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**Friend
or foe**

**understanding
the impact of
the Australian
media**



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Friend or foe: **understanding** **the impact of** **the Australian** **media**

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Abstract

In Australia today, people are exposed and have access to an overwhelming breadth of media from local, national, and foreign sources. The frequency and availability of media seems greater than ever through newspapers, online content, television, radio, social media, and advertising. There are over 900 national, state and local newspapers (Guide to Australian Newspapers, 2011), nearly 300 commercial and more than 400 community radio stations (World Radio Map, 2021) and over 90 television channels (Media.info, 2021) in Australia alone, not to mention what can be accessed from overseas and online. Opinion pieces also seem to have inundated the news cycle (Park *et al*, 2020; Roy Morgan, 2018; Newman & Fletcher, 2017). News and media outlets seem more determined than ever to present a certain angle to a story, presumably in the hope of influencing the consumer. Interestingly, despite the breadth and ubiquitousness of media, studies show that Australians are only moderate consumers of news and current affairs and that they are less interested in news than many news consumers from other developed countries (Park *et al*, 2020). More importantly, as evidenced by the PM Glynn Survey on Hope, Trust and Belonging, more than half (54%) of the survey participants reported that media had no impact on their lives with another 11% citing the media's negative impact.

Introduction

Journalism and the media play an important role in democratic societies by providing information and commentary to the public on topics and themes about which they do not possess direct knowledge or experience (Flew *et al*, 2020; Happer & Philo, 2013). The media is also an important mechanism for holding people to account. It raises awareness about important issues that might otherwise be overlooked or never publicly addressed. It also has a vital role in motivating governments to act on important matters, like social policy (Sen, 2011).

While being a power for good, the media also possesses a lot of control over what is shared with the public, when it is shared and how it is shared. Because of this control, the media can strongly influence public debate by setting an agenda and using it to direct the focus of the public. The danger here is that the range of arguments and perspectives that inform public debate can be limited (Happer & Philo, 2013). In some cases, the media can also become an instrument for the dissemination of false and inflammatory messages and values that do not foster respectful or thoughtful dialogue. This type of journalism has the power to divide communities and feed the stereotypes that can lead to violence (Sen, 2011). Since accounts of conflict and drama help to make papers sell (Park *et al*, 2020), more sensational points of view often receive airtime rather than the views of the majority that often have more accommodating and balanced perspectives (Sen, 2011).

The dawn of digital media has demonstrated that the world is made up of fragmented and often contradictory information (Happer & Philo, 2013). Consumers, who, once upon a time, waited for the morning or evening editions of the newspaper or televised news, now have mass media at their fingertips. This has led to what has been coined "truth decay" in the media (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). Truth decay comprises increasing disagreement about facts and

interpretation of data, a blurring of the lines between opinion and fact, increasing relative volume, and resulting influence of opinion and personal experience over fact, and declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018).

This truth decay and everything that it embodies may help to explain why Australians are not as impacted by the media, despite its apparent breadth, as one might think. This is evidenced by the results of 2018 PM Glynn Survey on Hope, Trust and Belonging.

The 2018 PM Glynn Survey on Hope, Trust and Belonging

In December 2018, the first PM Glynn Survey on Hope, Trust and Belonging was undertaken. This survey is aimed at investigating the underlying attitudes and concerns that shape responses to current political, social and ethical issues and their implications for Australian society. The survey has eight major sections covering:

- Current life circumstances and life goals;
- Influences and connectedness;
- Fears and concerns;
- Beliefs and attitudes;
- Attitudes to changes in society;
- Human rights;
- Democracy; and
- Religion.

There were 3000 respondents aged 16 years and over, who were selected at random to be representative of the national population. In the course of the survey, respondents were asked, “Which of the following sources of influence have had, or currently have, the most impact in shaping your beliefs, your values, your goals, and the way you conduct your life?” The survey recorded the responses to several variables including the media.

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA (N=3000)	
Positive impact	35%
No impact	54%
Negative impact	11%

While 35% of participants responded that the media had a positive impact on their lives, a majority of 54% responded that the

media had no impact on their lives and a further 11% went as far as to say that the media had a negative impact on their lives.

Key demographics and the impact of media

The survey also mapped responses to the question on the media with other variables including age, residence, income and education to determine if this would make a difference to how the media is perceived.

IMPACT OF MEDIA BY AGE GROUP, RESIDENCE, INCOME AND EDUCATION (N=3000)						
Age group	16-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65+yrs	
Positive impact	43%	39%	33%	29%	35%	
No impact	42%	52%	58%	59%	55%	
Negative impact	15%	8%	9%	12%	10%	
Residence	Metro	Rural				
Positive impact	37%	31%				
No impact	52%	58%				
Negative impact	10%	12%				
Income	<\$50,000	\$50,000 - <\$80,000	\$80,000 - <\$120,000	\$120,000 - <\$200,000	\$200,000 or more	Unable to estimate
Positive impact	32%	35%	39%	37%	45%	30%
No impact	57%	56%	49%	52%	48%	59%
Negative impact	11%	10%	12%	11%	7%	11%
Education	TAFE or vocational qualification	University first degree	University higher degree			
Positive impact	34%	38%	42%			
No impact	55%	51%	48%			
Negative impact	11%	11%	10%			

The table shows that across age groups, from 25 years old and above, media had no impact on the lives of the majority of the respondents. The 16-24 age cohort was the only group that reported a slightly higher figure of 43% who felt that the media had had a positive impact. Nonetheless, for this age cohort, a sizable 42% also reported “no impact”. Hence, the general finding is that despite media’s proliferation and ease of access to it, the majority of the respondents across the age groups reported a lack of impact by media.

The same finding is shown when cross-tabulating respondent's perception of the media and their place of residence. The majority of respondents (53% to 58%), whether residing in a metropolitan area or rural area, cited media's lack of impact on their lives. Less than 40% of metropolitan and rural residents cited media's positive impact.

The findings are interesting when the impact of media and income is cross-tabulated. While the general trend holds true that the majority of the respondents across all income levels reported that the media had had no impact on their lives, it is interesting that:

- Those in the lowest income bracket (earning less than \$50,000 per year) had the highest percentage (57%) of respondents who cited media's lack of impact on their lives. This is in contrast to those earning over \$200,000 annually who had the lowest percentage (48%) across income levels to report no impact;
- Those with income over \$200,000 reported the highest percentage of respondents (45%) who felt that the media had had a positive impact on their lives. Compare this to the lower income group with less than \$50,000 annual income, only 32% cited the positive impact of media on their lives; and
- The biggest percentage of middle-income earners (income levels from \$80,000 to \$120,000) and higher middle-income earners (above \$120,000 to less than \$200,000) reported no impact.

When taking into account education, a similar finding emerged. Across education levels, the majority of the respondents (48% to 55%) reported that media had had no impact on their lives. Interestingly though, the higher the level of education is, the more positive the impact of media seems to be. Forty-two percent of those with a university higher degree reported that the media had had a positive impact on them in contrast to 38% of those with a university degree and 34% with TAFE or vocational qualification.

The results from the survey demonstrate that while there are some minor differences in how the impacts of the media are felt by respondents across different demographics, in every instance except the 16-24 age bracket, the percentage of respondents who felt that the media had impacted their lives in a positive way was less than those who felt the media had had no impact on their lives, so much so that the positive impacts of the media were never recorded above 50% of any of the variables discussed.

What could account for these results?

In Australia, interest in media has declined over the last five years (Park *et al.*, 2020). In the 2019 *Digital News Report* which surveyed attitudes towards media across 38 countries, Australians were found to be the lightest consumers of news. It was recorded that 48% of Australians accessed news once a day or less compared to the global average of 34% (Fisher *et al.*, 2019). In comparison, only 15% of people from Sweden were light consumers of news (meaning that 85% of Swedes were heavy consumers of news), along with 29% from Japan, 33% from the UK, 36% from Germany, 37% from the USA and 43% from Canada (Fisher *et al.*, 2019). In 2020, this figure reduced slightly with 44% of Australians consuming news once a day or less. While an improvement, but most likely brought about by interest in the Australian bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic (Park *et al.*, 2020), this demonstrates that

many Australians are simply not interested in news and the media. But why might this be, particularly when news is ubiquitous, and it is so easy to access? Is the power of the media merely a perception rather than fact? Distrust of media and journalism that is considered not independent and news that is overpopulated with opinion and bias seem to be the main drivers of this issue.

Trust in news and media is essential to the running of well-functioning societies (Flew *et al*, 2020). If people do not trust their news providers, then the impact of the news these providers purvey will understandably be limited. Studies suggest that trust in news is falling across all news and media platforms (Park *et al*, 2020; Ipsos Global Advisor, 2019) and mistrust of news has become a major global issue in recent times. The public are concerned about sensationalism and inaccurate news reporting, the blurring of fact and opinion, journalistic bias, unethical behaviour, and a lack of transparency (Finkelstein, 2021; Flew *et al*, 2020). There is a shared expectation between producers of news and consumers of news that there is an “ethically coherent and culturally convincing foundation for evaluating news performance” (Coleman, 2012). Unfortunately, however, this is not always upheld.

Of course, it should be mentioned that not all consumers use news for purely factual accounts of day-to-day events. People also seek out entertainment news and opinions of everyday people often found in the comment sections of a news site or through the sharing of news via social media. Consumers may not necessarily believe what they read, nor does it influence their decision-making, but they engage with the content for amusement and distraction and nothing more.

In Australia, news consumers are increasingly turning to social media and search engines to find news (Park *et al*, 2020). Interestingly, this shift correlates to an increase in consumers who distrust the news. For comparison, a recent study shows that 26% of consumers who rely mainly on television for their news say that they distrust the news, however, 43% of people who rely mainly on social media for their news say that they distrust the news (Park *et al*, 2020). If more and more people distrust the news, partly because of the platform that they are using to access the news, it is again unsurprising that they are not being impacted by the news and media.

Trust in news can also fluctuate depending on the social, political or environmental circumstances. The 2020 *Digital News Report* found that during the 2020 Australian bushfire crisis, consumers’ trust in news was only 38%. Trust in news about COVID-19 however peaked at 53% and even higher for local news reporting on the pandemic at 61% (Park *et al*, 2020). Greater public trust in local news suggests that traditional forms of media are not completely meeting consumers’ demands. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reporting of news and output from media focused on expert opinions and comprehensive, intellectual discussion of the issue with a focus on facts and figures. Did the nature of this style of reporting draw consumers back to the fold? Were consumers more satisfied with this style of reporting, along with the obvious public interest in the crisis as it unfolded? These questions need to be explored.

The possibility of misinformation is another cause for distrust of the media amongst Australians. Sixty-four percent of Australians surveyed in the 2020 *Digital News Report* reported that they were concerned about possible misinformation from online news sources. When asked about which sources they were most concerned about producing false or misleading information, 35% indicated that they were most concerned about misinformation produced by the Australian government, politicians or political parties, 20% were concerned about activists and activist groups and 14% were concerned about misinformation from journalists and news sources (Park *et al*, 2020). Mistrust of media released by the Australian

government, politicians and political parties is an interesting finding, especially regarding what this might mean for successful public policy-making. How can the government share changes and updates to policy with the public if over one third are concerned that the government and politicians are not being truthful? Moreover, how can the government be truly effective overall if many people believe that the government and politicians are not being truthful? If this is the case, then why did Australians take a more active interest in news reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic when much of the information available was from government sources? Did people trust and engage with this information differently because it was being delivered by doctors and other healthcare professionals? Is it only politicians that people mistrust? The meaning of truth poses an interesting question here too. What is meant by truth? Do people think that the government is lying, that they are only providing one perspective, that they have an agenda, that they are only telling part of the truth or are they concealing some aspects from the public? Regardless, this mistrust of government poses a huge problem and creates a divide between the government and the public.

Conclusion

The purpose of the media is to inform, influence and impact the consumer, however findings from the 2018 PM Glynn Survey on Hope, Trust and Belonging indicate that respondents overwhelmingly were not impacted by the media regardless of their demographics. As more and more people prefer their news to be independent, unbiased, and well-researched, it is not surprising that there is greater distrust of the media as more opinion-based news items are delivered each day. Despite attempts by the media to influence consumers with opinion-based pieces, and agenda-driven features, it seems that consumers are most drawn to media when journalists commit to reporting the facts as demonstrated by an increase in news consumption in Australia during the outbreak of COVID-19. If Australians do not feel that the media is impacting them today, to such an extent that many are choosing to not engage with media on a daily basis, then this is problematic for the discussion of government policy in the public sphere.

Freelance journalist and academic Margaret Simmons sums up this desire for intellectual, research-driven journalism well, "... journalists are most valued when they stick to their knitting, and to the core principles of journalism. Opinion pieces are of course part of journalistic work, but not the most important part. Lots of people purvey opinions. Opinion is cheap in every sense of the word, and impotent without facts. The thing that journalists do that others don't do, or not consistently, is finding things out in real time, and communicating the results promptly and in language easily understandable by the general public." (Simmons, 2020).

If government and media wish to engage with the general public on important issues that make for effective public policymaking and good governance, then perhaps a refocus of the media industry is called for and a return to good, old fashioned, substantive, factual journalism is what is required.

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The PM Glynn Institute was established by Australian Catholic University (ACU) in 2016 as a public policy think tank to analyse issues of concern to the Catholic Church and the wider Australian community. Its focus is public policy for the common good.

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