Supporting Democracy: How well do the Australian media perform?

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From the Editor

Welcome to the 2011 edition of *Australian Journalism Monographs*. We are pleased to present Volume 13 of this unique contribution to the growing research culture in Australian journalism scholarship. We produce this issue hot on the heels of the 2011 Journalism Education Association of Australia (JEAA) Conference in Adelaide, which showcased the breadth and depth of journalism research, in both traditional and practice-led forms. Congratulations to the organisers and all the presenters of the conference for a stimulating three days.

In this issue of *AJM*, we present to you the work of Edith Cowan University scholar, Beate Josephi, who will be well-known to many of you. This monograph, ‘How the Australian media supports democracy’ is drawn from Dr Josephi’s work with the Media for Democracy Monitor Project. This monograph presents the Australian component of that large international study, examining a range of factors which might point to the levels of freedom, autonomy and control that Australian media workers experience. Through an examination of both policy frameworks, self-regulatory mechanisms and reports from journalists themselves, this work draws a broad picture of the structures many contemporary Australian journalists operate within.

On another note, Griffith University’s journalism program has produced *Australian Journalism Monographs* since 2005, and we are sorry to say this will be our last issue. We are all continuing our work in journalism research and education but feel it is time to hand on the reins of control for future editions of *AJM* to another editorial team.

So, after seven consecutive issues of *Australian Journalism Monographs*, during which time we hope it has gained momentum as a regular and useful contributor to Australian journalism scholarship, we say farewell but look forward to a continuing involvement with the journal.

Importantly, this latest issue is also available for you in PDF if you wish to keep an electronic version for easy access and searching – go to http://www.griffith.edu.au/humanities-languages/centre-cultural-research/publications where you will also find issues from 2009 and 2010.

Susan Forde, Editor
December, 2011
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Beate Josephi is coordinator of the coursework Masters courses in the School of Communication and Arts at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. She is the former chair of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) Journalism Research and Education section, and now a member of IAMCR’s executive board. She has edited *Journalism Education in Countries with Limited Media Freedom* (2010, NY: Peter Lang), which includes chapters on China, Cambodia, Palestine, Oman, Egypt, Kenya, Tanzania, Brazil, and Russia. Her publications include chapters in Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (2009) *Handbook of Journalism Studies* (London: Routledge) and in Arnold de Beer and John Merrill (2009) *Global Journalism: Topical Issues and Media Systems* (5th edition; Boston: Pearson). Her articles have appeared nationally in journals such as *Australian Journalism Review* and *Media International Australia*, and internationally in journals such as *The International Communication Gazette*, *Communications: the European Journal for Communication Research*, and *Global Media and Communication*. 
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ABSTRACT

This monograph analyses how well the Australian media perform in their role of supporting democracy. The central section of this study is part of the Media for Democracy Monitor project, which was developed for mature democracies, and has been carried out in nine European countries and Australia. The study uses a methodology developed by Trappel (2011) which examines how well a country’s media and media framework fulfil the core principles of freedom, equality and control. Areas examined include the free flow of information, patterns of media use, media ownership concentration, levels of self-regulation, independence of news media from owners and/or those in power, internal media democracy, and the importance of the watchdog role. This study concludes that, in comparison to the European countries, Australia performs moderately well and that its legal framework and media ownership structure are the two most significant factors impeding its democratic functioning. Despite the legal hurdles, Australia stands out for its commitment to watchdog journalism. This is evidenced by the fact that nine out of ten journalists in Australia see the watchdog function as their most important role, that professional education assigns high importance to it and that media allocate some resources to investigative teams or sections.
INTRODUCTION

The media have long been considered as an essential part of democracy (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, 2009; McNair, 2009; Schultz, 1998: 15-22). As Curran writes, “[t]he principal democratic role of the media, according to traditional liberal theory, is to act as a check on the state” (Curran, 2005: 122). Similarly, McQuail states, “[t]he monitorial role is probably the most widely recognized and least controversial in terms of conventional ideas about what the press should be doing” (McQuail in Christians et al., 2009: 125). Accordingly, the notion of ‘media as watchdog’ is one of the guiding criteria in ascertaining how well the media support democracy. The other is ‘media as information provider’. The media is charged with the task to ensure that citizens learn “to know about the world they inhabit” (Gripsrud in Schudson, 2003: 14) so that they can make informed political choices. This ability to know about the world today extends to aspects of digital connectivity, with the internet and Twitter becoming important tools in providing a forum for public discussion and participation in the media.

Given these widely accepted assumptions about the principal democratic roles of the media, the question arises: How well do and can the media fulfil these responsibilities (Trappel & Maniglio, 2009: 170)? This question had not been systematically examined in Australia until this project. There are agencies, such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, which have developed indices of press or journalistic freedom. However, these indices are conceptualised to chart the pathway to media democratisation (Becker, Vlad & Nusser, 2007), as two-thirds of all countries around the globe do not meet the criteria for free media (Freedom House, 2010). The question asked here, then, is: How well do the media in mature democracies fulfil their role in democracy?

To arrive at a scientifically sound evaluation, a symposium at the University of Zürich in June 2007 was devoted to discussing and workshopping principles for media monitoring. Josef Trappel (formerly University of Zürich, now University of Salzburg) subsequently developed indicators, in consultation with the authors of the individual studies, by which the media’s performance in mature democracies could be measured. This project, titled Media for Democracy Monitor, was supported by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) program “Democracy in the 21st Century”, and was carried out in ten countries, of which Australia is the only non-European one. The European countries are Austria, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. It was the intent of the study to establish an evaluation system and procedure, which would provide a solid basis for comparing media performance. Accordingly, all country chapters were written to a prescribed structure, which included allocating points for each criterion. The studies have been published under the title of Media
For this monograph, the strict structure which underpinned the comparative study has been loosened to permit elaboration of various points. While the overall concept of testing the media environment and its structural conditions on a national level and performance criteria on a media level has been preserved, comparisons with other countries have been added. Further, the volume containing the collected studies highlights the fact that performance criteria alone cannot capture the nature of a nation’s journalism. Every so often, authors in *Media for Democracy Monitor* allude to their country’s journalistic culture to explain certain behavioural phenomena. For this reason, this study will take elements of Australian journalistic culture into account, and try to outline their connection to what is perceived as Australian national culture. This link is of particular importance to Australian journalism’s most revered form, investigative journalism (O’Donnell, 2009).

**How to measure democratic performance**

This section explains the indicators developed for the project by Trappel to measure the performance of media in mature democracies, and adhered to in the present study. The indicators are based on a theoretical framework which assumes three fundamental functions the media must meet in order to promote democracy: (a) safeguard the flow of information; (b) provide a forum for public debate; (c) act as a public watchdog. By applying the criteria to different countries, patterns of media institutionalisation, media organisation, media coverage and consumption will become apparent (Trappel, 2011: 23).

The three core principles, according to which the study is structured, are freedom, equality, and control. These principles are investigated at two levels. The *country* level establishes available infrastructures, levels of media concentration, and legal and administrative rules and regulations. It also looks at media consumption. The *media* level considers the internal organisation of the mass media, their ownership and financing, and their independence from government and other power holders, and media production and output.

Each core principle has been given a subsidiary aspect. For freedom, the subsidiary aspect is information, as freedom is “defined in terms of communication rights to opinions and to receive and convey information” (Trappel & Maniglio, 2009: 177). Equality has been given the subsidiary aspect of interest mediation, meaning that not one opinion should dominate and that “access to the media should be provided on a fair basis to oppositional or divergent opinions, perspectives, or claims” (Trappel & Maniglio, 2009: 178). Control is paired with the media’s watchdog function, and questions the degree to which the media are guardians of the flow of information,
a public forum for discussion of diverse and often confliction ideas, and to what degree they are funded to function as watchdog over abuses of power (Trappel & Maniglio, 2009: 179). Each core principle – freedom, equality, and control – is probed by seven to ten questions designed to elicit conclusions about the news media’s performance in fulfilling their democratic obligation.

The answers for some components of this study were found in publicly available data provided on websites such as the Australian Communications and Media Authority and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. As in all country studies, further answers were sought in a series of eight semi-structured face-to-face interviews with editorial level journalists from all media – print, broadcast and online – as well as additional face-to-face interviews with spokespersons for the journalists’ union (Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance) and the Australian Press Council.

There is one caveat – this study can only provide a snapshot in time. While sincere efforts have been made to provide up-to-date information at the time of writing, it is inevitable that more current data has appeared, or likely that further ownership and legal changes have occurred by the time of publication.

**Australia: Structural factors**

When placing Australia next to European countries in this project, two defining factors stand out: its geography and demographics. As the world’s sixth largest country Australia compares in geographic size to the United States, not including Alaska. Australia’s large landmass – 21.5 times the size of Germany and 186 times the size of Switzerland – only has a population of 22.5 million people, which is concentrated in its state and territory capitals, with close to 90 per cent of Australians living in urban centres (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

History is another highly influential factor, with post-settlement Australia initially consisting of six British colonies which joined to form a nation in 1901. While a move to federation has led some countries, for example Germany, to a highly federated structure of its media, this is not the case in Australia. In addition to the fact that many British traditions shape Australia’s legal and regulatory framework to this day, its public broadcaster also followed the British centralised model. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (later Corporation) was established in 1932, and the Special Broadcasting Service in 1978. However, unlike their British or many of their European counterparts, the public broadcasters are directly funded by the government. Although the ABC’s independence has been guaranteed in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983, board appointments have followed the government of the day’s political preferences. Commercial media also flourished comparatively early.
Given the size of the country and its population distribution, Australia has always experienced a high level of concentration of media ownership (Richards, 2005). This is accompanied by a uniquely Australian phenomenon of media dynasties and media moguls, who were decidedly influential in Australia's first 100 years after Federation (Griffen-Foley, 2002; Griffen-Foley, 1999; Chadwick, 1989; Wolff, 2008; Shawcross, 1993). In the latter part of the 20th century, Australia's two wealthiest men were media owners, the late Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch. In 2010, Murdoch’s News Corporation was the world’s third-largest media company behind The Walt Disney Company and Time Warner. Another outstanding feature is the importance journalists have played in Australian politics – that is, journalists who become politicians – especially in the first 50 years of Australia’s nationhood (Errington & Miragliotta, 2009). More recent examples are former Western Australian premiers Brian Burke and Alan Carpenter, and former New South Wales premier Bob Carr.

Australia does not have the legal instrument, neither a constitutional nor statutory bill of rights, guaranteeing freedom of speech for its citizens, nor does it have freedom of the press expressly guaranteed in its constitution (Nash, 2003). Its journalists do not constitutionally enjoy any special rights beyond those of an ordinary citizen. However, since the 1990s the High Court of Australia has recognised an implied right to freedom of political communication in a succession of cases (Nash, 2003; Herman, 2009). In March 2011 the federal shield law was written into law, extending the protection to confidential communications between journalists and their sources in that “journalists are able to protect the identity of their confidential sources unless there is an overriding public interest to the contrary” (MEAA, 2010). Uncertainties in the legal framework have led to an ongoing demand for better shield laws on a state level for journalists and an improved Freedom of Information system (Warren, 2010).

Media policy is legislated by the government of the day. After 20 years of relative stability in media ownership regulations, technological developments have made the possession of a particular type of media less important, and legislative changes have occurred since 2006. The Australian government’s regulatory body dealing with the electronic media is the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). Its main brief is to ensure that quality communication services are available as well as making sure that licence conditions, codes and standards are followed.

In comparing Australia to Europe, it comes as no surprise that Australia most closely resembles the United Kingdom in its legal framework and traditions. Humphreys has summarised the features of the British system as: “high professional standards in the ‘quality press’ but strong ‘downmarket’ popular press; a lack of deference to the political class; weakness of privacy laws; strong libel laws with a chilling effect on press freedom; [and] a tradition of weak freedom of information” (2011: 319).
FREEDOM – COUNTRY LEVEL

Information provision is considered an essential part of the democratic framework so that citizens can make informed political choices. This section looks at how readily news information can be accessed, diversity of news sources, and checks this against news consumption to establish a picture of how citizens avail themselves of news.

News availability

In a country the size of Australia and a population density of close to three persons per square kilometre it is no surprise that there are regional divides. Large parts of Australia are unpopulated or have so few people living in them that infrastructure, in particular broadband and mobile telephony coverage, has always posed difficulties, and has been hotly contested politically. Broadband and mobile telephone access is readily available in the capital cities and large regional centres.

The media consists of commercial and public broadcasters (radio, television and online services), daily newspapers, a reasonably large community media sector (primarily community radio) enshrined in the Broadcasting Services Act, as well as a large array of magazines.

Table 1 – Access to telecommunication in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media type</th>
<th>Household access</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free-to-air TV</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital free-to-air TV</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay TV</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadband</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS, 2009b

These figures show that analogue free-to-air television provided by the public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and, in the main, three commercial television networks is available to 99 per cent of Australians (ABS: 2009a). The percentage of digital free-to-air users is 77 per cent and the percentage of households with digital readiness is 86 per cent (Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, 2011: 71). In breaking down these figures, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA, 2008: 7) gives evidence that socio-economic reasons play the largest role in determining access to the Internet, whereas country location has the largest impact on broadband.
Access to radio is 99 per cent, and the availability map for 2007 shows that most of Australia is serviced by one to five stations, and up to twelve in the metropolitan centres (ACMA, 2009). There are 274 commercial radio broadcasting licences in Australia, including 150 FM licences and 106 AM licences, with the largest concentrations of commercial radio licences in the major capital cities. Most regional centres are served by two licencees, typically with one AM and one FM service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Number of commercial licences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adelaide</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canberra</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobart</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ACMA licensing information (ACMA, 2008: 4)

The public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), provides 60 local radio stations throughout Australia, and four national broadcast networks – the national talk network, Radio National; the national news network, News Radio; the national youth network, Triple J and the national classic music network, Classic FM. Via shortwave, satellite and online Radio Australia broadcasts in the Asia-Pacific region.

The second public broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), has a brief to broadcast to Australia’s various migrant ethnic groups (Ang, 2008), and broadcasts in 68 languages to all capital cities and key regional centres on a mix of FM and AM frequencies. SBS radio provides Australian and international news, homeland news, a mixture of current affairs, interviews, community information, sport and music (ACMA, 2008). Community radio has to be regarded as the third tier of the Australian radio broadcasting system, as it has services in regional areas where there is no local commercial radio. In 2007, community radio had about four million listeners per week and 274 operating licences (Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell, 2007).
In terms of television, the public broadcasters Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), and three major commercial networks, Seven, Nine and Ten are the main providers of free-to-air television. The ABC’s analogue service is available to more than 98 per cent of the Australian population. SBS’s multilingual and multicultural television services reach 97 per cent of the Australian population through its analogue service and 97 per cent through its digital service.

There are 28 distinct commercial television licence areas across Australia. Broadcast planning provides for three commercial television licence operators in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. The Seven, Nine and Ten networks operate in each of these cities. There are three licencees operating in Canberra and Hobart, and two in Darwin. In regional areas, the majority of broadcasting is provided by the NBN, Prime, Seven Queensland, Southern Cross Broadcasting and WIN networks (ACMA, 2008). Permanent community television services were established in Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney in 2004. In January 2007, there were 83 permanent community television licences, 79 of which were remote Indigenous media services (ACMA, 2008).

Until 2001 only a limited number of analogue free-to-air television channels were available. From 2001 the two public broadcasters and from 2004 the commercial channels have begun to add further digital channels. Between 2010 and 2013 Australia is switching to wholly digital TV (Digital TV Switchover Australia, 2011). In 2006 the potential audience reach of the major television companies was listed as:

**Table 3 – Potential audience reach of television broadcasters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commercial Broadcaster</th>
<th>Channel name</th>
<th>Reach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seven West Media</td>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten Network Holdings</td>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine Entertainment Co</td>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Cross Broadcasting Australia Ltd</td>
<td>Southern Cross Television (Regional)</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Television Ltd</td>
<td>Prime, Golden West Network (GWN) (Regional)</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIN Corporation Pty Ltd</td>
<td>WIN (Regional)</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public broadcasters</strong></td>
<td><strong>Channel name</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reach</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Broadcasting Service</td>
<td>SBS</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Jackson (2006)
The reach of the major commercial television broadcasters is calculated according to the number of metropolitan and regional television licences they hold and the audiences which can be reached by those licences. To date, Australian regulations prevent a commercial network from owning a licence which would enable them to reach more than 75 per cent of the Australian population. However, this rule is due to be reviewed (Chessell, 2010a). The Seven West Media group, which now also holds a commanding interest in the West Australian metropolitan newspaper, *The West Australian* (ABC News, 2011), controls one regional and five metropolitan television licences; Ten Network Holdings controls five metropolitan television licences and Nine Entertainment Co, which also is Australia’s largest magazine publisher through its subsidiary Australian Consolidated Press, controls three metropolitan and one regional television licence. The regionally based Southern Cross Broadcasting has one metropolitan and seven regional television licences. Audience-share figures, which vary within a range of two percentage points for the commercial channels from week to week, show the following for early November 2010:

**Table 4 – TV audience share figures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel 7</th>
<th>Pay TV</th>
<th>Channel 9</th>
<th>Channel 10</th>
<th>ABC</th>
<th>SBS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience Share</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *The Australian* Media Supplement (November 1, 2010: 31)

Australia has never had the diversity of national and regional print media most European countries have experienced, although commercial pressures are now reducing the diversity of titles in Europe. Australia’s demographic distribution and economies of scale brought about a high concentration of press ownership. There are two national papers, *The Australian* and *The Financial Review*. Each of Australia’s major cities has had only one local or metropolitan paper since the late 1980s, with only Sydney and Melbourne having two papers, one broadsheet and one tabloid. New South Wales has 13 regional papers, Victoria six, Queensland 14, South Australia one, Western Australia one, Tasmania two and the Northern Territory none.

Although most Australian newspapers have lost sales over the last decade, they have not experienced the decline in circulation seen in the United States. Australian newspaper circulation figures for 2001–2009 show a fall for Saturday and Sunday papers of between 5 per cent and 6 per cent, and a fall of weekday papers of 3.6 per cent according to the Australian Audit Bureau of Circulations.
Table 5 – Newspaper circulation figures 2001 – 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audit period</td>
<td>1.1.01-30.6.01</td>
<td>1.1.06-30.6.06</td>
<td>1.4.09-30.6.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday-Friday papers</td>
<td>2,336,189</td>
<td>2,296,571</td>
<td>2,256,436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday papers</td>
<td>3,142,459</td>
<td>3,047,027</td>
<td>2,955,791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday papers</td>
<td>3,469,141</td>
<td>3,469,141</td>
<td>3,297,584</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian Newspaper History Group Newsletters (ANHG, 2001; ANHG, 2006; ANHG, 2009)

In its 2008 Annual Report on the State of the Australian News Print Media, the Australian Press Council observed that, despite sharp increases in the number of readers accessing newspapers via the Internet, the weekday circulation of broadsheets was generally holding steady, while there had been a decline in tabloid circulation (Australian Press Council, 2008). Although the decline in metropolitan newspaper circulation accelerated in 2010, the figures compare favourably with falls in circulation in the United States, the United Kingdom and other European countries (Este, Warren & Murphy, 2010: 6). On the matter of news availability, it has to be said overall that news media are readily available in Australia’s metropolitan centres, whereas regional Australia is less well served.

Diversity of news sources

Australia benefits from being part of the English-speaking community, which permits Australians to easily access, for example, British or American-sourced international news. This somewhat restricts the importance of the Australian national news agency, AAP (Australian Associated Press). AAP is owned by the four major Australian newspaper publishers, and mostly concentrates on domestic news but, in the provision of international news, is complemented by alliances with the major international news agencies.

Similarly, the News Corporation’s worldwide media network feeds into its Australian papers and its pay television channel, Foxtel. The national newspaper, The Australian, carries one page sourced from fellow Murdoch publication the Wall Street Journal in its Business section each day, and in its World section sources articles from Murdoch’s London The Times. But other Australian media have similar alliances, and the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) takes a number of its reports from the BBC. The ABC, until recently, maintained quite an extensive foreign correspondents network. Due to reallocating resources to its ‘News 24’ channel, support to the foreign correspondents network has been cut back in 2011 but it still provides the largest and most comprehensive team of foreign correspondents of
any Australian media.

The influence of public relations material is considerable in Australia. A joint *Crikey* – ACIJ (Australian Centre for Independent Journalism) investigation, carried out in September 2009, has found that “nearly 55% of stories analysed were driven by some form of public relations” (Crikey, 2009: 3). However, any story based on a media release, a public relations release or other form of promotion was counted in this percentage. A further breakdown of figures into media releases and press releases or other promotions shows that the highest levels of public relations content were found in reports on police (41 per cent) and arts & entertainment (39 per cent), and the lowest in the areas of energy and environment (11 per cent) and politics (12 per cent) (Crikey, 2009: 6).

With regard to gender balance, the Global Media Monitoring Project found that women only made up 24 per cent of news sources on the sampling day in November 2009 (Romano, 2010: 4). This was particularly striking in sports news, which is Australia’s most-reported news topic (Lawe-Davies & le Brocque, 2006: 97). Here women only made up 1 per cent of sources, and they “were disproportionately portrayed as celebrities and victims” (Romano, 2010: 4).

**News consumption**

The broadcast media, newspapers, and to an increasing degree the Internet, are the main news providers for the Australian population. More than 92 per cent of Australians aged 15 years and older reported that they listened to radio, with 91.1 per cent indicating that they listened regularly (at least once a week). More than 53 per cent of these listened to commercial FM radio while 40.1 per cent listened to one of the stations provided by the public broadcaster. About one-quarter listened to commercial AM stations, 14.6 per cent to the ABC’s Triple J network, 13.7 per cent to community stations, 5.6 per cent to other stations and 4.6 per cent to SBS’s ethnic broadcast stations (ACMA, 2009: 64; note McNair Ingenuity have reported higher audience listenership for the community radio sector, at around 27 per cent of Australians listening weekly, McNair Ingenuity 2008 and 2010).

**Table 6 – Use of news and talkback radio 2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Gp</th>
<th>15-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
<th>55-64</th>
<th>65-74</th>
<th>75+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talkback</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ACMA (2009: 65)

Two-thirds or more of the radio audience listened to radio news, with the exception of the 15-24 age group where listening figures were lower (45 per cent). Despite
these figures which indicate the popularity of radio, separate research has shown that radio is not considered the main source of news.

Television has long been the major news provider in Australia (Phillips & Tapsell, 2007), and recent figures do not change this picture. Between half and two-thirds of the Australian population acknowledges this medium as their source for national news, and even more so for international news. Interestingly, for the younger generation, the internet is already the second most important provider of international news, whereas the print media occupies this space for older generations.

Table 7 – Media type as sources of national news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National News source</th>
<th>14-17</th>
<th>18-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-49</th>
<th>50-64</th>
<th>65+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Roy Morgan Research (2007)

Table 8 – Media type as sources of international news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National News source</th>
<th>14-17</th>
<th>18-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-49</th>
<th>50-64</th>
<th>65+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>68.5%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
<td>64.5%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Roy Morgan Research (2007)

These figures underpin the fact that television is the major news provider for Australians of all age groups, in particular for international news. While the older generation also takes a large share of information, both national and international, from the newspapers, people up to the age of 34 turn to the internet as their second preference for sourcing international news.

In this context it has to be noted that the major television news providers are not, as in many European countries, the national broadcaster/s, but commercial television stations. Data shows that Channel 7 news on weekdays and Sundays and its current affairs program, Today Tonight, are among Australia’s ten most-watched programs. An estimated audience share of 24 per cent watched Channel 7 Sunday news (The Numbers, The Australian Media Supplement, November 1, 2010: 31).
The Australian Communications and Media Authority found that Australian television viewers in households with free-to-air sets spent an average of 161 minutes per day watching television in 2008, with commercial channels accounting for the majority of their viewing. Viewers in subscription television households spent 218 minutes per day watching television (ACMA, 2009: 61). These figures are likely to shift when considering the increasing use of the internet. Between 1998 and 2008-09 household access to the internet at home more than quadrupled from 16 per cent to 72 per cent, while access to computers has increased from 44 per cent to 78 per cent (ABS, 2009b).

**FREEDOM – MEDIA ORGANISATION LEVEL**

This section looks at whether the media, which proclaim to be pillars of democracy, are democratic in structure themselves. Newsroom democracy is defined by consultation, participation and plurality of views. Media owners and external power holders should not have undue influence on editorial decisions and news selection.

When looking at the internal rules for newsroom democracy, major indices are the right of journalists to have a formal say in how to portray political issues, the existence of a newsroom council and the journalists’ right to appoint the editor-in-chief, or at least have an input into appointment decisions.

To gauge the degree of newsroom democracy in Australia, the research had to rely on interviews with journalists at editorial levels as no written newsroom rules exist that state the rights of journalists. All interviewees confirmed that that there were no newsroom councils in their media. However, the Australian journalists union does have ‘house committees’ of journalists in the various media companies which meet regularly to discuss industrial matters as well as professional and ethical issues. While all interviewees agreed that Australian newsrooms followed a hierarchical structure in which the editor is the ‘boss’, several mentioned that some editors work ed in more collegiate ways than others, and that it depended on the seniority of the journalist as to how much direction s/he needed to take.

Nord, Nieminen and Trappel note in their concluding remarks that in the Freedom section the lowest scores are recorded for internal rules for practice of democracy. “In most countries analyzed, journalists are not at all involved in processes for election of editors-in-chief or other persons in leading positions” (2011: 350). However, there are exceptions. In the Netherlands, for example editorial by-laws give a formal guarantee of the influence journalists can exercise over the content and important appointments. Portugal goes even further in that the Constitution states the right of journalists to elect newsroom councils, as well as their right to have a
say in the editorial orientation of the news media. This is based on the concept that media is not a business like any other and that “journalists are expected to actively work to guarantee that media meet their social responsibilities” (Fidalgo, 2011: 243). Australia again is closest to Britain, where Humphreys quotes Tunstall who “hardly paints a picture of vibrant democracy within [British] newspapers, finding instead that newspaper editors have always wielded ‘commanding powers’. Journalists have had little professional defence against editorial power” (Humphreys, 2011: 322).

An even more vexed subject matter in Australia is the degree of independence of the newsroom from the owners or the company management. Historically, Australia has been known for its hands-on media owners. While Rupert Murdoch publicly maintains that he does not interfere with the decisions of his editors (Chessell, 2010b), a prominent court case in 2010 brought by the sacked editor of high circulation Melbourne tabloid Herald Sun indicates intervention by the Murdoch family, particularly in the appointment of editors and in some content decisions (Guthrie, 2010; Milovanovic, 2010). Other studies have similarly reported that media owners, notably Sir Frank Packer and Kerry Packer, actively participated in editorial decisions (Barry, 1993; Griffen-Foley 1999; Griffen-Foley, 2002).

In Australia, much depends on the ownership structure of the media company, and several, such as the public broadcasters, have statements on the independence of the editorial board. All the same, there is agreement on a culture in Australian newsrooms of ‘upward referral’. Conversely to internal influence on the newsroom, the strong position of media proprietors protects their media companies from external influence. Throughout Australia’s history, the influence of media owners and editors on politics has been in evidence rather than the other way around (Griffen-Foley, 2003).

In the European studies, the daily news conferences were put forward as evidence for consultation, participation and plurality of views. In Australia, too, all interviewees mentioned the importance of the daily news conferences—two per day in the print media and one in the broadcast media—and saw these as the forum of debate on news values and news selection. Some emphasized that there is a further degree of transparency in that visitors can sit in on these news conferences, something that is rarely possible in European countries.

Australia’s size comes into play in this question. The ABC, as well as one of the national newspapers, mentioned the considerable logistics in putting together news bulletins or a paper for a country of the size of Australia, which covers several time zones. While each state or territory nominates their top stories, the decision which of these should gain prominence has to be made centrally in these media outlets, with national, rather than local, news values in mind.
In summary, news information is freely available to Australian citizens in a diversity of formats. However, internally the media in Australia show few democratic traits due to the influence of media owners.

EQUALITY – COUNTRY LEVEL

Providing information and ideas for public debate is considered another essential role of the media in a democratic framework. This section examines whether divergent views and perspectives are available to the public by examining levels of media ownership concentration, provision of minority media, diversity of formats and media affordability.

Media ownership concentration

Historically, Australia has a high level of media ownership concentration. This is primarily evident in the print and television media, which led in 1986 to the introduction of legislation by the then-federal Treasurer, Paul Keating, that a newspaper proprietor could not own a television station or radio station in the same city (Chadwick, 1989). Although this rule was abandoned in 2006, the June 2009 figures published by the Audit Bureau of Circulation for newspaper market share still reflect the effects of the earlier regulation.

Table 9 – Market share of Australian daily newspaper publishers, June 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Total sold</th>
<th>Market share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Ltd</td>
<td>1,698,124</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairfax</td>
<td>811,407</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven West Media (formerly WAN)</td>
<td>227,605</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APN News &amp; Media (APN)</td>
<td>154,033</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>24,177</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Isaacs (2010a: 6-7)

The June 2009 figures for Sunday newspapers indicate a more concentrated market share distribution:
### Table 10 – Market share of Australian Sunday newspapers, June 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Total sold</th>
<th>Market reach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Ltd</td>
<td>2,535,490</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairfax</td>
<td>762,094</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APN News &amp; Media (APN)</td>
<td>13,697</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Isaacs (2010a: 6-7)

The major newspapers published by News Ltd are nationally, *The Australian* (all editions), *The Daily Telegraph* (NSW), the *Herald Sun* (Victoria), *The Courier-Mail* (Queensland), *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), *The Mercury* (Tasmania), and in the Northern Territory, the *Northern Territory News*. Fairfax publishes nationally *The Australian Financial Review*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* (Melbourne). It also publishes papers in major regional centres, such as the *Illawarra Mercury* (Wollongong), *The Newcastle Herald* (Newcastle), *The Border Mail* (Albury-Wodonga) and *The Warrnambool Standard* (Warrnambool). APN News & Media publishes in regional centres in northern NSW and throughout Queensland.

A comparison with the figures of 2006 (Jackson, 2006) show a decrease in News Ltd’s market share which, for almost two decades, was at 68 per cent of the daily newspaper market, whereas Fairfax, which publishes *The Age* in Melbourne and *Sydney Morning Herald* in Sydney has increased its market share.

The market for television is shared a little more widely between two public broadcasters, three free-to-air commercial television stations and pay television. The numbers are published on a weekly basis by Oztam, and also in *The Australian*’s Media Supplement. The market share figures give Channel 7, Channel 9 and Pay TV around two to three percentage points above 20 per cent each. Channel 10 hovers under 20 per cent, the ABC around 15 per cent and SBS around 4 per cent.

When looking at Australia’s regions, media ownership due to demographic distribution and the resulting economies of scale is even more concentrated. Two areas are given as an example, the south-west region of Western Australia (population: 163,170; area: 24,000km²) and Gippsland in Victoria (population: 241,483; area 41,538 km²).

A total of 15 newspapers serve different towns in the south-west’s 12 local government areas, but these newspapers are only produced in larger towns, such as Bunbury, Busselton and Margaret River. The market is dominated by Seven West Media (formerly West Australian Newspaper Holdings), which owns six of these...
newspapers plus a regional Western Australian weekly, *Countryman*, and Fairfax, which owns five. The other four newspapers are locally owned. There are also only three tiers of radio ownership in the south-west. Public broadcaster ABC has the widest coverage, holding licences in nine towns. Southern Cross Media Group holds six licences and Western Australian Newspaper Holdings has four radio licences in addition to its newspaper market share.

Newspaper and radio ownership is more diverse in Gippsland, which has 16 newspapers and 23 radio stations covering towns in six local government areas. Fairfax owns a large share of the newspaper market, with six, and Star News Group owns one. But, in contrast to the south-west of Western Australia, Gippsland has nine locally owned newspapers. Gippsland also has nine community radio stations, as well as five ABC and four Southern Cross Media Group stations, and five stations owned by three regional companies.

Free-to-air national and regional television stations owned by ABC, SBS, Prime Television and WIN Corporation are available in analogue format throughout most of the south-west and Gippsland. Southern Cross Media Group’s regional Victorian analogue station is available in Gippsland. The content of these stations, however, is mostly sourced from programs shown on these broadcasters’ parallel networks in the capital cities (ABC, SBS, Seven, Nine and Ten). News programs offer some localised content. Pay television is provided mostly via satellite to these regions by Foxtel in Western Australia and Austar in Victoria. A wider range of free-to-air channels, including new channels introduced by the main broadcasters, is now available in digital format in larger towns and newer regional developments through analogue/digital set top box converters and pay television’s satellite and cable services.

However, there are still many regional towns that cannot receive terrestrial digital signals, which led the government in 2010 to offer subsidies for household purchases of satellite dishes and equipment (Brady, 2010). The Australian government’s Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (2010) recently estimated, based on small survey samples, that 80 per cent of households in Gippsland had already converted to digital television, while only 58 per cent of households in regional Western Australia were receiving digital signals. For this figure, the Department’s survey combined all parts of regional and remote Western Australia. Gippsland switched permanently from analogue to digital television in May 2011, and the south-west will be one of the last areas in Australia to switch in December 2013.

This snapshot of Gippsland and the south-west of Western Australia shows that regional areas in Australia were at a greater disadvantage in terms of news provision...
in an already concentrated media market. The current roll out of digital media and broadband will help citizens in regional and remote areas to put them on a more equal footing with Australia’s urban population.

**Minority media**

Australia is exceptionally well served with broadcast and print in languages other than English. Australia’s second public broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), is considered unique in that its radio and television services are broadcast in more languages than on any other network in the world (Ang, 2008). The television program on its first channel in languages other than English – which comprise more than half the SBS television schedule – are accessible to all viewers through SBS-produced English-language subtitles. Its charter is “to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia’s multicultural society” (SBS, 2010). SBS television broadcasts in 23 languages, including news programs and SBS radio broadcasts in 68 languages, including news programs. One of SBS’s digital channels is almost entirely devoted to news programs taken from stations around the world. In addition, community radio broadcasts in more than one hundred languages. Surveys conducted by the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters’ Council (NEMBC) revealed that in an average week the sector produces 2,439 hours of multilingual language programs (NEMBC, 2011). Indigenous radio and television also form an important part of the community media sector. In recent years, the federal government has provided funds to NITV, the National Indigenous Television service, to make it something of a third public broadcaster, although its funding levels are well below both the ABC and SBS. The establishment of NITV was at the cost of many remote Indigenous media organisations who had previously received support through the bush-based ICTV (Indigenous Community Television) structure.

Australia’s multiculturalism is equally reflected in the print sector. In New South Wales, newspapers in 30 different languages are available which includes seven newspapers in Arabic, five different Chinese publications, four Korean and Turkish and three Afghan/Iranian papers. The other states do not offer quite the same spread. Victoria offers papers in 17 different languages, with six different papers in Chinese, and four each in Greek and Indian languages. Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia only have four, three and two newspapers respectively in languages other than English. The frequency of publication varies from bi-weekly to weekly, which is the most common form, to fortnightly, and in some cases, monthly (Ethnic Media Organisations, 2010).

The two Indigenous newspapers, the *National Indigenous Times* and the *Koori Mail*, reported a circulation of 12,000 copies and more than 9,000 copies respectively.
Previously, Australia’s high media ownership concentration prompted the predecessor of the Australian Communications and Media Authority, the Australian Broadcast Authority, to find out whether there was an adequate range in the sources of news and current affairs, and also the degree of influence that different types of broadcasting services were able to exert in shaping community views in Australia. Pearson and Brand also asked whether there was sufficient diversity of news formats (Pearson & Brand: 2001, 191-199). According to the study’s findings, newspapers and public radio were considered to cover local and regional issues better than other media, with commercial radio and television only doing a somewhat adequate job (Pearson & Brand, 2001: 198). These findings still have validity with regard to regional news where the recent increase in digital television and the four-fold increase in internet use has done little to improve local and regional news.

**Media affordability**

In Australia, like in all European countries apart from Portugal, the media is readily affordable. In 2007-08, the average disposable household income was A$811 per week (ABS, 2009b), or A$42,172 per year.

**Table 11 – Newspaper prices in Australia in 2010**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Weekday edition $AU</th>
<th>Saturday edition $AU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>National daily newspapers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Australian</em></td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Financial Review</em></td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Capital city daily newspapers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Adelaide Advertiser</em></td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Age</em></td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Canberra Times</em></td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Courier Mail</em></td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Daily Telegraph</em></td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Herald Sun</em></td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hobart Mercury</em></td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>NT News</em></td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sydney Morning Herald</em></td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The West Australian</em></td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Isaacs (2010b: 4-5)
The news media costs, as detailed above, show that the supply of a daily paper, plus a subscription to pay television and broadband lies somewhere between three and five per cent of the average weekly Australian income. Newspapers, while being home delivered, are not customarily bought on subscription rates as they are in Europe.

Australia does not charge radio or television fees for the public broadcasters, as these are taken out of the general tax revenue. The only expenses are subscription television or Pay TV.

**Table 12 – Monthly pay television costs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Minimum subscription</th>
<th>Maximum subscription</th>
<th>Installation fee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foxtel</td>
<td>$72</td>
<td>$135</td>
<td>Free-$200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austar</td>
<td>$42</td>
<td>$124.45</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optus Television</td>
<td>$42</td>
<td>$116.95</td>
<td>$500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood Cable</td>
<td>$19.95</td>
<td>$54.95</td>
<td>$99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Collated from various publicly available sources in 2010

All subscription television providers offer news channels, such as BBC, CNN and Sky News, in their minimum subscription packages. The subscription rate for broadband in Australia is between A$50 – A$60 a month.

**EQUALITY – MEDIA LEVEL**

This section examines how well the media’s performance is monitored, and which regulatory or self-regulatory mechanisms are in place. It also considers the level of public participation in the media, as access is considered an important component of media democracy.

**Monitors**

Australia has a number of monitoring instruments, and these are largely self-regulatory. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) has the task of regulating broadcasting, radio communications and telecommunications. It mostly looks after adequate communication reach, licences and technical industry performance, and steps in when transgressions occur with regard to compliance with licence conditions, codes and standards. This also extends to online content.
A high-profile case, commonly referred to as ‘cash for comment’, prompted ACMA’s predecessor, the Australian Broadcasting Authority, to inquire into industry standards in commercial radio in 1999. The case concerned a number of commercial radio news commentators, commonly known in Australia as ‘shock jocks’, who had reportedly received payment from major companies to promote particular political viewpoints on their programs. As a result of the inquiry and the finding of systemic failure to ensure the effective operation of the industry’s self-regulatory codes of practice, the Australian Broadcasting Authority determined three program standards for commercial radio licencees in 2000 (ACMA, 2010).

The public broadcasters, ABC and SBS, have boards which consist of the managing director and five to seven directors, appointed by the government of the day, which has resulted in criticism of the appointees’ political affiliations, backgrounds, and relative merits. The ABC board is also responsible for ensuring that the gathering and presentation of news and information is accurate and impartial, according to recognised standards of journalism, and that the ABC complies with legislative and legal requirements (ABC, 2008).

The Australian Press Council is the self-regulatory body for the print media. It was established in 1976 with two main aims – to help preserve the traditional freedom of the press in Australia; and to ensure that the free press acts responsibly and ethically and provides accurate and balanced reporting (Australian Press Council, 2010a). The Australian Press Council has 22 members, comprising an “independent Chair and eight ‘public members’, who have no affiliations with a media organisation; nine nominees of media organisations which are ‘constituent bodies’ of the Council; [and] four independent journalist members, who are not employed by a media organisation” (Australian Press Council, 2011). While it only deals with complaints received, it does play an active role in promoting freedom of speech and access to information, and in ensuring high journalistic and editorial standards. Its adjudications are available on its website, as are its research reports, State of the News Print Media in Australia, which was published until 2008.

While the Australian Press Council is well aware of the debate about its effectiveness, interviews conducted for this projected indicated the APC was achieving a mediated settlement in a short space of time in at least half the cases brought to it. Settlement can consist of the publication of an apology, a correction, a clarification or publication of follow-up material. Several newspapers now have a correction or ‘we were wrong’ column.

All European countries in this study, with the exception of Portugal, have press councils as the self-regulatory body of the print media industry. While the composition of these councils, their funding and adjudication processes differs,
none of the press council’s recommendations can be enforced by law. In Britain in 2007 it was argued that statutory regulation “is a hallmark of authoritarianism and risks undermining democracy” (House of Commons cited in Humphreys, 2011: 332). The Swedish press council can issue fines up to €2500 (AU$3300). Also, not all press councils work smoothly. In Austria, after a controversy concerning the news coverage of Kronen Zeitung in 2001, the publishers’ association withdrew its support from the press council which therefore was de facto inactive from 2002 to 2010. In 2010, the press council was re-established but criticised because its decisions were supposed to be final without the possibility of further legal actions in the same case (Grünangerl & Trappel, 2011: 98).

Unlike several of the European countries, such as Sweden and Portugal, Australia does not have ombudsmen, neither in-house in the media companies nor is there at the national level an ombudsman for the media. Many of the print media houses have their codes of conduct or editorial ethics policy readily available on their websites (ABC, 2009a), and the ABC has created a special position of director of editorial policies who frequently speaks at public forums.

For journalists, the Media Arts and Entertainment Alliance (MEAA) code of ethics is the major self-regulatory instrument. The code of ethics was first adopted in 1944 (Lloyd, 1985: 228), and has been revised twice since. It was drafted by the Australian Journalists’ Union, which later became part of MEAA, and has all the hallmarks of a union-based code (Josephi, 1998). For a long time, it was Australia’s only code of ethics for journalists. Concise in nature and upheld by the union to which a high proportion of Australian journalists used to belong, it is well-known to journalists and throughout the print industry, has a deep professional penetration. Over the last two decades, more and more media companies added their own in-house codes of conduct to the MEAA code (see, e.g., The Age, 2002). As the online presence of media, and in particular social media, continually extends, new ethical issues that previously did not have to be considered and which the MEAA code does not cover, are emerging. For this reason, both the Fairfax Media Group and the Herald and Weekly Times group have developed policies, which came into effect in July 2011 (Fairfax Media Group, 2011; Herald and Weekly Times, 2011).

Media ethics also form a core part of all tertiary journalistic training (Richards, 2005; Hirst & Patching, 2005; Tanner, Phillips, Smyth & Tapsell, 2005).

Public participation

The degree of public participation in the media, according to the interviewees consulted for this project, is now as high as it has ever been. One interviewee mentioned that her investigative stories were accompanied by an online forum where the public could send in comments and tips, and that the response was
overwhelming and often unmanageable. Yet while there is a far greater interaction between journalists and the public than in the past, this does not amount to an actual participation in the news process. In this, Australia is very much on par with the European countries, where the news selection process is entrusted to the hands of professional journalists.

In the traditional print media, the “Letters to the Editor” is the customary feedback tool. Most Australian papers devote a page to “Letters to the Editor”, to which columns of brief emails from readers are added under the heading of “Commentary”.

The public broadcasters ABC and SBS have high profile programs, ‘Q & A’ and ‘Insight’, which are built on audience participation, not only of the audience in the studio but also emailed questions and tweets, with a strip of Twitter comments running at the bottom of the screen. Almost 36,000 tweets were recorded in an hour in one ‘Q & A’ during the election 2010 campaign (Scott, 2010). The ABC website offers two political blogs under the title of The Drum and Unleashed, which invites the public to “Our rolling gabfest. Drop in, have your say”.

The ABC has been criticised, mainly by its commercial rivals, for its strong push into new technologies. But the current managing director is unapologetic about this move. In his words, “news is in our Charter. We have provided for a for commentary and analysis around news events for decades on radio … audiences have flocked to the ABC’s distinctive offering [on the web] for the breadth and selection of content, and for the opportunity to engage with and discuss matters of contention. We are now seeing 2.2 million visitors a month. In the space of just six months page views of Drum/Unleashed have doubled” (Scott, 2010).

Australian print media have a reasonable degree of internal diversity through their opinion pages, especially in their Saturday editions. These opinion pieces are either written by regular columnists who may or may not be staff on the paper or by invited columnists such as politicians or other public figures. These can range from pieces by Aboriginal leaders’ commentary on government action in Indigenous affairs to a former German foreign minister writing on the German chancellor’s policy in the Middle East.

In summary, in terms of equality Australia is not scoring as high as many European countries because of its strong media ownership concentration and the continuing city–bush divide in terms of information provision and coverage. On the other hand, media is readily affordable in Australia and its self-regulatory mechanisms are comparable to those in European countries.
CONTROL – COUNTRY LEVEL

Scrutinizing government, business and other bodies is considered a principal democratic role of the media. Legal provisions for independence from power holders have to be in place for the media to carry out this task without fear or favour. The media, in turn, have to be monitored to evaluate whether their work meets acceptable standards.

Independence from power holders

Legal instruments to guarantee greater independence from power holders have become law as recently as in March 2011. The passing of the Federal shield law by the Senate has to be seen as a big step towards journalists being able to guarantee confidentiality to their sources. However, the same law does not yet exist on a state level in some of the Australian states.

On the other side of the ledger, Australia’s defamation laws can be used as a pathway to prevent scrutiny (Pearson, 2007). Apart from the United Kingdom, other European countries do not have a similar legal instrument as a way to silence journalists. Although the law is designed to protect people’s reputations from unfair attack it can also be used to protect powerful people from unwanted disclosures. In particular politicians and wealthy individuals have been known to serve writs quickly when they see unfavourable comment in the media. Defamation action is costly and can only be pursued by those with sufficient funds, thus hardly benefitting the ordinary citizen. The 2005 reforms restricted companies from suing for defamation, and established truth as an unqualified defence (Australian Press Council, 2010b). However, this step has failed Australian media defendants (Fernandez, 2009). The qualified privilege defence of Australia’s uniform defamation laws is still considered insufficient to ensure reasonable publication of information in the public interest (Breit, 2011: 19).

The public broadcasters do not have the degree of independence enjoyed by most European public broadcasters. Since 1973 the ABC has been funded entirely by the Australian government with relatively short funding cycles, and is therefore in a position of dependency. It is a similar scenario for the Special Broadcasting Service, although it derives 20 per cent of its revenue from advertising. With both public broadcasters, the selection procedure for their boards is not independent from government.

Access to information

The Freedom of Information legislation in Australia was considered such a hurdle to journalistic work that in 2007 nine major media companies, the two public
broadcasters and the MEAA formed the ‘Right to Know’ coalition to address concerns about free speech in Australia (Right to Know, 2010). This coalition set out to work with the Commonwealth and State governments to establish new policy and best practice to improve Australian’s relatively poor world ranking for freedom of speech. In November 2010, changes to the Freedom of Information laws came into effect, making it easier for Australians to obtain information about the federal government. Several of the Australian states, notably NSW, Queensland and Tasmania, had previously begun to overhaul their Freedom of Information legislation (Herman, 2009: 9-11). All the same, interviewees pointed to two major problems with Australia’s Freedom of Information laws. One is the time it takes to access the information, and the other is the ongoing secrecy provisions, particularly with the Department of Defence which prevents journalists, or anyone, accessing information.

By comparison, some European countries provide their journalists with easy access to information. For example, in Switzerland, according to law, the State must provide information to journalists who seek it. In Sweden, the default position for governmental documents since 1766 is that they are public.

Watching over the watchdogs

In Australia, some media functions as ‘watchers’ of the news media industry. The most continual source of ‘inside stories’ on the media as well as politics, business and the environment is the web publication *Crikey* (crikey.com.au). Its pages are available to subscribers only, with an annual subscription costing AU$160.

Arguably, the best-known program is *Media Watch* on ABC television, which has been broadcast for more than 20 years. *Media Watch* has a weekly 15–20 minute program slot right after the ABC’s major investigative television program, *Four Corners*, on Monday nights, and in 2009 averaged 736,000 viewers per program (ABC, 2009b). *Media Watch* picks on factual errors and sloppy journalism, unethical behaviour such as plagiarism, and does not shy away from criticising its own broadcaster. Under the motto, ‘Stay brave and true’, it has had some high profile presenters, either journalists with years of experience or media lawyers.

Several Australian newspapers have dedicated media sections. The national paper, *The Australian*, the flagship of News Ltd, publishes a weekly six-page Media Supplement, with articles, commentaries, and ‘The numbers’, which provides the ratings figures for radio or television programs, and the top stories of the past week on various platforms and other industry news and analysis. Such an extensive media supplement is unusual compared to what is on offer in European papers, where the weekly media section takes up one or sometimes only half a page, and often looks at the television offerings of the week.
CONTROL – MEDIA LEVEL

This section asks how well the media are equipped in professional terms to fulfil their watchdog role, and to what extent they commit to this function.

Journalistic professionalism

Most of Australia’s journalists have received some professional training. The days when journalists joined media companies directly after finishing their schooling, and worked their way up, are well and truly over. The training is mostly provided by the tertiary sector. For the past two decades all but two of Australia’s 39 tertiary institutions have offered journalism courses (Koivisto & Thomas, 2008: 95). This development has led to significant changes in the educational level of Australian journalists over this period. Whereas in 1992 only 35 per cent of journalists held a degree, in 2010 this had jumped to 80 per cent. Interestingly, the percentage of those who held an undergraduate degree in journalism had hardly changed, from 33 per cent to 35 per cent, which shows that the industry is happy employing people with degrees other than journalism. However, many journalists hold a postgraduate degree in journalism (Josephi & Richards, 2012). Cadetships are still offered by major media companies, the public broadcaster and some commercial television stations, but their numbers have decreased as a casualty of expenditure cuts.

Media companies offer training for mid-career journalists, for example in video and audio for online, but also media law, social media training, hostile environment reporting, bushfire and natural disaster training. All the same, according to a MEAA spokesperson, these courses are more poorly resourced than they have ever been. The MEAA also provides continuous training, in particular directed towards facilitating the transition to online journalism, or on journalism ethics, which the union sees as core to journalistic professionalism.

The assumption can be made that the more secure journalists are in their employment, the better they can do their research and reporting work, and exercise their watchdog function. However, Life in the Clickstream II, as Australia’s journalists’ union has titled their most recent study into the workplace, promises uncertainty rather than certainty in the job (Este, Warren & Murphy, 2010). While this does not mean that there will be no more jobs in journalism, journalists have to accept new ways of working. Also, the changes in the workplace do not necessarily mean a less dedicated journalistic workforce.

While there are redundancy clauses and long periods of notice in the case of dismissal based on the time served, the union acknowledges that this is a difficult climate for the industry in general. According to the MEAA, there is an increasing use of casuals and freelancers, although the more intense period of casualisation
occurred in the early 2000s. The union attempts to enforce that, if a journalist has been a casual for more than six months and has worked a regular pattern of shifts, that s/he has the right to become a regular member of staff. Yet in a time of credit crunch and structural change, newspaper and other media are reluctant to take on permanent staff. The ‘casualisation’ of the industry can also be seen as an opportunity for all those hundreds of journalists who have been made redundant to now earn their living as freelance journalists.

Watchdog function

The watchdog function is undoubtedly considered a central role among Australian journalists and in the Australian media. In a recent survey of Australian journalists, 90 per cent responded that investigating government claims was very important (Josephi & Richards, 2012). Similarly, the editorial-level journalists interviewed for this study saw the watchdog role as their media’s most important task. As one interviewee described it, it is the way the paper can ‘brand’ itself. The interviewees agree about the costliness of investigative journalism, pointing out that the expense of investigative journalism lies in the time it takes, rather than travel budgets or special technology, occupying staff time that could otherwise be diverted to filling the pages of the paper.

Those media companies whose editorial policy is available on the Internet, such as The Age and the West Australian, commit themselves expressly to their role as fourth estate (West Australian, 2009). The Age (2002) details its commitment: “The public interest includes investigating and exposing crime, serious misdemeanour and seriously anti-social conduct, and investigating and exposing hypocrisy, falsehoods or double standards of behaviour by public figures or institutions.” Despite lean times, several media companies have allocated resources to investigative journalism. The West Australian, for one, started a special in-depth investigative report section in 2009, ‘Agenda’, in their Saturday edition. In October 2010 The Australian announced a new “national investigations team to leverage the newspaper’s story-breaking credentials” (The Australian, 2010: 2).

The ABC always had a strong investigative brief, and in 2010 revived and reconfigured its investigative units, which includes the ABC News Online Investigative unit. The ABC’s Four Corners program, a weekly 45-minute report on television, is Australia’s best-known investigative program. Its investigations have triggered royal commissions and have caused state premiers to step down. But other segments on ABC television, such as its nation-wide 7.30 Report and Lateline, also contain strong investigative elements as do a number of ABC radio programs. SBS frequently shows investigative programs on international topics bought in from other providers.

Investigative journalism is a subject or part of a teaching unit in many university
journalism courses, with one institution—the University of Technology Sydney (UTS)—hosting the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ). Students are taught investigative-style reporting methods and how to develop innovative research strategies (Robie, 2011: 5), and they collaborate with mainstream media to have these published or broadcast. These efforts can easily be criticised as insufficient commitment. Yet comparisons with other countries show Australian journalism has a mindset that makes watchdog journalism central in its endeavour with 90 per cent of journalists seeing it as their most important role, and this attitude informs their work. In this, it is similar to British journalism, about which Humphreys asserts that “[d]espite commercial pressures that militate against quality news and investigative journalism, [and] widely perceived by journalists and academics alike to be in decline”, examples abound of outstanding investigative work (Humphreys, 2011: 322). After naming numerous instances such as the parliamentary allowances rorts, he concludes that in all these cases “the press impressively performed its democratic watchdog function as a result of the work of journalists searching for evidence and not reliant on agency feed or PR” (Humphreys, 2011: 322).

In other countries, such as Finland, the watchdog function enjoys “a very high level of importance in the rhetoric of the editors-in-chief” (Karppinen, Nieminen & Markkanen, 2011: 128). All the same, despite experimenting with independent units dedicated to investigative journalism, no newspaper has established them (Karppinen, Nieminen & Markkanen, 2011: 139). In Lithuania and Portugal, investigation is the exception rather than the rule, and in the German-speaking countries, investigation is not considered central. “Our findings corroborate the results of a previous survey showing that no more than 24 per cent of German journalists see themselves as watchdogs” (Weischenberg, Malik & Scholl cited in Marcinkowski & Donk, 2011: 168). No Austrian newsroom has journalists exclusively working on in-depth research of critical stories (Grünangerl & Trappel, 2011: 108). In Switzerland, editors see their main task as being information providers, while also fulfilling the role of being a critical and analytical intermediary between the public and the political elite (Meier, Gmür & Leonarz, 2011: 314).

It has to be concluded that, by comparison, Australia’s journalists and media take the watchdog role very seriously. Despite relatively difficult access to information and only recently passed shield laws, Australia’s media and journalists fulfil their role of holding political and other power-holders accountable.

**Journalistic culture as part of national culture?**

The Australian media provide an interesting example of a journalistic culture that is at odds with the legal framework. With no constitutional rights enshrining freedom of speech and no specific legal framework for the media or journalists, Australia’s dedication to investigative journalism is even more astonishing. It should
be considered worthwhile to briefly discuss possible reasons for this disparate development.

Journalistic culture, over the last decade, has strongly emerged as a field of study (Deuze, 2002; Zelizer, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2007; Hanusch, 2008; Worlds of Journalism, 2011). While Deuze’s (2002) study went little beyond recording journalists’ basic characteristics and role perceptions, Zelizer and Hanitzsch attempted an in-depth theoretical and methodological approach. To Zelizer, seeing journalism through the lens of culture permits one to observe “journalism through the journalists’ own eyes, tracking how being part of the community comes to have meaning for them, and queries the self-perceptions that journalists provide” (Zelizer, 2005: 200). Hanitzsch similarly writes that journalism culture “can be defined as a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously or unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others” (Hanitzsch, 2007: 369). Despite mentioning expressly the performative level, the methodology for the Worlds of Journalism project (Worlds of Journalism, 2011) only includes surveys and interviews with journalists, thus confining it so far to investigating values.

The Media for Democracy Monitor study does not include surveys with journalists, but looks at written documents and facts, such as the way resources are deployed in media companies, as a statement of their practices. These confirm the importance placed on investigative journalism, as do Australia’s highest journalism awards, the Walkley Awards. By far the majority of these have gone to in-depth investigative pieces (O’Donnell, 2009).

Given that the legal framework does not facilitate investigative journalism in Australia, this author wants to put forward the argument that a strong link exists between Australia’s journalism culture and Australia’s national culture. In his classic 1958 study on the topic, The Australian Legend, Russell Ward, despite his trepidation towards stereotypes, draws a picture of the typical Australian. Among his outstanding characteristics is his belief that “Jack is not only as good as his master but, at least in principle, probably a great deal better, and that he is a great ‘knocker’ of eminent people … He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority, especially when these qualities are embodied in military officers and policemen” (Ward, 1965: 2). These characteristics are, to a large part, drawn from Australian literature, whether through such classics as Furphy’s Such is Life or Australia’s unofficial national anthem, Waltzing Matilda, in which the thieving swagman, and not the officer, is the hero. In a poem, Australia’s best known living poet, Les Murray, writes: “At birth, each Australian/ receives a stout bullshit gauge/…/ double-edged, emblematic/ it is his to break” (Murray, 1974: 48).
The “stout bullshit gauge”, cultured from a convict past, a strong Irish and working-class element, still finds its expression in a healthy disrespect of authority (Haskell, 2011), and it is this rebelliousness that the masters tried to keep under control through their laws. This attitude of not “humbling to the crown” (Bold Jack Donohue, n.d.), nor government or other power holders, emerges as the Australian media’s strongest pillar in upholding democracy, as the laws and the institutions that would guarantee the media’s role in a democratic society are only partially equipped to do so.

CONCLUSIONS

Supporting democracy: How well does Australia perform?

When comparing Australia to the European countries that are part of the Media for Democracy Monitor project, a number of features stand out. Australia’s size and geography present a far greater challenge for the nation’s communication infrastructure than is the case in any of the European countries. This impacts on news media availability, and is also a factor in Australia’s high media ownership concentration.

In terms of freedom indicators, Australia is on par with European countries in patterns of media usage and diversity of news sources. However, with regard to internal rules for the practice of news democracy, specifically company rules against internal influence by media owners and procedures for news selection and processing, Australia does not score as well as most of Europe. While at least half of the European countries in the study also have no written rules for the practice of newsroom democracy, only the formerly communist Lithuania has comparable evidence of the media owners or other power holders influencing or interfering with media coverage decisions. None of the countries studied has similarly high profile, and in the past also hands-on, media proprietors. In terms of news selection and processing, it is again Australia’s size that forces the national news into a centralised and somewhat hierarchical approach.

In the core principle of equality, Australia’s concentrated media ownership is a major factor. Only Austria has a similar level of media ownership concentration. Australia has to be noted for having an excellent provision of minority, or ethnic, media, and it is on par with content monitoring instruments, self-regulation and codes of ethics.

In terms of equality, Australia ran the danger of coming last had it not been for the March 2011 passing of federal shield laws and changes to the Freedom Of Information legislation. Instead, Lithuania is the ‘wooden spooner’. Despite the
legal hurdles, Australia stands out for its commitment to watchdog journalism. This is evidenced by the fact that nine out of ten journalists in Australia see the watchdog function as their most important role; that Australian journalism awards its highest prizes to investigative pieces; that professional education assigns high importance to it (Robie, 2011); that media refer to it in their mission statements; and that the media give resources to investigative teams or sections.

Overall, Australia is in the lower middle ranks of the Media for Democracy Monitor, averaging just over 60 per cent on the total media monitoring scale. The Scandinavian countries of Sweden and Finland are high on the scale, which tallies with similar placings, for example, by Reporters without Borders (2010) or Freedom House (2010), where both nations are accorded number one ranking. High scorers, too, are the Netherlands and Germany. The Baltic nation of Lithuania clearly still has the longest way to go before achieving a structure that adequately supports democracy. The study of the Australian media shows that legal frameworks and media ownership structures are the two most significant factors impeding strong democratic functioning.
REFERENCES


Notes for contributors

*Australian Journalism Monographs* welcomes submissions of manuscripts on any aspect of journalism and news media research. Manuscripts should be between 7000 and 12,000 words, and should not have been published elsewhere. Manuscripts will be subject to a double-peer blind refereeing process, and referee’s comments and reports will be returned to the author.

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Referencing style follows the in-text author-date method, followed by the page number where applicable – for example: *Rodriguez (2001: 36) argued...* or alternatively, *Community media can be considered the newest form of citizen's media (Rodriguez, 2001: 36).* We do accept the footnote method for scholars who may need to provide further explanation or detail on some points.

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Supporting Democracy: How well do the Australian media perform?

Dr Beate Josephi
Edith Cowan University, Western Australia

This monograph analyses how well the Australian media perform in their role of supporting democracy. Areas examined include the free flow of information, patterns of media use, media ownership concentration, levels of self-regulation, independence of news media from owners and/or those in power, internal media democracy, and the importance of the media's watchdog role.