

Media favours Coalition, study finds

Posted Wed Sep 2, 2009 5:00pm AEST

Updated Wed Sep 2, 2009 5:11pm AEST

Newspapers are left wing, television is right wing, and the media as a whole tends to favour the Coalition.

And surprisingly, according to researchers from the Australian National University, the ABC Television news is the most pro-Coalition of them all.

Former Liberal prime minister John Howard railed against the alleged left-wing bias of the ABC, but the researchers found Auntie was more likely to favour his side.

Researchers pored over news stories from 1996 to 2007 to establish if the media was biased.

The results, released today, point to the media being generally middle-of-the-road, with the coalition tending to win out.

Researchers found journalists were "a centrist bunch" - the exception was ABC TV news which "had a significant slant towards the coalition".

Newspapers were more pro-Labor, while talkback radio and television were more pro-Coalition.

Melbourne's The Age newspaper had the most "slanted" pro-Labor headlines.

When it came to editorial slant and donations by the media to political parties, the Coalition was laughing all the way to the polls.

More than three-quarters of newspaper editorials endorsed the Coalition. The Herald Sun and The West Australian newspapers endorsed them 100 per cent of the time.

Media companies donated significantly more money - 39 per cent more - to the coalition than to Labor.

Every media company that donated favoured the Coalition.

Of course, the Coalition was in power for the period studied.

The researchers found that the more a political party spent on advertising with a media outlet, the more favourable the media coverage.

"It is consistent with the simple notion that advertising dollars may be an explicit or implicit payment to proprietors for favourable coverage," the study said.

But it said the link could also be explained by political parties advertising with media outlets which were slanted in their favour.

Study author and ANU economist Andrew Leigh concluded that journalists were centrists, but editors were "more



The study found newspapers lean to the left, but the media as a whole tends to favour the Coalition. (ABC News: Giulio Saggin)

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Media favours Coalition, study finds -...

likely to take a party line".

The study suggested "slant is determined at an editorial level rather than through pressure or article selection by journalists".

The researchers measured bias by counting the number of mentions of left-leaning or right-leaning intellectuals.

They also rated the "slant" of front-page election stories and headlines, counted electoral endorsements and tallied political donations.

The ABC's Radio National was the only media outlet to score dead even when it came to favouring left-leaning or right-leaning intellectuals.

- **AAP**

Tags: [media](#), [broadcasting](#), [abc](#), [radio](#), [television](#), [journalism](#), [print-media](#), [australia](#)



Bias to the right? 'Yeah right'

By News Online's Brigid Andersen

Posted Thu Sep 3, 2009 4:16pm AEST

Updated Thu Sep 3, 2009 5:38pm AEST

Claims that Australian media are biased in favour of right-wing politics have been questioned by an intellectual from a prominent right-wing think tank.

The Australian National University (ANU) study, which measured slant in Australian radio, television and newspapers between 1996 and 2007, found that newspapers favoured the left, radio favoured the right, and the media as a whole favoured the Coalition.

And while former politicians like John Howard and Peter Costello have berated the ABC for supposed left-wing bias, the study actually found that ABC television news was the most pro-Coalition of them all.

But Chris Berg, a research fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and editor of the IPA Review, says the study's findings are ridiculous.

"I don't agree with the results and I think there's a deep problem with the results in that it doesn't really pass the laughter test," he said.

"It classifies individuals like Phillip Adams and Germaine Greer as right-wing intellectuals and it classifies people like Keith Windschuttle as left-wing intellectuals.

"When you've got results like that you have to really wonder whether the study has found anything at all of relevance or of interest."

Mr Berg says the study's findings are so skewed that there were probably mistakes made somewhere in the research.

"I think the essential point about the study is that when it's correct, it's banal. The point being that Australian media is somewhat centre-aligned," he said.

"But when it's interesting - like when it says that the ABC television is right-wing - then it's ridiculous, it's just not true.

"If you as an academic produce something that is so contrary to what absolutely everybody thinks, yes, you might have come up with some grand new research and discovered some essential truth that nobody knows about, but more likely you've made a mistake somewhere."



A think tank has slammed a report claiming the Australian media is biased to the right. (ABC News: Damien Larkins, file photo)

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'Low quality debate'

But one of the authors of the ANU study, Professor Andrew Leigh, says arguments like Mr Berg's are typical of commentators - many of whom place too much emphasis on particular sections of the media.

"My read in the way in which the media slant debate in Australia has proceeded is: it's generally been probably one of the lowest quality debates in Australia," he said.

"So when people talk about media slant typically they pull out a couple of examples. So Kerry O'Brien has very little airtime on ABC TV, but a disproportionate amount of ink is spilt on him when we talk about media slant.

"In terms of newspapers, I think people place too much slant on the editorial page and not enough weight on other pages like, for example, page one.

"Insiders often get a skewed notion of slant because they're looking at small bits of media content, rather than taking the whole.

"What we were trying to do was to do a more holistic analysis which tried to use some sensible statistical tools and do a little bit better than an 'I reckon' strategy for determining media slant."

'Pushing barrows'

While journalists and the media are normally lambasted for being too right-wing or too left-wing, Chris Berg says there should be more of it.

He says bias is a sign of a robust democracy.

"I think [bias is] wonderful. I think Australia could do with much more biased media. I think we could do with more media, and it could be pushing more barrows," he said.

"I think objectivity in journalism is largely mythological and we could do with more aggressive barrow-pushing on all sides of journalism and get the extremely diverse and extremely passionate media that you see in the United Kingdom or United States.

"I think that's a positive thing for a deliberative democracy such as us."

Mr Berg says the ABC's 7:30 Report is an example of media and democracy working together.

"Shows like that tend to be anti-government more than anything else, because they put on high-end government ministers and they drill them and try and pick holes in them," he said.

"I have no doubt that [Kerry O'Brien] has his own political views and sometimes those do come out with the nature of the questions he asks and the sort of things he's interested in, but by and large I think that's a necessary part of democracy."

Mr Berg says competition in the media market is key to delivering enough debate and opinion to keep Australia's media fair.

"There are certainly subtle and obvious biases in different mediums and those biases come down to issues that are chosen, rather than the public intellectuals they choose to interview [and] the time news organisations spend on certain interviews," he said.

"I think it's fair to say some of our major national newspapers tend to favour certain sides of politics more than other sides.

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"But having said that I certainly don't think that bias is that big an issue as long as all sides are being heard and there's enough competition in the media marketplace."

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Study finds ABC bias leans towards Coalition

Ari Sharp

September 3, 2009 - 12:00AM

PETER Costello believes the ABC is "hostile territory" for conservatives, but a study has found its television news leans towards the Coalition.

Economists Joshua Gans and Andrew Leigh made the finding in a research paper, *How Partisan is the Press?*, that also said that on another measure of bias *The Age* slants towards Labor.

The study of media from 1999 to 2007 found that television and talkback radio were most likely to lean to the right, while newspapers slant left. Overall, the media showed a slight inclination to the right.

The first part of the study involved subjecting a list of more than 100 public intellectuals to an analysis of mentions in Parliament to determine whether they were favoured by Labor (for example Michael Kirby and Mick Dodson) or the Coalition (Geoffrey Blainey, Helen Hughes).

The study then checked every reference to those public figures across 27 news services to calculate the media's slant. While for most outlets the statistical standard error made bias difficult to detect, ABC television news was significantly slanted towards the Coalition.

The finding challenges a claim made by Mr Costello, who, writing in *The Age*, last week called for more conservative voices on the ABC, claiming that everyone on the conservative side of politics believes "the ABC is hostile territory".

An ABC-backed inquiry last year into bias in the public broadcaster assessed a sample of TV news stories as impartial.

The findings of the latest research could be brought into question by the surprising categorisation of public figures Gerard Henderson and Les Murray as pro-Labor and Hugh Mackay as pro-Coalition.

Other research evaluated front-page political articles from 10 daily newspapers during the 2004 federal election on a scale of one (very pro-Labor) to five (very pro-Coalition).

"The only newspaper whose mean score is significantly different from three is *The Age*, which is rated by our coders as tending slightly pro-Labor (2.75)," the researchers found. "However, even in this case, the differences are quite slight."

An assessment of headlines only in 2004 found a more pronounced pro-Labor leaning. Despite that, *The Age* was one of eight dailies to editorialise in favour of the Coalition in 2004.

The Age's editor-in-chief, Paul Ramadge, welcomed the analysis but noted its narrow focus around the 2004 election.

"In terms of *The Age* and its reportage of federal political affairs, we report without favour," he said. "Any reasonable assessment would recognise the weight and impact of *The Age's* reporting of federal politics in the past 12 months. Our investigations have changed the public's understanding of key issues and have resulted in significant changes to the political landscape."

The authors did not speculate on the reasons for slants, but noted that Australian media appear to be more clustered around the centre than the US.

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"While this could be due to differences in methodology ... it is also plausible that it reflects the effect of a less competitive media market," they said.

This story was found at: <http://business.theage.com.au/business/study-finds-abc-bias-leans-towards-coalition-20090902-f8gm.html>



ABC1: Monday 9:20pm; repeated Wednesday morning 12:25am

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Left and Right of the ABC

On the ABC, according to former Treasurer Peter Costello, lefties rule:

"Everyone's ABC? Only if you lean left

— *The Age, 26th August, 2009*"

It's hardly a new complaint, of course. But imminent retirement has given Mr Costello the freedom to join the chorus.

As he put it in *The Age* three weeks ago:

"I am not now at the mercy of the media so I can afford to say what everyone on the conservative side of politics knows - the ABC is hostile territory.

— *The Age, 26th August, 2009*"

[Read the full article published in The Age](#)

The ABC has always denied that its output leans to the left - a denial greeted with hoots of derision by its Coalition critics.

Coincidentally, just a few days later, a couple of academics from Melbourne Uni and the ANU published a study which attempts, using some impressive-looking mathematical formulae, to answer the question:

"How Partisan is the Press?"

— *How Partisan is the Press?, August 2009*"

Using:

"Multiple Measures of Media Slant

— *How Partisan is the Press?, August 2009*"

[Read the full report How Partisan is the Press?](#)

...it finds that the answer is "not very partisan at all". Most newspapers, radio and television, says the study, take a centrist line.

But in a finding that must have amazed Mr Costello, the authors add:

"...the only media outlet that is significantly slanted is the ABC Channel 2 television station, which is significantly pro-Coalition during the period in question.

— *How Partisan is the Press?, August 2009*"

Pro-Coalition! Well knock me down with a feather!

Bias, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder - and just as hard to quantify.

But maybe the good professors could put their minds to this little conundrum.

About ten days ago, the ABC's Midday Report brought us this piece of news:

"Ros Childs: Police in Greece say a far-right militant group called 'Revolutionary Struggle' could be behind a bombing outside the Athens stock exchange...

— *ABC, Midday Report, 3rd September, 2009*"

The problem is, 'Revolutionary Struggle' is a far-left militant group in Greece. Been around for years.

Now, does that little error demonstrate left-wing bias, or right-wing bias, or just that someone made a cock-up?

As America's studiously impartial Fox News would say: We report, you decide.

YOUR COMMENTS

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Printed September 02, 2009 03:20pm AEST

Media shock! The Age leans to the left, bias study finds

Christian Kerr | September 02, 2009

Article from: [The Australian](#)

PAPERS are pinko but the TV is tory. That is how media slant in Australia goes, according to a new study.

Two economists, Andrew Leigh from the ANU and the Melbourne Business School's Joshua Gans, have attempted to quantify just how far our media leans along the ideological spectrum.

They have found Australian journalists are close to the centre of the political spectrum, but their editors are more likely to take a party line.

Professors Leigh and Gans used three approaches to test for media slant; reviewing media mentions of 100 public intellectuals, rating election stories and rating newspaper headlines.

They found that although most media outlets showed no significant slant in reporting, there were some notable exceptions.

“In terms of content, Australian journalists seem to be a centrist bunch”, said Professor Leigh.

“Using the first approach, only one out of 27 news outlets had a significant slant. This is ABC Television News, which had a significant slant towards the Coalition in the period 1999-2007. All other outlets were essentially centrist.



“Coding articles and headlines, The Age had a significant pro-Labor slant, while the other newspapers were centrist.

“However, editorial endorsements show a much stronger slant, with only 8 of the 44 election endorsements over the period 1996-2007 being for Labor.”

Professor Leigh said that in general television was the most right-wing medium while newspapers were the most left-leaning.

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ABC more right wing than The West Australian: ANU

Chris Thomson

September 2, 2009 - 12:19PM

ABC Radio 720 is more right wing than WA's monopoly weekday newspaper, according to a study released today by the Australian National University.

In a political boilover, 720AM received a pro-Coalition score of 0.489 in *How Partisan is the Press? Multiple Measures of Media Slant*, compiled by business researcher Joshua Gans and economist Andrew Leigh.

The West Australian received a more moderate pro-Coalition score of 0.462.

The scores placed the ABC above, and *The West* below, the mean 0.482 score of 27 news agencies surveyed across the nation.

With a score of 0.516, the only other WA agency surveyed, Fairfax Radio's [6PR](#), was the most right wing in the state, and the equal third most right wing in Australia.

The survey found that in the period 2003-2007, compared to 1999-2002, ABC 720 had become more right wing, jumping from a ranking of 0.473 over the former period to 0.503 over the latter.

The oft-held assumption that dumped *West Australian* editor Paul Armstrong was a right-wing apparatchik was not born out by the study, with *The West's* pro-Coalition score only inching from 0.460 to 0.465 between the same periods.

Armstrong's editorial reign lasted from 2003 until he was sacked in January this year.

Radio 6PR also became less Coalition-friendly with its 1999-2002 score of 0.527 eclipsing its 2003-07 ranking of 0.511.

No online newspapers were examined by the ANU probe.

WAtoday is owned by Fairfax Media.

This story was found at: <http://www.watoday.com.au/wa-news/abc-more-right-wing-than-the-west-australian-anu-20090902-f7qs.html>

True blue view from the red centre

New research on political bias may surprise Peter Costello, write **Joshua Gans** and **Andrew Leigh**. Cartoon by **Lindsay Foyle**

It is a hardy perennial of public debate: politicians, or their shills, attack a media outlet because they believe it to be slanted against their cause. In the US, this has been notable in Republican attacks on *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* for a left-wing slant. Indeed, the whole "fair and balanced" positioning of Fox News aimed to counter that perception.

In Australia these issues also arise occasionally, most recently in this foray from Peter Costello against the ABC: "With the ABC the line of questioning is always predictable. It always comes from the Labor/Green perspective," he wrote. By comparison, he argued, the ALP got a free ride. Costello concluded: "I am not now at the mercy of the media so I can afford to say what everyone on the conservative side of politics knows: the ABC is hostile territory."

Are such perceptions true? The alternative hypothesis is that the ABC is doing its job and giving a hard time to any politician who fronts it for an interview. Let's face it, under a well-informed grilling it's easy to imagine the interviewer might be a mole for the other party.

A number of US studies have set to explore media slant in that country. Instead of looking at isolated instances, these studies have sought a more "objective" test, covering a large volume of news-outlet reporting. In one study that built upon the US's flourishing "think tank" population, researchers Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo sought to identify a coincidence of citation. First, they looked at which politicians referred favourably to particular think tanks. They scored this in terms of citations relative to one party or another.

Groseclose and Milyo then tested whether particular newspapers cited certain think tanks more often than others. If it turned out a newspaper cited think tanks that were also more heavily cited by politicians of a particular party, they could score the degree of slant of that outlet relative to all other outlets, or what should have occurred had think-tank attribution been simply random.

In many respects the study produced the expected results. First, there was a significant degree of polarisation among US news outlets. Some were right-leaning while others were left-leaning – and they were the "usual suspects". Overall, however, media outlets in the US were to the left of the typical US voter. (If you have recently visited the US and find this hard to believe, remember the US electorate is also well to the right of the Australian electorate.)

We set out to replicate this approach. Australia does not have the same think-tank population, but we do have a set of public intellectuals who perform the same role and are regularly cited by politicians and news media alike. So in principle, we can use public intellectuals as a "crosswalk" between parliament and the media. We adopted a list created in 2005 by Michael Visontay for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and supplemented it until we had 155 individuals. We then whittled down the list as follows: to make the cut, the intellectual had to be favourably cited at least once in Hansard between 1996 and 2007. An attack by John Faulkner on "doddering fools ... Paddy McGuinness and Piers Akerman" did not count as an ALP vote for the pair.)

Of the 155 public intellectuals on our initial list, 48 received no favourable mentions in parliament, leaving 107. Of these, 21 were cited significantly more often by one side of politics than the other. Coalition politicians were more likely to cite Marie Bashir, Geoffrey Blainey, Ron Brunton, John Hirst, Helen Hughes, Paul Kelly, Hugh Mackay, Wendy McCarthy, Noel Pearson, Ken

Phillips, and Paul Sheehan. ALP politicians were more likely to mention Larissa Behrendt, William Deane, Mick Dodson, Gerard Henderson, Michael Kirby, David Marr, Les Murray, Barbara Pocock, Anne Summers and George Williams.

Then it was time to look at media citations. Our 107 stars were cited more than 84,000 times between 1999 and 2007. (By the way, you'll note this covers the period when Peter Costello was most prominent.) To benchmark media slant, we looked at each party's disposition to cite public intellectuals favourably. Some 47 per cent of all citations came from the Coalition, so a score of 0.47 was our benchmark. If a media outlet mentioned those Coalition favourites more often, they were slanted towards the Coalition.

But our measure also allowed us to see just how slanted: yes, an outlet with a score of 0.48 is right-leaning, but it is unlikely to be significantly so. The more times an outlet mentioned public intellectuals, the more precisely we were able to gauge its ideological position.

So to the results. In contrast to its American counterparts, the Australian media is pretty centrist. There are some more to the left, and there are some more to the right, but overall we couldn't say most outlets were significantly slanted. This might be a disappointment to those outlets trying to position themselves as partisan. But others, such as ABC's Radio National, will probably take pleasure from our finding – they were smack-bang in the middle of the ideological spectrum. But one outlet stood out as more slanted than randomness would suggest: ABC TV News. But which way? It will surely surprise the former treasurer to find that all these years ABC TV news was more for his side than against it. To be precise, it is significantly more likely to quote the kind of public intellectuals that Coalition politicians mention favourably in parliament than those Labor parliamentarians cite.

Given the nature of this exercise, we also conducted a few robustness checks using alternative methodologies. In particular, we conscripted a hapless quintet of coders to read all front-page articles from the 2004 election campaign and form an opinion as to whether they were more slanted towards one party than another. We did the same for the article headlines. These results confirmed our main finding – that the Australian press is pretty centrist – although this time *The Age* stood out as left-leaning. (There is a certain irony in the fact that Costello used its opinion page to attack the ABC.) If there is any place in the Australian media where you see substantial slant, it's not on the factory floor but in the corner offices. During 1996-2007, 36 of the 44 newspaper editorial endorsements were for the Coalition.

Why is the Australian media so centrist? One theory is that in the US, there is greater competition in the media market and more variety. That might mean consumers are better satisfied, and perhaps also that the truth is being distorted. These are matters for further study. For now, our hope is that star-crossed polities think twice before claiming the media really is out to get them.

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Andrew Leigh is an economics professor at the Australian National University
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The study, *How Partisan is the Press? Multiple Measures of Media Slant*, is available at www.andrewleigh.org

FUNNY HOW IT'S ONLY THE PEOPLE
I DISAGREE WITH WHO ARE BIASED

