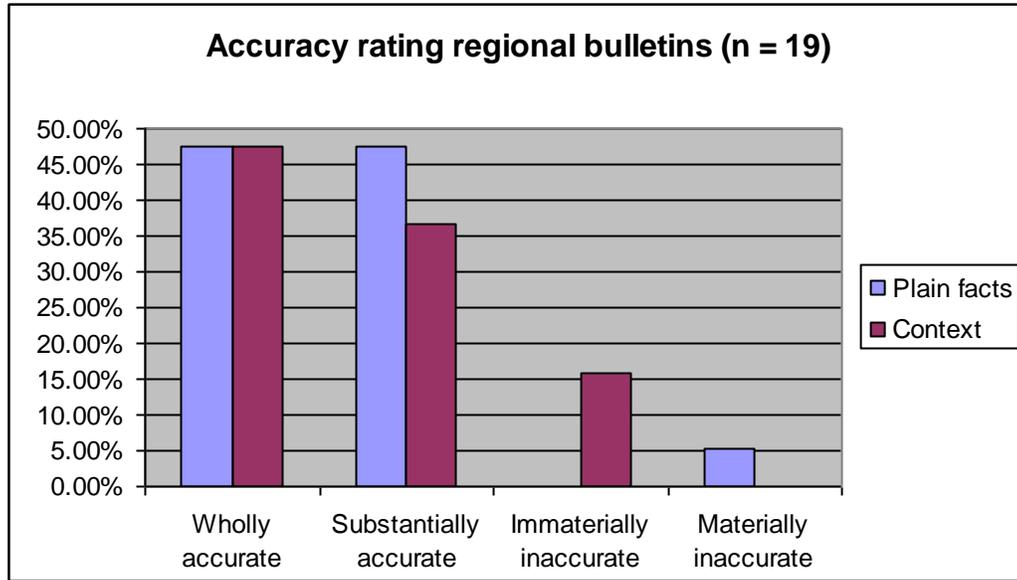
TABLE 6.6: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR REGIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 19)

Plain facts				Context			
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
47.4	47.4	--	5.3	47.4	36.8	15.8	--

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

The data are presented graphically in Figure 6.3.

FIGURE 6.3

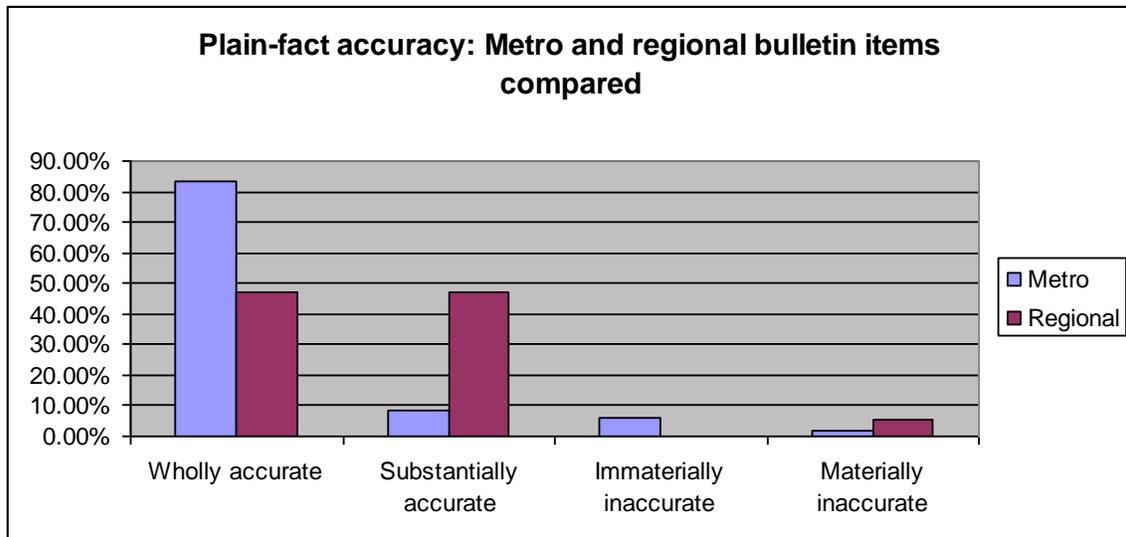


One further point arose in relation to regional bulletins. In Item 129, a Mr Norton’s given name was spelt “Stuart” instead of “Stewart”. While this has no material effect on a radio broadcast, the item was also published on the ABC website, where spelling does matter. Because this was a study of radio news accuracy, this has not been counted among the errors. However, the case illustrates a practical consequence of the convergence of media technologies. As the ABC disseminates more of its content on a wider range of platforms, different standards of accuracy are required. This creates new challenges for reporters and editors.

[Metro and regional bulletins compared](#)

Figure 6.4 compares metropolitan and regional bulletin items for plain-fact accuracy and inaccuracy.

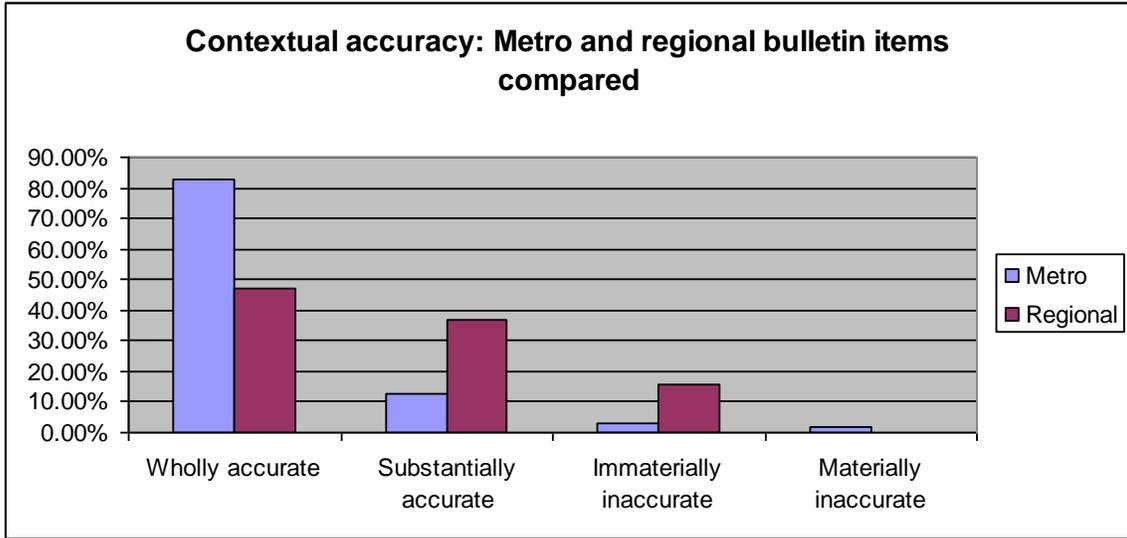
FIGURE 6.4



The differences between the two categories of bulletin on wholly and substantially accurate rates are clear. The incidence of “wholly accurate” items on plain facts is lower in regional bulletins, and the incidence of “substantially accurate” items is higher.

Figure 6.5 makes the same comparison for contextual accuracy.

FIGURE 6.5



It can be seen that the incidence of “wholly accurate” items is considerably lower in regional than in metro bulletins, and that the incidence of “substantially accurate” items and those that are “immaterially inaccurate” for context are considerably higher in regional than in metro bulletins.

While the sample base of regional bulletins is modest, the data indicate a real difference between accuracy standards in metropolitan and regional bulletins.

The figures show that in regional areas, journalists get it nearly right, but not quite right, somewhat more often than their metropolitan counterparts.

The reasons for this cannot be divined from this study, but the phenomenon does seem real and may warrant a more thorough examination.

SERN/national

Finally in this sequence, we present findings for SERN/national bulletins. We preface this with a reminder that the sample was very small and therefore is indicative only. We anticipated that there might be fewer qualifying items from SERN/national bulletins because many bulletins in this class were broadcast at weekends and, for the reasons discussed in the methodology section of this report, there is a much lower incidence of document-based items in weekend bulletins. In the event, only six qualifying items could be found from weekday and weekend SERN/national bulletins. Table 6.7 sets out the overall picture for items in SERN/national bulletins.

TABLE 6.7: RATES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR SERN/NATIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 6)

Total accurate		Total inaccurate	
Plain facts	Context	Plain facts	Context
%	%	%	%
66.7	100.0	33.3	--

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Table 6.8 breaks these figures down into the four degrees of accuracy.

TABLE 6.8: DEGREES OF ACCURACY AND INACCURACY FOR SERN/NATIONAL BULLETIN ITEMS (n = 6)

Plain facts				Context			
Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate	Wholly accurate	Substantially accurate	Immaterially inaccurate	Materially inaccurate
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
66.7	--	16.7	16.7	100.0	--	--	--

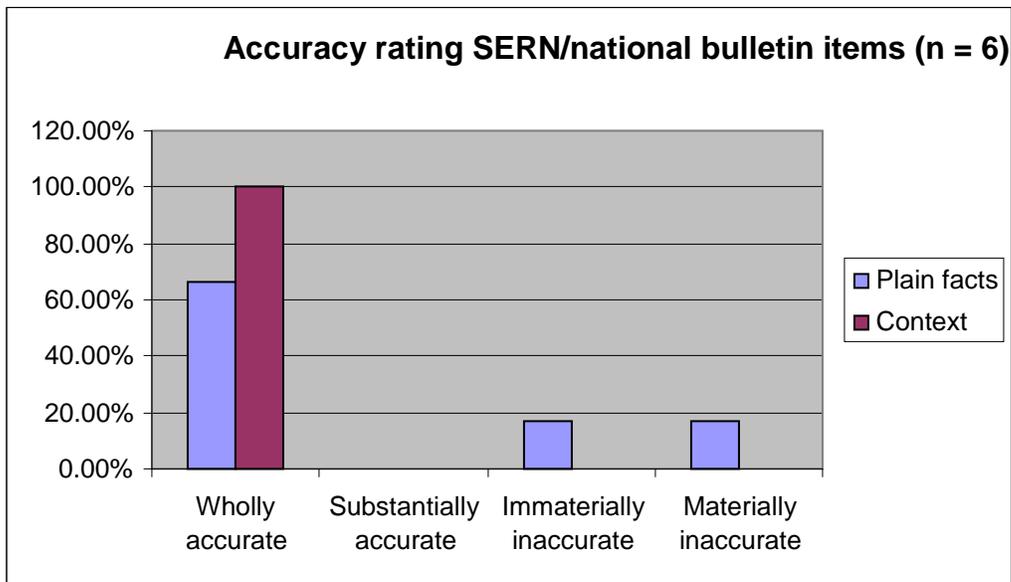
Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

The potential for distortion caused by small samples is immediately apparent, with one case of immaterially inaccuracy and one of materially inaccuracy translating into error rates of 16.7 in each case.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions about the accuracy levels of SERN/national bulletins from these figures. We would hazard that the accuracy profile of SERN/national bulletins probably more closely resembles that of metropolitan than regional bulletins because they are produced in metropolitan newsrooms. Against that, there is a disproportionately high incidence of inaccuracy in weekend bulletins as a whole (as is noted below) so more work would be needed to arrive at any conclusive findings about SERN/national bulletins.

Figure 6.6 shows the accuracy rating for SERN/national bulletin items on the four-point accuracy scale.

FIGURE 6.6



Weekdays and weekends

Analysis of the 14 cases of inaccuracy found by this study shows that 7 of the 14 cases (50%) occurred in weekend bulletins (metro and SERN/national). This is disproportionately high, considering that weekend bulletins made up only 24.4% of total bulletins. Weekday bulletins made up 75.6% of total bulletins and also contributed 50% of inaccuracies.

Of the seven weekend inaccuracies, five occurred in metro bulletins and two in SERN/national bulletins.

Of the four material inaccuracies found in the study as a whole, three occurred at weekends, two in metro bulletins and one in SERN/national bulletins.

C. Nature of inaccuracies

In this section we look more closely at those items classified as either immaterially or materially inaccurate for plain facts or context. To assist in understanding the nature of all the inaccuracies found, a typology was developed. There were five types:

1. **Imprecision:** Errors of fact; careless or ambiguous expression; failure to appreciate important distinctions or the actual meaning conveyed.
2. **Pushing it:** Nudging the facts so that an exaggerated sense of drama or importance is achieved.
3. **False alarm:** Creating a sense of crisis where none really exists.
4. **Oversimplification:** Paraphrasing or short-cutting that leaves out a material fact or distinction and thus alters the substance of the story as received by the audience.
5. **Unwarranted omission:** Omitting some information, resulting in an incomplete or misleading account.

We found some of these too in EQA Project 2. They are commonplace in journalism, perhaps even endemic.

On the basis of these two studies and our own long experience in journalism, we believe that many of the errors are the product of haste (imprecision, omission, oversimplification) and poor habits (pushing it, false alarm).

These do not excuse the errors but they may help explain them. They are the product of deep-seated operational and cultural factors in the profession. They can be influenced by the extent and quality of professional development and pre-publication review, among other things. Of course, these measures have resourcing implications, which may be particularly acute in regional newsrooms and at weekends.

In this study, as in EQA Project 2, we found no evidence of serious professional dishonesty: no flagrant misrepresentation, no invention of material. Nor was there any evidence of serious incompetence or recklessness of the kind that results in gross errors. The material sampled was clearly the product of best endeavours by competent professional journalists of unquestioned integrity. This remained true even where mistakes had been made; so much is evident from the nature of the mistakes. These are described in Tables 6.9 and 6.10.

TABLE 6.9: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	3	NATURE OF INACCURACY
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro	<p>Plain fact: This item concludes by saying, “The Reserve Bank says it still expects the inflation rate <u>to fall to 3% by the middle of 2010</u>. Table 14 of the November SMP forecasts a CPI rate of 3 ¼ % for June 2010 and 3% by December 2010.</p> <p>The mistake implies that inflation will fall six months earlier than the RBA forecast.</p> <p>This error was repeated in a later report Ex-RN-MEL in RBA Statement 2pms.</p> <p>It also was not always clear whether the item was referring to consumer price inflation or the underlying rate of inflation.</p>
DATE	10/11/08	
TITLE	RBA statement pms	

TABLE 6.9 continued: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

<p>ITEM 37</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 10/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Mind the Gap 1 and 2</p>	<p>Plain fact. The study being reported on did not seem to support a statement in the item that NSW, Victoria and Tasmania do not record whether deceased people were Indigenous or not.</p> <p>While the main source for the item, Professor Tony Barnes, did not reply to the reviewer’s inquiries, Australian Bureau of Statistics data state that there is under-reporting of Indigenous deaths in most states and territories, but does not say there is any state or territory where Indigenous deaths are not recorded as such.</p>
<p>ITEM 67</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 8/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Business woman of the year</p>	<p>Plain fact. The item says Chantal Williams’ company now <u>cares for “more than 3000 children</u> throughout Tasmania and Victoria.”</p> <p>The news release from Telstra actually says that Ms Williams’ centres <u>“are licensed to care for up to 3000 children per day”</u>.</p>
<p>ITEM 79</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 10/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Power summit 2</p>	<p>Plain fact and contextual. The item leads by saying: “The State Government is reassuring workers and their families in the La Trobe Valley that their future is secure”.</p> <p>The closest the media release by the Minister, Mr Bachelor, comes to this is: “The future needs to provide secure employment for the families who live and work here in the Valley”.</p> <p>This is a long way from a statement that their future is secure.</p>
<p>ITEM 112</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 22/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Brain injury</p>	<p>Plain fact and contextual. The item says that the ability to respond to people’s emotions is a common problem for people with brain injuries.</p> <p>The media release says: “Someone who has suffered traumatic brain injury, commonly due to a blow to the head, can lose the ability to accurately read other people’s emotional cues ...”</p>

TABLE 6.9 continued: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	122	<p>Plain fact and contextual. The item says: “The Health Department says the data will help determine whether health problems would increase if the expansion of Alcoa’s Wagerup Refinery goes ahead”.</p> <p>The media release says: “The results will now provide baseline data for comparison when the survey is repeated if the Wagerup 3 development proceeds.”</p> <p>The item presents a misinterpretation of the nature and purpose of the survey. It confers on the data a determinative quality they just don’t have. They are merely benchmarks. The data cannot help determine anything. All they might do is show some change or no change.</p>
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro	
DATE	22/11/08	
TITLE	Wagerup health	
ITEM	128	<p>Contextual. The poll question referred to in the item simply asked whether Mr Foley should remain an independent, or join a political party, and did not elaborate on any intentions he might have towards one party or another.</p> <p>Mr Foley is quoted as saying the survey was “extensive”, and “87 per cent of people in my electorate wanted me to stay independent”. The absence of any context for this figure leaves the audience with no way of assessing what it means. The term “extensive” is vague. Mr Foley suggests it was 87 per cent of the voters in his electorate, but this was a web site poll, and other polls on Mr Foley’s web site show as few as 20 respondents. To give the percentage any meaning, it was essential to know at least how many apparent respondents there were.</p>
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional	
DATE	10/11/08	
TITLE	Foley independent 2	
ITEM	133	<p>Contextual. The item refers to an economic plan by the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and says that the plan “<u>will</u> safeguard Tasmanians from the worst effects of the global financial crisis”.</p> <p>The original press release contains an announcement of a three- point plan to help stabilise employment and boost business confidence, which in turn <u>could</u> have the benefit of protecting Tasmania from the “worst effects of the global financial crisis”. This plan, put forward by an industry group, received only very general, qualified acknowledgement by the Deputy Premier, and there was no suggestion that it would be implemented. Therefore the use of the word “will” is too strong, and should have been replaced by “could”.</p>
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional	
DATE	10/11/08	
TITLE	Economic package AM 1	

TABLE 6.9 continued: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	146	<p>Contextual. The item states that “93% of farmers are compliant” in registering their cattle on a national livestock identification system. This creates the impression that compliance is high.</p> <p>In fact the media release states that “only” 93% of cattle checked at monitoring depots and abattoirs had been registered, and that this compliance level was “not acceptable”. Thus the impression that compliance is high is misleading.</p> <p>Moreover, the item gives the basis of the compliance rate as “farmers”; the media release refers only to “cattle”. These are not interchangeable in the context.</p>
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional	
DATE	19/11/08	
TITLE	Cattle identification	
ITEM	153	<p>Plain fact. Aussie Home Loans cut its <u>basic</u> variable rate for <u>first-home buyers</u> to 6.99%. These useful qualifications were missing from the item.</p>
BULLETIN TYPE	SERN/national	
DATE	9/11/08	
TITLE	Aussie rate cut	

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	45	<p>Plain fact and contextual. This item repeats a statement acknowledged to have come from <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> quoting the acting president of the NSW Teachers Federation as saying a 2008 report by the NSW Auditor-General into the aging of the teaching service revealed that <u>more than half</u> would reach retirement age by 2016. The Auditor-General’s report states: “By 2016, 50% of the teachers are projected to reach retirement age.” Fifty per cent is half, not more than half.</p> <p>In the introduction to the same item, it is stated: “. . . there is a <u>rapidly rising birth rate</u> as well as large numbers of teachers reaching retirement age”. It also quotes the Teachers Federation to this effect. The Auditor-General’s report stated: “Due to the <u>decline in birth rates</u>, the demand for school education services is expected to fall”.</p> <p>The combined effect of these inaccuracies is to create an illusion of crisis – as indeed the item’s slug line suggests – and promotes the views of a vested interest, in the form of the Teachers Federation, over the evidence in the report upon which the item was based.</p>
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro	
DATE	9/11/08	
TITLE	Teaching crisis	

TABLE 6.10 continued: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	47	Plain fact and contextual. The item states that the first-home owners' grant will be means tested and not available to people who buy properties over \$750,000.
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro	It is not correct to say there is a means test. The NSW Government Treasury website states: "The First Home Owner Grant will be capped . . ." It also says: "There are no income or assets tests to qualify for the benefits".
DATE	8/11/08	It appears that "means test" has been incorrectly equated with a capping system. The original media release did not mention a means test either.
TITLE	Homebuyers grant	
ITEM	142	Plain fact. The story repeatedly refers to a project value of \$5 million. However, this is only the State Government contribution to the development. The project is actually worth \$12 million, including \$5 million from the State Government, \$5 million worth of land, and \$2 million in additional road upgrades and building of amenities from council and other parties.
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional	
DATE	19/11/08	The media release from Jenny Macklin says: "The lowering of the deeming rates means that part-rate pensioners . . . <u>may</u> receive an increase in their pension payments . . . Individual results are heavily dependent on individual circumstances".
TITLE	EPA Water Park 2	The item misleads potential beneficiaries in a material way.
ITEM	152	Plain fact. The item states: "She [Jenny Macklin] says those on part pensions <u>will</u> get higher payments.
BULLETIN TYPE	SERN/national	
DATE	9/11/08	
TITLE	Pension rate	

Appendix I: News Division’s Response to Initial Draft Findings and Project Manager’s Determinations

TABLE 6.9: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

<p>ITEM 3</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 10/11/08</p> <p>TITLE RBA statement pms</p>	<p>NATURE OF INACCURACY</p> <p>Plain fact: This item concludes by saying, “The Reserve Bank says it still expects the inflation rate <u>to fall to 3% by the middle of 2010</u>. Table 14 of the November SMP forecasts a CPI rate of 3 ¼ % for June 2010 and 3% by December 2010.</p> <p>The mistake implies that inflation will fall six months earlier than the RBA forecast.</p> <p>This error was repeated in a later report Ex-RN-MEL in RBA Statement 2pms.</p> <p>It also was not always clear whether the item was referring to consumer price inflation or the underlying rate of inflation.</p>	<p>Response</p> <p>Nothing to add.</p>
<p>Determination: The draft finding stands.</p>		
<p>ITEM 37</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 10/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Mind the Gap 1 and 2</p>	<p>Plain fact. The study being reported on did not seem to support a statement in the item that NSW, Victoria and Tasmania do not record whether deceased people were Indigenous or not.</p> <p>While the main source for the item, Professor Tony Barnes, did not reply to the reviewer’s inquiries, Australian Bureau of Statistics data state that there is under-reporting of Indigenous deaths in most states and territories, but does not say there is any state or territory where Indigenous deaths are not recorded as such.</p>	<p>Response</p> <p>The story was prepared based on information gained in an interview and the journalist was relying on the expertise of the interviewee. She did not subsequently check all information supplied by that interviewee independently.</p>
<p>Determination: The draft finding stands.</p>		

TABLE 6.9 continued: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	39	<p>Contextual. The item’s introduction states that serving alcohol in glass late at night should be banned “in a bid to curb anti-social behaviour.”</p> <p>It is clear from the report that it is in a bid to reduce glassing attacks and injury to people that this law is being introduced. Glass or plastic cannot affect anti-social behaviour, just the consequences.</p>	Response
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro		<p>News believes this introduction was reasonable. It is clear that the glasses that drinks are served in can be used in anti-social behaviour in a way that plastic used to serve drinks in cannot. It is a reasonable extension to say that serving alcohol in glass should be banned ‘in a bid to curb anti-social behaviour’, just as you might argue that banning guns late at night is a ‘bid to curb anti-social behaviour’.</p>
DATE	10/11/08		
TITLE	Glass ban		
<p>Determination: News Division’s argument is fair and the point is a fine one. It is an inaccuracy of expression rather than fact. Therefore this item will be counted as substantially accurate.</p>			
ITEM	67	<p>Plain fact. The item says Chantal Williams’ company now <u>cares for “more than 3000 children throughout Tasmania and Victoria.”</u></p> <p>The news release from Telstra actually says that Ms Williams’ centres “<u>are licensed to care for up to 3000 children per day</u>”.</p>	Response
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro		<p>Nothing to add.</p>
DATE	8/11/08		
TITLE	Business woman of the year		
<p>Determination: The draft finding stands.</p>			
ITEM	79	<p>Plain fact and contextual. The item leads by saying: “The State Government is reassuring workers and their families in the La Trobe Valley that their future is secure”.</p> <p>The closest the media release by the Minister, Mr Bachelor, comes to this is: “The future needs to provide secure employment for the families who live and work here in the Valley”.</p> <p>This is a long way from a statement that their future is secure.</p>	Response
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro		<p>Nothing to add.</p>
DATE	10/11/08		
TITLE	Power summit 2		
<p>Determination: The draft finding stands.</p>			

TABLE 6.9 continued: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	112	Plain fact and contextual. The item says that the ability to respond to people’s emotions is a common problem for people with brain injuries.	Response
BULLETIN TYPE	Metro		This reporter has resigned and is currently in South America and can’t be contacted.
DATE	22/11/08		However, a reading of his copy indicates to his manager, the NSW News Editor, that he has spoken to the researcher and her grab is accurately reflected in the introductory line the review has found to be inaccurate. The researcher says “some people might have trouble recognising and identifying what facial expressions are being shown in somebody else and that might interrupt the way they can use ... a facial expression to monitor how they’re going in a conversation with someone”. The News Editor comments that he thinks the line “losing the ability to respond to people’s emotions” is a reasonable summary of that explanation and an accurate reflection of the scientist’s work.
TITLE	Brain injury	The media release says: “Someone who has suffered traumatic brain injury, commonly due to a blow to the head, can lose the ability to accurately read other people’s emotional cues ...”	
<p>Determination: The News Editor’s point is not the one at issue. The item states that the impairment is a common problem for people with brain injuries. The use of the word “common” in relation to the incidence of the problem is a misapplication, because in the media release it is applied to the cause of injury, not the incidence of the problem. The result is that the item says that this impairment is common among people with brain injuries, and that is not what the media release or the researcher in the subsequent conversation said. The draft finding stands.</p>			

TABLE 6.9 continued: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

<p>ITEM 122</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 22/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Wagerup health</p>	<p>Plain fact and contextual. The item says: “The Health Department says the data will help determine whether health problems would increase if the expansion of Alcoa’s Wagerup Refinery goes ahead”.</p> <p>The media release says: “The results will now provide baseline data for comparison when the survey is repeated if the Wagerup 3 development proceeds.”</p> <p>The item presents a misinterpretation of the nature and purpose of the survey. It confers on the data a determinative quality they just don’t have. They are merely benchmarks. The data cannot help determine anything. All they might do is show some change or no change.</p>	<p>Response</p> <p>This finding seems to be imply that data cannot determine outcomes, it can only measure them or give a guide to what they are. This is based on the meaning of the word determine in the causal sense, that it, to determine the outcome of something (as in the example of ‘demand determines supply’ in the Macquarie Dictionary). However, the Macquarie also has a definition of ‘determine’ as ‘to conclude or ascertain after reasoning or observation’, and that would make the story accurate, since the data will indeed help to reach conclusions.</p>
<p>Determination: News Division’s argument is fair insofar as it draws attention to the different meanings of “determine”. Two difficulties remain, however. First, the baseline nature of the data is not made clear. So the actual way in which these data “help reach conclusions” is not made clear. Second, only one possible outcome is given: that of an increase in health problems. From a baseline, future data could show an increase, a decrease or no change. This is a good example of a common practice in journalism of putting a gloss on the facts which tends to make them sound just a bit more newsworthy than they really are. It would have been equally open to the reporter (and equally inaccurate) to say that the data could help show a decrease. The draft finding stands.</p>		
<p>ITEM 128</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Regional</p> <p>DATE 10/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Foley independent 2</p>	<p>Contextual. The poll question referred to in the item simply asked whether Mr Foley should remain an independent, or join a political party, and did not elaborate on any intentions he might have towards one party or another.</p> <p>Mr Foley is quoted as saying the survey was “extensive”, and “87 per cent of people in my electorate wanted me to stay independent”. The absence of any context for this figure leaves the audience with no way of assessing what it means. The term “extensive” is vague. Mr Foley suggests it was 87 per cent of the voters in his electorate, but this was a web site poll, and other polls on Mr Foley’s web site show as few as 20 respondents. To give the percentage any meaning, it was essential to know at least how many apparent respondents there were.</p>	<p>Response</p> <p>The reporter says: ‘The story clearly states the poll question related to joining a political party (not a specific party). However, we had previously reported Mr Foley as saying people had suggested he join the LNP. This information was mentioned in the second paragraph for background. It was Mr Foley himself who described the survey as “extensive”. I acknowledge it would have been beneficial to include figures on poll responses in the story.’</p>
<p>Determination: The inclusion of figures about sample size in any story about polls is not just beneficial but essential if the audience is to make any sense of the results independently of the impression interested parties might like to create. The draft finding stands.</p>		

TABLE 6.9 continued: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

<p>ITEM 133</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Regional</p> <p>DATE 10/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Economic package AM 1</p>	<p>Contextual. The item refers to an economic plan by the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and says that the plan that “<u>will</u> safeguard Tasmanians from the worst effects of the global financial crisis”.</p> <p>The original press release contains an announcement of a three-point plan to help stabilize employment and boost business confidence, which in turn <u>could</u> have the benefit of protecting Tasmania from the “worst effects of the global financial crisis”. This plan, put forward by an industry group, received only very general, qualified acknowledgement by the Deputy Premier, and there was no suggestion that it would be implemented. Therefore the use of the word “will” is too strong, and should have been replaced by “could”.</p>	<p>Nothing to add.</p>
<p>Determination: The draft finding stands.</p>		

TABLE 6.9 continued: INSTANCES OF IMMATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	146	Contextual. The item states that “93% of farmers are compliant” in registering their cattle on a national livestock identification system. This creates the impression that compliance is high.	This story was compiled for a Bunbury regional bulletin and was based on a combination of a media release and follow-up telephone call by the reporter to the Department of Agriculture.
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional		
DATE	19/11/08		
TITLE	Cattle identification	In fact the media release states that “only” 93% of cattle checked at monitoring depots and abattoirs had been registered, and that this compliance level was “not acceptable”. Thus the impression that compliance is high is misleading.	Given that this was one of many stories she prepared in a busy regional newsroom since last November, she can’t recall the form of words in the media release. But she does acknowledge that authorities at the time were not happy with compliance rates and therefore says that indeed the department may have believed the compliance level to be unacceptable.
		Moreover, the item gives the basis of the compliance rate as “farmers”; the media release refers only to “cattle”. These are not interchangeable in the context.	That said, the story’s main point was to report that the Department was going to conduct surveys to ensure that producers complied with national regulations. While the story said compliance had reached 99.8% in saleyards and 93% on farms it did not say this was a good thing or that compliance was somehow up. The reporter now says she should have included the fact that the department was displeased with the compliance rates.
Determination: The draft finding stands. However, the pressures on a reporter in a busy regional newsroom are acknowledged, as is the fact that the item did convey the main point of the story.			
ITEM	153	Plain fact. Aussie Home Loans cut its <u>basic</u> variable rate for <u>first-home buyers</u> to 6.99%. These useful qualifications were missing from the item.	This item should probably have had the qualifying information the report recommends. However, in mitigation, the story does include the higher standard variable rate.
BULLETIN TYPE	SERN		
DATE	9/11/08		
TITLE	Aussie rate cut		
Determination: The draft finding stands. The mitigating point is acknowledged.			

TABLE 6.10: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY

<p>ITEM 8</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 10/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Rees Stewart</p>	<p>Plain fact. The item states “three former <u>and serving</u> police officers have accused the MP of attempting in the past to interfere in their investigations”.</p> <p>The media release on which this statement appears to be based is from Lee Rhiannon, who refers to complaints by “former police officers and public sector workers”. There is no mention of serving police officers.</p>	<p>Response</p> <p>Lee Rhiannon’s press release refers only to two former officers. However, using her experience and knowledge of the area, the NSW state parliamentary reporter knew there was a serving officer who had also made the same complaint. The serving officer’s complaint had been referred to the ICAC the previous November and was a matter of record.</p> <p>The reporter recalls that he didn’t want to go on tape to talk about it, although he confirmed the story. The other two were former detective sergeants and Lee Rhiannon had statements from them, which she passed onto the inquiry.</p> <p>On the basis of that, News believes the story is correct and Lee Rhiannon’s press release did not reveal the full story.</p>
<p>Determination: The response is accepted and the draft finding is withdrawn. This item will now be counted as wholly accurate.</p>		

TABLE 6.10 continued: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY

<p>ITEM 45</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 9/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Teaching crisis</p>	<p>Plain fact and contextual. This item repeats a statement acknowledged to have come from <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> quoting the acting president of the NSW Teachers Federation as saying a 2008 report by the NSW Auditor-General into the aging of the teaching service revealed that <u>more than half</u> would reach retirement age by 2016. The Auditor-General’s report states: “By 2016, 50% of the teachers are projected to reach retirement age.” Fifty per cent is half, not more than half.</p> <p>In the introduction to the same item, it is stated: “. . . there is a <u>rapidly rising birth rate</u> as well as large numbers of teachers reaching retirement age”. It also quotes the Teachers Federation to this effect. The Auditor-General’s report stated: “Due to the <u>decline in birth rates</u>, the demand for school education services is expected to fall”.</p> <p>The combined effect of these inaccuracies is to create an illusion of crisis – as indeed the item’s slug line suggests – and promotes the views of a vested interest, in the form of the Teachers Federation, over the evidence in the report upon which the item was based.</p>	<p>Response</p> <p>The reporter concerned is away on a month’s holiday in South America and can’t be contacted. The News Editor has e-mailed her but is not confident of getting a reply within a reasonable time.</p>
<p>Determination: In the circumstances, the draft finding will stand provisionally. It will be reviewed when a response from the reporter can be obtained.</p>		
<p>ITEM 47</p> <p>BULLETIN TYPE Metro</p> <p>DATE 8/11/08</p> <p>TITLE Homebuyers grant</p>	<p>Plain fact and contextual. The item states that the first-home owners’ grant will be means tested and not available to people who buy properties over \$750,000.</p> <p>It is not correct to say there is a means test. The NSW Government Treasury website states: “The First Home Owner Grant will be capped . . .” It also says: “There are no income or assets tests to qualify for the benefits”.</p> <p>It appears that “means test” has been incorrectly equated with a capping system. The original media release did not mention a means test either.</p>	<p>Response</p> <p>Nothing to add.</p>
<p>Determination: The draft finding stands.</p>		

TABLE 6.10 continued: INSTANCES OF MATERIAL INACCURACY

ITEM	142	Plain fact. The story repeatedly refers to a project value of \$5 million. However, this is only the State Government contribution to the development. The project is actually worth \$12 million, including \$5 million from the State Government, \$5 million worth of land, and \$2 million in additional road upgrades and building of amenities from council and other parties.	Response The reporter says she used the figure of five million dollars in relation to the water park, as that was the figure used in a previous story.
BULLETIN TYPE	Regional		
DATE	19/11/08		
TITLE	EPA Water Park 2		
Determination: The draft finding stands. Apart from the material nature of the error, it is a good example of the perils of relying on previous versions.			
ITEM	152	Plain fact. The item states: “She [Jenny Macklin] says those on part pensions <u>will</u> get higher payments. The media release from Jenny Macklin says: “The lowering of the deeming rates means that part-rate pensioners . . . <u>may</u> receive an increase in their pension payments . . . Individual results are heavily dependent on individual circumstances”. The item misleads potential beneficiaries in a material way.	Response The lead paragraph of the story was appropriately qualified, saying that ‘some’ pensioners are ‘likely’ to get higher payments. However, in the final paragraph, the story erroneously paraphrased the Families Minister as saying ‘those on part-pensions WILL get higher payments’. The reporter notes that the story was prepared on a Sunday night shift, with no other staff present. She recalls attempting to speak to the Families Minister for comment. The reporter says deeming rate provisions are somewhat complex and that she possesses no particular expertise in the area.
BULLETIN TYPE	SERN/national		
DATE	9/11/08		
TITLE	Pension rate		
Determination: The draft finding stands. The complexities of the subject and the difficulties of obtaining expert assistance at weekends are acknowledged, as is the qualification in the intro.			