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## Habermas's Public Sphere : Politics and Australian News Media

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Habermas's Public Sphere:  
Politics and Australian News Media

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Tim Balfour

This Thesis is Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of  
the Requirements for the Award of  
Bachelor of Communications (Media Studies) Honours  
At the Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries  
School of Communications and Multimedia,  
Edith Cowan University  
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## ABSTRACT

Jürgen Habermas's theory of an eroded public sphere is common to media studies that address the functions and shortfalls of news media in society. The theory tackles many aspects of society, but is most usually associated with the mass media and its role in facilitating informed public debate among private persons coming together as a public to hold institutions of power to account. The term has been used to such a degree that its authority is taken as rote, which has subsequently reduced the complexity, subtleties and strength of Jürgen Habermas's original arguments. In turn, this has caused critics to question the most fundamental aspects of the theory: is there just one sphere?; are the public merely acquiescent dupes of the mass media?; do the media *really* deliberately coerce and manipulate unsuspecting audiences? Habermas's theory of an eroded public sphere is contentious and a target for criticism because in its simplistic form it appears conspiratorial and unlikely within a society with a free press and democratic institutions. However, this thesis argues that while there are certainly deliberate attempts at distorting public communications by influential actors, it is the prevailing conditions of communication that allow for such distortion. In this respect, Habermas's theory deals with the structures and communicative networks within society and how these contribute to a depleted public sphere.

In essence, the public sphere has been appropriated by autonomous organisations external to the public sphere, or the arena of common civil experience. These organisations seek legitimisation by means of public acclamation attracted by manufactured publicity. However, public opinions that emerge from the public sphere and those that are formed from within private organisations, such as political parties and profit making corporations, are quite different. While there no doubt exists a spectrum of possible communicative interactions between private opinions and those that emerge from the public sphere, private organisations tend to treat the public as spectators and consumers. Like corporations who use tested marketing techniques such as opinion polling and surveys to distinguish markets, political parties and government use the same methods to sell policy or reputations in order to legitimate their power and influence over a voting public. The result is a public sphere that is targeted by of various corporate or political opinions and agendas competing for public acclamation. The disparate information being channelled through the public sphere tends to cause mistrust between a public and

its political leaders. This is primarily because of a lack of consistency in the quality and veracity of information stemming from the fact that information does not often reflect or correlate with the lived experiences common to an electorate. By using news media accounts of the Australian 2004 federal election campaign, this study intends to demonstrate that Habermas's theory of an eroded public sphere is an effective way of casting a critical eye over news media organisations and their interaction with political power and influence.

## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education, and that, to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another author or organisation, except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature

Date

29/07<sup>th</sup>/2005.

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## Introduction

This study considers the news media's role in Australian society using Habermas's account of an eroded public sphere. The arguments that this thesis will be concerned with centre around Habermas's description, as outlined in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), of how increased journal and newspaper circulation, along with growing press freedoms from the early seventeenth century, allowed for public critical political debate. Newspapers informed a concerned readership of the relations between merchants, citizens, government representatives and all who felt they had a stake in the proceedings. That is, anyone who wanted the chance to participate in civil society. Ideally, those who contributed to such public meetings in the coffee houses and salons of continental Europe and Britain during the eighteenth century were considered equals regardless of position or title and, therefore, had the means by which to hold government accountable. The emphasis that Habermas places on this arrangement is the equality of the participants and the condition that the strongest argument during 'rational-critical debate of a public into public opinion' (Habermas, 1989, p. 219) would win. It was this guarantee of universal access, claims Habermas, which would ensure current truths were bound to the logic of argument and counter-argument (p. 219). As with most guarantees, however, it comes with a caveat, which is often confused with an oversight on Habermas's part. That is, while free association and access to various arenas of public debate may be available to a public, privately organised bodies of influence and power can potentially subvert opinions emerging from such arenas. Since the rise of advanced capitalism during the mid to late nineteenth century, Habermas claims that the public sphere has splintered into self-representing, hierarchical organisations with their own internal systems of autonomy. Important to Habermas's argument is that government, political parties and the news media have become publicly inaccessible organisations whose private agendas have become enmeshed and integrated with a once independent public sphere distinct from government.

According to critics of Habermas's public sphere, the idea of universal access should be taken as an ideal rather than an all-encompassing view of a collective public within eighteenth century society. Ian Ward, for example, claims that Habermas's public sphere was inaccessible to the illiterate and women whose main role was considered to be tending to the home and caring for the family, otherwise

known as the 'private sphere' (Ward, 1997). Therefore, since the driving force behind the early public sphere was 'composed of bourgeois private persons crystallizing around newspapers and journals' (Habermas, 1996, p. 366) certain groups would be excluded from the circles of influence that provided a semblance of social cohesion of its own making. Peter Dahlgren claims that as an ideal concept, the public sphere 'retains an anchoring in critical theory, and to use the term incorporates the media within a critical perspective on democracy' (Dahlgren, 1997, p. 9). That is, as a critical model used to realise the effectiveness of the news media as a two-way information relay between communities and political representatives, Habermas's public sphere 'evokes wide-ranging critical reflection on social structure, the concentration of power, cultural practices, and the dynamics of the political process' (p. 9). Nicholas Garnham (cited in Reinecke, 1989, p. 147), too, sees the public sphere and the 'principles it embodies as an ideal type against which we can judge existing social arrangements'.

It does not appear, however, that Habermas is blind to these criticisms in his account of the rise of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas adds that, although the public sphere was considered a space in which rational debate took place in a context of 'universal access' (Habermas, 1989, p. 219), this ideal was never truly realised, even during its most effective period. There are reasons, however, that Habermas persists with his argument of a degraded bourgeois public sphere. Today, as much as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the possibility of inclusion for those outside *the* bourgeois public sphere always exists. However, what Habermas is saying specific to a mediatised public sphere, in both the *Structural Transformation* and his later work *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), is that the conception of a public sphere has always had its roots fixed firmly within a middle-class perspective. In addition, and contrary to criticisms that state otherwise, Habermas accepts that there exist other public spheres, of minority and interest groups, that can have an influence on civil society and its political function. However, since the bourgeois model of the public sphere, and all forms of culture that pass through it, have in themselves become commodities, there are fewer possibilities of less powerful actors, on the periphery of commodity exchange, being able to communicate effectively on a mainstream, or mass level.

It is true, as critics have pointed out, that the conditions that allowed for the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere enabled the inclusion of minority groups.

This reflects wider arguments that continue today about the degradation of the public sphere through what are seen as lesser forms of mass popular culture and entertainment (Iverson, 2003, p. 33). Habermas does not take issue with these forms of culture as the main cause of the erosion of the public sphere, while still maintaining that they certainly play a role in exacerbating and sustaining its dysfunction. After all, Habermas acknowledges in his historical account of early eighteenth century Europe that it was the publisher taking over the role of the patron as the 'author's commissioner and [organizer of] the commercial distribution of literary goods' (Habermas, 1989, p. 38) that led to a wider interested reading public, albeit the propertied and educated class. In turn, this led to the general public paying for the opportunity to attend theatres, museums and galleries previously reserved for the courts. Public discussion on these cultural activities was a natural part of this new environment, and it was this sequence of events that finally led to the bourgeois public sphere that not only discussed high culture, but also politics. The danger that arose, which is still prevalent today, is that powerful actors can, and do, appropriate the public sphere to further their own ends. It can be said of widespread mediated political debate, for example, that it has furthered the public's understanding of politics and potentially offers the possibility of inclusion. However, the reality is that political discourse is predominantly conducted between politicians, journalists, analysts and other specialised political commentators. In addition, the production of political discourse has been formalised, packaged and produced for consumption, by another set of specialists, that stifles a fluid, rational exchange of opinions emerging from other spheres of society. Deliberate or not, political communication in Australia can be controlled and steered by those with the means to do so, and accepted as a voice of normalised authority by those not willing to critically examine its motives or veracity.

The political public sphere is all but closed to public participation, apart from the one democratic right offered to them on election day. Parliament Question time, the political arena where the public can supposedly view democracy at work via the news media, broadcast by the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [ABC], becomes an arena where 'instruction-bound appointees meet to put their predetermined decisions on record' (Habermas, 1989, p. 205). Projected into the public sphere in this way, these privately produced policies and opinions seek to shape public opinion rather than inform and facilitate public debate between private

members of the electorate. Subsequently, say social researchers such as Hugh Mackay (McKay & Brown, 2004), the Australian electorate have become disengaged with politics. If this is true, it is perhaps not because the public find politics boring, but because they have no meaningful part to play in the rationalising of decisions that may affect them. Alexis de Tocqueville observed, claims David Ivison, that this chain of events has a constant reflexive effect on a public where the less politically inclusive a public perceives itself to be, the more apathetic to power they become (Ivison, 2003, p. 31).

There is also the additional factor that the news media are themselves privately owned organisations that are subject to: (a) government scrutiny; (b) the need to attract advertisers (in the case of commercial news media); and (c) the need to harness a loyal audience and readership. These factors when combined cultivate an environment where participation and acknowledgement of the public is circumvented, and public debate reduced. With a greatly reduced role in political affairs, in effect an apolitical public sphere, Habermas's argument is predominantly concerned with a public that is continually cast in the role of audience member rather than active participant. He describes this as the refeudalisation of the public sphere, where the public applaud power and authority the same way as they did before aristocracy.

For a democracy to exist it needs an informed and politically engaged public. For an informed and politically engaged public to exist there needs to be a free, incisive and disinterested news media. The public sphere is now inhabited by the publicity and advertising of competing private interests used to influence public opinion in an effort to seek public acclamation on matters discussed privately.

## 1. Criticism of Habermas's Theory of an Eroded Public Sphere

One way of describing Habermas's theory of the public sphere in a clear manner is to highlight one or two opposing arguments and misleading representations. For example, Keith Windschuttle, *Fixing the news* (1981; 1988 and 2002), who has been involved in journalism, media theory and history for many years, stands as a critic of certain media and cultural theorists and their place in the Australian education system. More specifically, arguments expressed by Windschuttle at a keynote address at Queensland University of Technology, in 1998, and later published in *Quadrant* (1999) entitled 'Cultural Studies Versus Journalism', and alternatively 'Journalism Versus Cultural Studies' in *Australian Studies Journal* (1998), are somewhat representative of reoccurring criticisms levelled at Habermas's theory of a degraded public sphere. By responding to a number of his and other critics it is hoped that a clearer understanding of what Habermas is attempting to achieve in his writings will emerge.

In reference to Habermas's theory of the media, Windschuttle asks why academic media theorists are still 'subjecting their students to such an intellectually and politically discredited theory, which sheds absolutely no light on the way the media operate?' (Windschuttle, 1998). In this particular case, Windschuttle's approach is misleading, as he is discussing two separate issues. Windschuttle conflates the mechanics of journalism and with the societal representations that stem from such systems, and as such his argument confuses function with meaning. It is true that critics of the media may not have the benefit of having an insider's view of how a television or newspaper runs on a technical level, but they can, however, see the results of such processes. Critical theories of media and culture, such as Habermas's, offer a perspective on the way in which society is framed through, for example, hierarchies of race, gender, affluence and power, and why it is framed in that way and not another. It also highlights the deficiencies inherent in systems of the news media, where mediums such as television become arenas for *ersatz* public debate that favours staged displays by political actors over public contributions. Windschuttle's argument makes the assumption that if the journalistic mechanisms work, then its product must be as close to objectivity as can be expected. Windschuttle finds Habermas's theory improbable, perhaps thinking it unrealistic to believe that the news media deliberately 'exclude oppositional voices, [prevent]

rational debate, [have a] *modus operandi* [of] concealment and subterfuge', consider their audience as 'either (a) mindless robots, or (b) fictional constructs that exist solely in discourse' (Windschuttle, 1998). As a result, Windschuttle's vehement arguments miss Habermas's point entirely.

Habermas argues that there is a relentless passage of information pouring through the channels of public communication from private organisations whose opinions and agendas do not emerge from the public sphere itself. Habermas explains that the public sphere is, or ideally should be, comprised of private individuals discussing and forming opinions on everyday experiences. For each individual person, it is the possibility of raising common concerns of everyday life experience that ensure active participation in the process of debate. In society, everyday experience often means how government decisions affect their lives directly, and therefore public opinions on government performance are formed based on this discourse. Hence, public opinion emerging from virtual public spaces, the public sphere, in this way forms the foundation of an open society.

However, Habermas discusses actors who exist autonomously outside the common spheres of public discourse. These groups may include political parties, corporations and government itself, who use their influence and power, both economic and political, to gain acclamation and consent from the public to legitimise and perpetuate their own existence and influence. In this environment of mass communication, the role of the news media can be one that questions government by facilitating public discourse on power, or they can act as a conduit for those power groups in their attempts at further self-legitimation. Of course, the news media are never exclusively 'either' a conduit or a critical eye on power; there are far more states that lie between these two extremes. It is this latter condition, however, that has contributed to the public sphere becoming eroded. That is, people are now finding it difficult to distinguish between disinterested public opinion and opinion aimed at acquiring their consent and ascension (Habermas, 1989 & 1996).

In the media's expanded role from local community toward a more or less globally mediated society, sociologist John Thompson, argues that Habermas's approach is limited in its ability to truly understand the 'nature of public life' while:

wedded to a conception of publicness which is essentially spatial and dialogical in character, and which obliges us to interpret the ever-growing role of mediated communication as a fall from grace (Thompson, 1995, p. 132).

Thompson is arguing that Habermas's theory relies too heavily on the conditions of communication encountered in a literal public space, of communities. Notwithstanding the fact that local and community based communications and discourse are an *a priori* to extended national and international discourse, Habermas responds to such criticisms of his theory of the public sphere in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996). In this later work Habermas claims that the public sphere is not a static metaphorical reference to society; when Habermas uses the term 'lifeworld', for example, he is referring to a global public sphere, where boundaries are constantly expanding, shrinking or splitting to accommodate social inclusion. While it is believed that it was Edmund Husserl that first used the term, the manner in which Habermas uses 'lifeworld' appears to carry on from Martin Heidegger's interpretation. In Habermas's work, as Giovanna Borradori explains:

The concept of world frees the public realm from the model of eighteenth century European society in relation to which the notion of a public sphere was first conceived (Borradori, 2003, p. 65).

This is true at all levels, from the public legitimation of the power elite to the integration of minority groups who, after exerting sufficient pressure on appropriate powers can influence, to varying degrees, the normative confines of a society's value system.

Media theorists such as Tom Gitlin (in Liebes & Curran, 1998) and Duncan Ivison (in Lumby & Probyn, 2003) argue that Habermas does not make allowances for the integration of new technologies, such as the Internet, that allow for less powerful actors to have a significant influence on mainstream society. As a result of, and in addition to, this alleged oversight made by Habermas, other social spheres of influence, which Gitlin refers to as 'sphericules', created by lesser powers are ignored. Therefore, they claim, by excluding such possibilities Habermas's conclusions rely exclusively on the specific communicative conditions that a singular public sphere generates. However, even in his earlier works Habermas presents us with a number of different spheres within, and external to, 'the' bourgeois public sphere: the *episodic*, such as taverns and coffee houses; and the

*occasional*, in the form of public presentations and events. Habermas's conceptions of various types of public spheres, and how he relates the developing forms of communication, contradict claims that his theory does not encompass multi spheres or allow for future forms of communication. He even talks of an *abstract* sphere, where consumers of mass media are brought together across vast geographical areas:

The one text of "the" public sphere, a text continually extrapolated and extending radially in all directions, is divided by internal boundaries into arbitrarily small texts for which everything else is context; yet one can always build hermeneutical bridges from one text to the next (Habermas, 1996, p. 374).

Examples such as this demonstrate that the public sphere is neither *a* sphere nor that it is static and limiting in trying to determine the normative state of a society; characteristics and functions of the public sphere change in parallel to the way a society communicates and, therefore, is only as limited as society itself. Habermas is not viewing publicness 'through the lens of the traditional model' (Thompson, 1995, p. 132) of communication, as Thompson states, but rather using previous models and forms of communication as a control state by which to measure succeeding ones, and the effect that they have on society. Habermas's model works on the basis of a continuing progression and comparison of communication models and publicity used to make some sense out of extremely complex human social networks.

This is quite different from saying that news media organisations are *against* – while there is a chance they *might* be – rational debate. Neither can it be said that arguments from commentators such as Habermas claim that these organisations' 'modus operandi is concealment and subterfuge' (Windschuttle, 1998). Habermas's criticisms of news media organisations contends that it is the corporatised structure of these organisations, not an intentional 'modus operandi', which determines the prioritisation of certain stories, and story angles. In fact, throughout his work Habermas is arguing that, conditionally, any formalised organisational structures of communication tend to detract from informal, unstructured, interpersonal networks comprised of private citizens communicating and debating matters that affect them. In this way, it can be said that organisations set on creating publicity to legitimate their own existence or a consumer interest around a product to be sold, that is not

derived from citizens' own personal experiences within the 'lifeworld', and is primarily for the benefit of the organisation itself and citizens second – if at all – does not constitute public opinion from the public sphere itself (Habermas, 1996, pp. 360 & 379). Under these conditions there is an allowance for organisations that do emerge from the public sphere and whose primary purpose is contributing toward citizens' and community needs more or less directly, or to allow a minority group to be recognised as a legitimate part of society where previously they were once discriminated against or seen as a threat to that society (p. 373). One example of a structural priority, however, is the need for commercial broadcast news organisation to stay commercially viable in a competitive market. In discussing television commercial news media, Fiske states that news is an expensive commodity that relies on advertisements, and therefore needs to be popular and produce an audience that will attract more advertisers (Fiske, 1991, p. 281).

Windschuttle's argument that media theory assumes a passive unthinking audience of 'mindless robots' is also baseless. When Windschuttle presented this argument at the Queensland University of Technology in 1998, Habermas had already stated, in his text *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), that even though research on the effects of media on an audience remains controversial:

The research on effect and reception has at least done away with the image of passive consumers as cultural dopes who are manipulated by the programs offered to them (Habermas, 1996, p. 377).

Here is evidence that Habermas believes in an actively thinking, critical audience. Habermas's argument explains that the public sphere has become congested with competing commercial, government and a myriad of interest and lobby groups that interact with one another while simultaneously omitting the public. It is disingenuous for Windschuttle, and others who share his view, to argue that Habermas believes in the existence of a mindless or passive audience. These criticisms serve to highlight the very controversial nature of what Habermas is saying. That is, despite our existence within a democratic society where minority groups have the opportunity in which to make their case in pursuit of inclusion, the interests of those with power, wealth and social influence will most often prevail. These actors have a greater opportunity to distort the channels of communication, and as a result make the public sphere an ineffectual arena for public political debate.

Questions that George Soros, financier and philanthropist, raises over freedom of speech and democracy in American society points to what seems a self-evident state of the news media, and the implications for democracy. Soros considers that, even though there is a free media in the United States, there is a way for the 'facts' to be manipulated and distorted, but questions how it is 'possible to distort facts in an open society' (Soros, 2004). Habermas argues that the public sphere's function of allowing private citizens to critically debate publicly has been compromised by the competing interests of privately owned organisations, and opinion that is derived from publicity that displaces the public's role in rational-critical debate. Critical debate is no longer public among organisations that have great influence on a public that has, in turn, a great dependency on some of these organisations. As a result the general public, the electorate, have lost their forum, and perhaps motivation, in which to come together as citizens. The corporatised model of society has, by default, relegated the public to the roles of audience, spectator and consumer. In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Habermas refers to the public as a 'great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical' (Habermas, 1989, p. 175). By this he means that society is divided into 'suppliers' and 'consumers', and given these conditions, public communication provides fewer opportunities for a public to be critical of power. The electorate are not dupes or robots but they are most likely frustrated with a media and political system that reduces their role as citizen to spectator of political events managed by organisations and interest groups outside of their sphere of influence.

## *2. The Appropriation of the Public Sphere*

### *2.1. The voter as spectator*

In the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Habermas argues that at its heart the mass media is a culture of integration, and as a result has brought about the death of a public sphere independent of government self promotion and propaganda. By this he means that the public sphere, which should ideally be informed by a disinterested press, is no longer solely comprised of private individuals coming together as a public to debate and form opinions that inform the polity. Instead, government, private organisations and corporations are groups external to, and use their influence on, the public sphere in ways that attract publicity and legitimate their presence over their rivals. That is, an autonomous organisation's privately formed opinions are promoted publicly principally to accomplish public acclamation, rather than to enrich public debate. Today, as with most businesses, economic forces govern the news media, which means that they need to draw in a loyal and consistent audience base. To achieve this, the news media have a tendency to fuse and present political information in a stylised form, a narrative that blends both guidance and entertainment to attract public interest. As autonomous businesses in their own right, news media organisations are predominantly driven by a requirement for human interest (Habermas, 1989, p. 175). The combination of political bodies and the news media seeking the acclamation of the public via staged publicity has resulted in events such as election campaigns making the public sphere an inadequate arena for public political debate. Habermas claims that the public sphere itself now assumes 'advertising functions', where the more the public sphere 'can be deployed as a vehicle for political and economic propaganda, the more it becomes unpolitical as a whole and pseudo-privatised' (p. 175). During an election campaign, information, as political news media, has two aims. The first of these is the need of government and political parties to generate positive public interest in their policies and themselves. The other is the news media's own necessary objective in attracting audiences to their news programs (p. 178). In regard to a functioning public sphere, the twin objectives of these organisations are incompatible and inadequate if the intention is to engender informed political understanding derived from rational critical debate.

According to research conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Authority [ABA], on media audiences and where they source their news and current affairs information, a large proportion of Australians acquire their news media from traditional sources. The ABA's findings show that:

Free to air television remains the most used source for news and current affairs with nearly 88 per cent of Australians using it followed by 76 per cent listening to the radio and 76 per cent reading newspapers. National Nine News is the leader amongst free to air viewers (Australian Broadcasting Authority, 2000).

It would therefore be a fair assumption to suggest that many Australians follow the progress of an election via these traditional news media sources. In this respect, the news media are burdened with a great responsibility as they decide how an election should be covered, and how the policies and the candidates responsible for them are represented to the public. Notwithstanding this responsibility, it would initially seem that the dissemination of political information could only lead to stronger public debate within the public sphere. Contrary to this assumption is Habermas's claim that public debate has actually suffered due to the development of private organisations and corporations' dominance in society. Habermas claims that the:

public use of reason is shattered; the public is split apart into minorities of specialists who put their reason to use non publicly and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical (Habermas, 1989, p. 175).

This criticism would suggest that news media organisations run the risk of becoming little more than a conduit for political publicity and propaganda for the major party candidates involved. While not assuming that the news media directly and deliberately influence the public on political issues, it can be said that the news media and political parties interact and relegate the citizen to the role of spectator rather than political actor.

Sociologist John Thompson argues that election campaigns are planned media events, where campaign coverage is a pre-planned, coordinated activity between the political participants and the news media intended to disrupt regular programming (Thompson, 1995, pp. 107-108). This implies that the voter is positioned as a spectator during an election campaign, rather than being a political

participant. From the very beginning of the six-week campaign, immediately after Prime Minister John Howard announced the election date on the 29 August 2004, the news media presented it as a spectacle, an event. On Perth's STW9 evening news, Nine Network's national political commentator Laurie Oakes (STW9 News, 29 August, 2004) sounded as though he was commentating a horse race: 'They're off! The PM fired the starters gun when he drove to Yarralumla to get approval from Governor Jeffery'. Accompanying Oakes's commentary was some fast-paced video editing displaying a white limousine driving through the Yarralumla gates. As the story swiftly unfolded, a sound bite from Prime Minister Howard (STW9 News, 2004) made him sound like a boxer ready to enter the ring: 'Oh, yes! Tough fight'. The two leaders were positioned as combatants even further when Oakes claimed that Labor had launched an 'all-out attack on Howard's credibility', and that Mr Howard had 'met the challenge head on by declaring the election will be about trust'. The juggernaut of video footage continued, and additional grabs of John Howard asking 'who do you trust?' were juxtaposed with Mark Latham claiming that the present 'government had been dishonest for too long'. *Nine's* story ended by questioning the credibility and worthiness of either leader. Oakes claimed that Latham's campaign agenda was a 'rehash' of an earlier speech that he had given nearly a year before, and that John Howard was yet to face 'further embarrassment' in the Senate over the children overboard affair.

In this brief, fast-paced story, *Nine News* focused on the physical accoutrements and symbols of power, politics and the personas of the leaders themselves, with the leaders positioned as competitors in a manner usually reserved for sports men and women. This highlights a news media predominantly concerned with characters and personalities in politics, rather than in promoting public discourse. Habermas even refers to this kind of treatment of democracy as the 'refeudalisation' of the public sphere, observing that: 'the "suppliers" display a showy pomp before customers ready to follow' (Habermas, 1989, p. 195). As a result, Channel Nine's coverage of the first day of the election campaign looked more like an opening ceremony for a sporting event than the commencement of an election. The term 'suppliers' can be taken to mean both the news media and politicians, who equally share a vested interest in cultivating a culture of information consumption, not formation, among the electorate. In this way, the process of informing the public on political matters is disseminated in a top down manner (p. 177) from government,

political parties and interest groups, via the opinions and analysis of political journalists, experts and commentators.

While news media is produced in a style that is considered entertaining in order to attract the attention of the electorate, there are arguments that claim that this has little to offer viewers in the way of political information. Graeme Turner observes that television news and current affairs programs, especially political debates, are regarded as too boring for audiences to watch. As a result only the most high profile political issues succeed in being broadcast on television. 'Political analysis on television limps along in 30-second grabs on national news reports, or in poorly resourced interviews on the *7.30 Report* or *Lateline*' (Turner, 2003, p. 144). Even a cursory glance at news and current affairs content reflects these observations. During the first weeks of the election campaign, the story order on local Perth commercial news stations had either the Beslan school siege, or progress reports on a cyclone threatening the Florida coast, as the lead stories.

Local news content profiled highly, such as on 5 September, 2004 when, following the lead Beslan siege story, Perth's STW9 news reported a four car 'head on' collision occurring on a road between Mandurah and Bunbury. This observation correlates with a 1995 study (cited in Firth, 1999, p. 63) of Sydney's Channel Seven, where it was shown that Seven's editors kept news 'simple and local' in fear of losing their audience, and that 'foreign news on free-to-air commercial television is brief, dramatic and entertaining rather than searching or analytical'. This is because most foreign policy issues are deemed 'too complicated to lend themselves to popular media treatment' (p.63). Election coverage was always in the second half of the half hour news program, and was comprised mainly of brief 'grabs' of the key political players, opposition leader Mark Latham, Prime Minister John Howard and Senator Bob Brown. In contrast, The ABC usually covered the progress of the election campaign first, and in slightly more detail, except during and after the Beslan school siege. The ABC used very similar footage, or grabs, as the commercial stations. If there was a major development that included extended visuals of the leaders on the campaign trail, or there was a political scandal, this would usually make the headlines on the commercial stations. This pattern was repeated throughout the election campaign.

Kevin McQuillan considers that the similarities between footage and stories used are a waste of resources. McQuillan claims that the findings of his report (Appendix: A), commissioned by Chris Anderson, a former Chief Executive of Optus and current board member of Publishing and Broadcasting Limited (PBL), support a move for the pooling of resources between news media organisations. McQuillan claims that in the United States resource-sharing between networks:

happens on a daily basis in Washington, where each network in a pool will take responsibility for covering the White House, providing the crew, reporter and uplink on White House press conferences (McQuillan, 2004).

Participants in a focus group that Michael Pusey conducted for his book *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform* (2003), have already expressed general anxieties and mistrust of the ‘sensationalism’, ‘bias’ and the ‘Americanisation’ of the media (Pusey, 2003, p. 136), where the ‘[p]olitical dialogue in the United States has degenerated into a welter of rhetorical flourishes and abstract platitudes’ (Boggs, 2000, p. 47). Further moves to consolidate the relationships between news media organisations would surely only exacerbate public perceptions of sensationalism even further. Regardless of Anderson’s motives in commissioning such a study, the approach seems to miss the point of the much broader problem of all news media organisations gravitating toward, as Turner argues, the most high profile political issues. It is a problem because often the most high profile political story is not the most publicly relevant, and is sought after by media organisations because of the publicity surrounding it rather than its substance and significance.

In discussing the libertarian and social responsibility models of journalism, Sally White claims that the news media’s role in the ‘democratic process is ultimately more important than its economic function and individual media organisations can be exempt from having to earn their way in the market place’ (White, 1991, p. 9). The way in which journalism has been infused with other types of mediated information has weakened the idea of the liberal model, and weakened journalism. The *speed, volume and configuration* of mass media content favour those who distribute rather than the consumers who receive the information (Borradori, 2003, p.57), and the cacophony of news, entertainment and advertising ‘comes together to form a syndrome that works to depoliticise public communication’ (Habermas,

1996, p. 377). Freelance journalist John Pilger claims that the term journalism has had a shift in meaning, and believes that the distinction that we now have between journalism and 'investigative journalism' is misleading. That is, all journalism *should* be considered investigative. Most importantly, 'investigative' journalism 'refuses to accept the press release version of events. It looks behind facades. It is always sceptical of authority, of vested interest, of governments (Pilger, 2004). It is the 'different conditions of communication', claims Habermas (Habermas, 1996, pp. 366-367), that determine how information is channelled and regulated between the private and public spheres, and how permeable each is to the other. Without communication channels available to the public that they can feel confident will provide the possibility for actual political participation, politics becomes impoverished, and people lose interest.

Prior to the election, social researcher Hugh MacKay's qualitative research was showing that the electorate's desire, or inclination, to play an active role in politics had declined. Early in April, on both the ABC's *7.30 Report* (Latham's popularity plunges, 2004) and Channel Ten's political program *Meet the Press* (McKay & Brown, 2004), MacKay stated that recent political developments in Australia have been taking place 'in the context of a pretty disengaged electorate, people who are not riveted by these issues'. On the *7.30 Report*, MacKay (Latham's popularity plunges, 2004) claimed that nothing '[Opposition leader] Mark Latham has said has really had any impact on the fundamental drivers that are going to determine the outcome of the next election – which are the economy and this whole bogey of national security'. On *Meet the Press*, MacKay (McKay & Brown, 2004) stated that 'this is not an electorate engaged with politics. I find it still quite hard to get people to say anything about federal politics'. MacKay's remarks reflect past international comparative studies of television viewing in trilateral nations. In these countries, 'including Australia, heavy TV use is associated with lower civic involvement and less interest in discussing politics' (Pusey, 2003, p. 128). In connection to these findings, an additional disincentive may be that with the prevalence of so many political commentators available, such as Paul Kelly, Paul Bongiorno, Laurie Oakes, Kerry O'Brien, Tony Jones, Maxine McKew and Michael Brissenden to name but a few, perhaps people no longer believe that politics is within their grasp, possibly feeling too intimidated to talk about a topic on which they believe they have no knowledge. Or the prevalence of such political

‘experts’ somehow relinquishes political participation from an alienated public. Or put another way, their existence can have the added effect of relieving the public from using or relying on their own critical abilities on political matters.

The divide between sender and receiver demonstrates what Habermas (1989, pp. 216-217) refers to as a ‘periodically manufactured public sphere’ in which the news media operate as an advertising vehicle for political parties. As private autonomous organisations in their own right, both the news media and political parties:

develop their own internal systemic logics and push the citizen into the peripheral role of mere organization member. They explode the model of a polity that determines itself through the shared practice of the citizens themselves (Habermas, 1996, p. 505).

However, an audience watching, reading or listening to news media coverage may get the impression that the journalists and production team consider themselves independent of the political display, rather than being an integral part of its construction. Media analyst Rodney Tiffen, for example, argues that the news media like to portray the image that ‘they are reporting a campaign which exists independently of them’ (Tiffen, 1989, p. 127). It is an attitude that contributes further to the construction of a manufactured public sphere, as neither are independent of one another, and each relies heavily upon the other for success in the lead up to, and during, an election campaign. To some commentators this relationship is a false, misleading and redundant one. For example, Rodney Cavalier (cited in Bean, Simms, Bennett & Warhurst, 1997, p.31), an ALP campaigner and government MP since the 1960s, states that: ‘the great mistake of campaign reportage is that it treats an election as an event worthy of narrative. *An election is a process largely invisible*’ [italics added]. However, Cavalier’s statement is axiomatic as it is precisely because elections, and political processes in general, are now so ‘invisible’ that a constructed narrative of events has become a necessary element in any news media coverage of an election campaign. Why they have become invisible to the public will be discussed in the next two sections on political debates and public opinion.

## *2.2. Mediated political debates*

Historian Eric Hobsbawm explains that politicians' reluctance to speak their mind in public can be attributed to the rise of mass political parties, mass media, and a subsequent widespread democratic fervour that these developments caused. The developing politics of mass propaganda and mass media posed a new set of problems for politicians and, along with the rise of democratic libertarian notions of the press, politicians and ruling classes found it prudent to avoid being drawn into discussions on democracy and the implications for the power elite that it may bring. With every word being carried by reporters to households everywhere, politicians found it increasingly advantageous to avoid saying what they actually meant (Hobsbawm, 1997, pp. 87-88). As a consequence, claims Hobsbawm, 'what intelligent observer could overlook the yawning gap between public discourse and political reality (p. 88). Regardless of these observations, we still tend to, have to, rely on individuals in the news media to garner useful information from politicians and authority figures. Tiffen claims that the news media are 'the central forum of political communication' and, therefore, also a 'key arena of political conflict' (Tiffen, 1989, p. 5). As far as democratic debate is concerned, however, the 'conflict' is publicly staged and broadcast, and represents public opinion only in a very narrow way.

Habermas claims that mediated political debates and interviews have become commodities. Where debate and political forums were once based on critical reviews of cultural production, discussion itself is now a consumer item. Habermas, while accepting that the commercialisation of cultural goods is one way in which to cultivate rational-critical debate, observes that debate itself should be 'excluded from the exchange relationships of the market' (Habermas, 1989, p. 164). For Habermas, commercially produced cultural and political debates indicate a shift away from private people debating political matters as a public of equals, as 'human beings' (p. 164). That is, we may tend to have more of an opinion on what politicians and experts being interviewed have to say, rather than our own opinions that evolve from everyday experiences. This is also true in regard to the topics to be raised. In discussing the relationship between politicians and the press gallery, Don Watson observes that: 'The media determine the form and, very often, the subject of debate' (Watson, 2002, p. 51). One may assume that this would have the desired effect of holding politicians to account, but as anyone who has seen a

politician being interviewed would know, this is not so. The way in which a political interview or debate is structured, following formalised rules, etiquette and presentation (Habermas, 1989, p. 164), in addition to the adherence to time constraints and the strict question-and-answer system, does not often foster quality debate (Beresford, 1997, pp. 58-60).

This was certainly true of the centrepiece debate that the news media built up to during the campaign. The 'Great Debate', as it is called, was televised live on the Nine Network's *60 Minutes*, which 2001 host, Ray Martin, referred to as 'the national broadcaster'. Before the commencement of the 2004 'Great Debate', the host, Charles Wooley (Great Debate, 2004), described Nine's live coverage of the Great Debate as the only occasion when the two leaders meet for a 'face-to-face encounter'. While this may perhaps be considered a coup for the Nine Network, it is a poor reflection of our political and news media systems. This means that on only one occasion do the public get to see each leader's ideas and opinions being tested by their political opponent, let alone being tested by other party leaders or, for that matter, a live audience. In place of audience questions the same old political experts, and senior journalists are left to ask the difficult questions. The panel was comprised of: Malcolm Farr from the *Daily Telegraph*; Neil Mitchell from Radio 3AW in Melbourne; Michelle Grattan from the *Age* and the ABC's chief political correspondent, Jim Middleton, with Laurie Oakes acting as moderator. In contrast, the public are again removed from political participation, such as directing questions to the party leaders on live television, and are instead relegated to providing statistical information via the 'worm'.

The worm is a box with a dial that can be used by a member of a live audience watching the debate to respond by turning a dial left or right in accordance with how well they think a politician is responding to a question. A graph is produced from the collated results that represents the performance of the politicians during the debate. However, as has already been discussed, we are never really sure as to why the audience liked or disliked what is being said. They may not have liked John Howard's tie for all we know. Furthermore, without questions from the public the debate may have missed the opportunity for topics such as indigenous affairs and the environment, which were not covered in the debate. Featuring heavily were the areas of national security, health, the economy and workplace relations, and the

panel obliged by staying with these themes. While this media event between the two leaders may enlighten some viewers to campaign issues, the leaders rarely strayed from their campaign messages, and offered little in the way of new information.

The task, then, is for the interviewer, through comprehensive and incisive questioning, to try and expose irregularities in any policy, not just the face value benefits advocated by the politician. Despite the best efforts of an interviewer, however, political interviews rarely achieve any new insight outside the policy's initial media release. Speaking from his experience as a political interviewer for the ABC's *7.30 Report*, Kerry O'Brien (cited in Irving, 2004) recalls one technique politicians use to get a political message across during what is supposed to be an interview. The technique involves drawing:

breath mid sentence, rather than at the end of a sentence, so that they can charge on with their answer and not give you a gap to get your next question in.

In using 'tricks of the trade' such as this, a politician can control an interview; they can simultaneously eat into the interviewer's valuable question time while favourably promoting a policy, their own party, or themselves. Early in the election campaign, *Lateline's* Tony Jones queried the Prime Minister (cited in 'PM defends', 2004) about a promise that he made, while in opposition in 1995, to the electorate. In 1995 Howard proclaimed that: 'I can promise you we will follow policies which will, over a period of time, bring down the foreign debt'. At that time the trade deficit was \$194 billion. According to Jones, since John Howard's government came to power this figure has risen to \$393 billion. Jones (PM defends, 2004) asked Howard: 'Now why didn't you keep that key economic promise?' Jones rephrased this question in numerous ways during the interview, but John Howard chose not to address the question directly and instead supplied answers that linked interest rates to Labor's economic record. The following quote is representative of the type of response Howard supplied throughout the course of the interview:

out there where people have high mortgages, they are sensitive to interest rate movements and they will look at the record of my Government over the last eight-and-a-half years, they will remember the 17 per cent interest rates of Paul Keating and Bob Hawke (PM defends, 2004).

John Howard used the time available to follow the Liberal-Coalition campaign strategy, which was attacking the economic credibility of the Labor party while advertising the government's own economic management team of Howard and Costello. While Howard was given the opportunity on ABC's *Lateline* to explain to the public why the trade deficit is so high, and how his government was going to remedy it, he decided to remain evasive.

British studies of the political interview further confirm that politicians and the news media are not necessarily a politically informative mix, and merely give the impression of in-depth debate. According to Peter Bull, there are a number of identifiable characteristic features associated with the political interview: 'the distinctive pattern of turn taking, the high frequency of interruptions and equivocation, and the importance of face management and self-presentation', where a 'politician's skills in face management in interviews becomes of central importance' (Bull, 1998, p. 158). The study conducted by Bull and Mayer revealed that politicians provide substantially less direct replies, a difference on average of 40%, to questions compared with non-political interviewees (p. 152). Another study conducted by Bavelas demonstrated how a politician's 'communicative situation' predicted an equivocation as a result of the question being impossible to answer without damaging either their own party, another party affiliate, or a segment of the public. This was referred to as an 'avoidance-avoidance' scenario. In this situation it is the potential mistakes that a politician can make that may win or lose support from an electorate or significant other (p. 153). These 'aggressive' interview tactics, generally speaking, are more likely to be seen on shows such as the ABC's *Lateline*, and *7.30 Report*. However, as already noted, this approach in itself does not guarantee a successful interview if the interviewee remains obstructive and chooses not to participate.

Comparatively, a third study revealed that not all questions are as adversely deterministic, and can in fact have a favourable result for the politician. This type of question, unlike the awkward Bavelas questions, can be answered with what is called a 'non-necessary threat' response where politicians can make positive statements about himself or herself and the party that the politician represents. Of course, it also allows for the discrediting of opponents (p. 156). Predictably, the majority of politicians analysed chose to give 'non-necessary threat' responses to

such questions (p. 156). Tiffen states that in relation to policy 'there are more costs than benefits in being specific.' Where 'the extra detail may provide a target for opponents to attack, and increase the likelihood of a gaffe' (Tiffen, 1989, p. 140). What most people who do not watch current affairs see, however, is the doorstep interview during the nightly news that relies on the 'sound bite'. The doorstep interview is when a politician is seen getting out of a car, or entering/leaving a location, a scenario that allows them freedom to say what they like and avoid difficult questions. 'The advantage of using sound bites, particularly for commercial news channels, is their brevity and entertainment value' (Payne, 1999, p. 100). Dr Trish Payne, a lecturer in communication studies, highlights the varying approaches and attitudes toward journalistic standards when she quotes Agnes Warren, of the ABC's *Media Report*, who claims that politicians take advantage of the brevity of commercial media, while appearing to sound as though they are giving both sides of a complex argument.

If the public have in fact become despondent about mediated politics, a response to this, claims Brian McNair, may be an 'aggressive, adversarial journalism, in the form of tough interviewing techniques ... as they constitute visible displays of the vulnerability and accessibility of political elites' (McNair, 2002, p. 201). There are sometimes occasions when the interviewer does manage to crack the political surface, and some vulnerability shows through. According to Stuart Firth, 'governments worry about the media because the media influences public opinion', but 'mass public opinion about much of Australia's foreign policy hardly exists' (Firth, 1999, p. 65). Government controls the agenda on foreign policy, and it would be a fair assumption to say they would like to keep it that way (p. 65). So, when the news media attain some piece of significant material that may jeopardises public support for the Iraq war, for example, the government attempts to neutralise and discredit the story.

While interviewing the Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, *Lateline's* Tony Jones was attempting to gain more information about the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) involvement, if any, in the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuses. Jones already had some background information that linked an ADF legal officer, Major O'Kane, to the drafting of a letter to the Red Cross in December. Jones asked Downer whether it 'disturbed' him that the letter stated that for 'security reasons

some internees at Abu Ghraib would not be given the protection of the Geneva Conventions?’ (Downer plays down, 2004). On this particular night Downer was on the defensive, as the O’Kane revelations had become headline news among nearly all the news organisations. Downer claimed he had not seen the letter, and that this was a desperate attempt to involve Australians in the prisoner abuse scandal. Downer, indignant, argued that: ‘to suggest that an Australian was involved in the drafting or a partial drafting of some letter’. At this point, mid-sentence, however, Downer changes tact before continuing with: ‘the person who signed the letter is the person who's responsible for the letter’. However, Jones challenged Downer about what he knew, asking whether he was disputing that an Australian had helped draft the letter or not. During the course of the interview Downer claimed that the ABC and the Labor party had colluded to make an argument ‘that somehow there was an Australian involvement in these Abu Ghraib atrocities’ (Downer plays down, 2004). He also accused Jones of ‘impugning the integrity’ of ADF officers, when Jones was actually trying to show that there was a collapse in communication between Foreign Affairs, the Defence Department and officers in Iraq. Furthermore, Downer referred to the idea of prisoners at Abu Ghraib not having the protection of the Geneva Convention as ‘some legal interpretation of the Geneva Conventions’ (Downer plays down, 2004).

When Jones asked Downer why O’Kane was not permitted to give evidence before a Senate Estimates Committee on matters relating to Abu Ghraib, Downer again aligned the ABC with the Labor Party, claiming that: ‘this is the line the Labor Party run’ (Downer plays down, 2004). Downer tried yet another tack by asking Jones the questions and what he thought Senate Estimates Committee hearings were for. Answering his own question, Downer said:

They are supposed to be about the financial estimates of government departments. ... You've got Senator Faulkner going in the Senate Estimates abusing public servants, humiliating public servants and then demanding people come before a Senate committee (Downer plays down, 2004).

However, on the government’s own parliamentary website it clearly states that:

One of the most significant features of the procedure for examining estimates is the opportunity that senators have to question officers of the public service directly ... The provision of facts and figures is a necessary but not

sufficient condition of accountability. What is needed to complete the picture is for the relevant officials to explain, not only the details of the 'what' and the 'how', but also the 'why' of departmental administration (Senate's Legislation Committees, 2001).

Furthermore, any evidence tabled in an estimates enquiry cannot be done so in secret, and all documents given in evidence become public (2001), which could be problematic for a government attempting to silence debate on a controversial topic. Foreign Minister Downer's performance on *Lateline* demonstrates how politicians, faced with a difficult series of questions, attempt to avoid responsibility or ownership of a negative issue being addressed by the interviewer. The technique is used to shut down debate, that is, give the impression of debate while trying not to reveal crucial information that can hold government to account. As McNair suggests, however, an adept and prepared interviewer can on occasion at least reveal some vulnerabilities.

### **2.3. Public Opinion**

During the early stages of the six-week campaign, the *7.30 Report*'s Kerry O'Brien stated that, tongue in cheek, 'at this stage [of the campaign] we are not quite sure who is listening'. It may be that the electorate were not interested in the policy issues, but it is the business of political parties and government to at least have some idea of who is listening to them. Commercial media organisations, for example, need to know their audience and what will draw and hold their attention long enough for advertisers to take advantage of audience attentiveness (Cunningham & Turner, 2002, p. 87). To effectively target a specific audience, consumer group or an electorate, political parties and news media organisations measure the public attitudes via opinion polls and surveys. The rationale behind their use is that it makes public opinion more or less predictable, and subsequently taking some of the guesswork out of policy decisions (Mills, 1986, p. 43). Polling may inform, for example, how a government minister should behave and respond during media interviews. Michel Foucault's writings on discipline incorporate the scientific study of populations as a means by which governments can control population. Knowing detailed movements and characteristics of populations, for example, led to the recognition of the conjugal family as an economic unit that could be incorporated into the state.

Foucault, (cited in Burke, 2003, p. 270) observes that ‘discipline was never more important or more valorised than at the moment when it become [*sic*] important to manage a population’. The use of opinion polls is the positivist contrast to Habermas’s definition of open and civil society that itself legitimates representatives of power through informed public debate (Habermas, 1989, p. 236). Habermas believes that because public opinion should be derived from rational-critical debate as ‘public opinion is not representative in the statistical sense. It is not an aggregate of individually gathered, privately expressed opinions held by isolated persons’ (Habermas, 1996, p. 362). Armed with polling results that define a population’s demography, advertising and public relations agencies may embark on a campaign to promote a product that not only ‘solidifies the profile of the brand and a clientele of consumers but mobilizes for the firm or branch or for an entire system a quasi-political credit’ (Habermas, 1989, p. 194). Neil Postman argues that many of these polls and surveys use push polling anyway, where the answer already lies in the question, that is ‘the public’s opinion on almost any issue will be the function of the question asked’ (Postman, 1993, p. 134). When political parties and government use the same methods as corporations to attract publicity, Australia’s entire political system and political functions are corrupted. A government that seeks public acclamation derived from private or undebated opinion is embarking on a process of public control rather than allowing a society to determine itself by the will of the people.

Neil Postman states that:

The question is as yet undecided whether knowledge of voter trends during a political campaign enriches or demeans the electoral process. But when polls are used to guide public policy, we have a different sort of issue altogether’ (Postman, 1993, pp. 132-133).

An opinion is not a static object that can be measured, ‘it is a process of thinking’ (p. 134). When political parties and news media organisations use techniques that bypass rational discourse, they become both the creators and purveyors of their own news and policy. Turner claims that there was some consternation when the ‘*Australian* began commissioning its Newspoll surveys and then publishing its interpretations of the results as front-page stories’ (Turner, 1996, p. 44). The front-page headline of *The West Australian* on election day, for example, read: ‘AND THE WINNER IS HOWARD, SAY POLLS’ (Dodson & Taylor, 2004, p. 1). The

headline was based on the latest ACNielsen poll. Under the bold headline, there is a large picture of Latham and Howard locked in a long and awkward handshake. As they passed each other in a radio station corridor, Latham vigorously grasped the Prime Minister's hand and closing in quickly hovered over him in what looked like deliberate intimidation. Anyone who watched any television news during the campaign would have seen this confrontation repeated *ad infinitum*. *The West Australian's* headline positions the reader to view Howard as a rational, humble bloke, over the irrational, bullying Mark Latham. Together, the photograph and the ACNielsen poll, as Turner rightly points out, is 'creating news, not reporting it' (p. 44). The use of polls is a good way for the news media to generate a story that may otherwise not have existed. Consequently, analysis and speculative commentary on polls and the competition between leaders that it generates, feeds '...into the general picture reinforcing their images as winners and losers' (Tiffen, 1989, p. 144).

The integration of disparate information and marketing techniques used by corporations and political parties contributes to the distortion of public communications that further depoliticises the public sphere. For example, just prior to the election in 1996, *Four Corners* reporter Liz Jackson asked Prime Minister Howard: 'when did you change your view that Medicare was a total disaster? When did you change your view that bulk billing was a rort' (Jackson, 1996). Howard responded by claiming that the 'Australian people like Medicare and they want to keep it'. Howard continued by saying that 'anybody who has the same view year in and year out, irrespective of the expression of public opinion, is stupid' (Jackson, 1996). Since coming to power John Howard has attempted to associate his party with the traditional Labor Party policy area of health. Strategically speaking, one would imagine that in a tightly contested two party race, this was in effort to neutralise any political advantage the Labor Party may gain from the association between health and the ALP. In this sense, the relationship between the two parties closely resembles the rivalry between two corporations fighting over market share.

Nicholas Ind, a corporate brand theorist, cites research, conducted by the Opinion Research Corporation [ORC], that 'demonstrates the importance of an organisation's reputation and the management of that reputation' (Ind, 1997, p.

57). One of the main statements posed by ORC that most executives agreed upon was that:

when several companies' products or services are similar in quality or price, the companies' respective corporate reputation often determines which service the customer will buy (p. 57).

Since his election in 1996, John Howard and his ministers have been claiming that the Liberal Party is more of a friend of Medicare than the Labor Party. Former Health Minister Michael Wooldridge (Medicare Stronger than Ever, 2000), Health Minister Tony Abbott (Abbott, Gillard battle, 2004), and the Prime Minister have at every opportunity have expressed the claim that the Liberal-Coalition party are 'better friends of Medicare than the Labor Party' (Medicare Announcement, 2004). In a tight contest between two parties selling the same product, 'repetition and visibility are the only true measures of success' (Klein, 2001, p. 49).

Habermas argues that conducting non-public opinion polling of the electorate results in 'issue related arguments' and 'political program statements' becoming symbols and representations (Habermas, 1989, pp. 217-218). Therefore, rather than fluid and fluctuating opinions on political issues in the form of national debates, internal polling congeals a non-public opinion to be used strategically by a party. Therefore, an advertisement (Appendix: B) extolling the virtues of the government's added benefits to Medicare, such as the 'safety net', served to associate the green and gold Medicare logo more with the government than the Opposition. The Medicare commercials were promoted by the government public service announcements rather than advertisements, though currently it is apparently a moot point as to what constitutes an advertisement or public service announcement. While accepting that both parties have spent excessive amounts of public money on advertising, the *ABC's Media Watch* (Aren't there any rules?, 2004) claim that Howard's Medicare advertisements are broadcast in spite of recommendations made in 2000, by the Joint Committee of Public Accounts & Audit, that recommends a ban on the 'dissemination of material to the public which promotes activities, programs or initiatives of the government in a politically partisan or biased manner'. A later government report into the conduct of the 2001 Federal Election shows a regression on the issue of government advertising. The report reveals that:

there are significant difficulties both in defining what constitutes government advertising for political purposes, and in determining appropriate regulation and enforcement mechanisms (Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, 2001, p. xxxvi).

Putting a positive spin on Howard's behaviour would mean accepting that the use of polls is the process of using science in trying to make democracy rational, with better governance over the population the intended result. However, this would ignore the recent coverage of 'Prime Minister John Howard [apologising] for raising the safety net thresholds by hundreds of dollars', despite Tony Abbott's "iron-clad" guarantee, ... made during the election, that the threshold would stay the same' (Abbott knew of safety net, 2005). In light of this, John Howard could be accused of using opinion polls and marketing strategies to secure his own popularity and power.

In another example, *The Australian Financial Review's* [AFR] David Bassanese believed that internal government polling had recognised a stark reality faced by 'Australian Households', that 'they're way over their heads in debt and acutely sensitive to the fear that their interest bill might rise further' (Bassanese, 2004, p. 21). The Coalition's recognition of this circumstance in connection with the government's election strategy would suggest attempts by the government at playing on the fears and vulnerabilities of a substantial proportion of indebted families. The following paragraph of rhetorical questions is what constituted John Howard's election campaign, and he and his team adhered to it religiously throughout the campaign:

Who do you trust to keep the economy strong? Who do you trust to keep interest rates low? Who do you trust to lead the fight on Australia's behalf against international terrorism? Who do you trust to keep the budget strong? The election will be about the future of this nation over the next ten years (Choice of October 9, 2004).

Howard's own strategy was to campaign heavily on the symbols of national security and the economy. Translating one Foucault's College de France lecture, Colin Gordon (cited in Burke, 2003, p. 270) argues that Foucault treats security 'as a specific principle of political method and practice', and as such, 'we live today not so much in a Rechtsstaat or disciplinary society as in a society of security'.

Furthermore, security can be linked with any other number of 'governmental configurations', such as welfare, defence, immigration, science and economics (pp. 270-273). Consequently, Prime Minister Howard announced that the election was a referendum on which party could be better 'trusted' to deliver 'strength and stability' in relation to the vast national security and economic challenges that needed to be faced.

For example, on September 9, 2004 there was a terrorist attack on the Australian embassy in Jakarta, with those responsible claiming to be members of the organisation called Jemaah Islamiah [JI]. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, during a press conference in Jakarta, claimed that the bombing was directed at the Australian embassy, but that there was no evidence to support any claims that the bombing was designed to influence the Indonesian or Australian election results, as it did in Madrid (Downer, 2004). Both Latham and Howard were quick to condemn the terror attacks and to pay their respects to those that had died or been injured. The press and news broadcasters used the situation to devote large portions of newspaper space or broadcast time to dwell on 'our' casualties. Articulating public sentiment symbolically or pictorially towards political issues is one of the key mechanisms that the media and political parties use. Stuart Ewen, a media theorist, states that symbols have the capacity 'to magnify emotion while undermining critical thought, to emphasise sensations while subverting ideas' (Ewen, 1996, p. 157). In Walter Lippmann's (cited on p. 157) words, 'in the symbol, emotion is discharged at a common target and the idiosyncrasy of real ideas is blotted out'. As Habermas states, the function of mass media is about 'exploiting events that attract attention' (Habermas, 1989, p. 194).

In doing so, the news media adheres to the psychology and techniques associated with 'pictorial publicity connected to well-tested human interest topics' (p. 194). Looking at the front page of *The West Australian* over a year, for example, shows that approximately 85% of them depict families, children or animals. In the aftermath of the Jakarta bombing and the Beslan school siege we were faced with depictions of injured children, or parents and soldiers carrying injured children. However, we very rarely see injured Iraqi children, even though 'more than half the deaths reportedly caused by the occupying forces were women and children' (Burnham, Garfield, Khudhairi, Lafta & Robert, 2004, p. 1863). Habermas argues

that calculated representations reorient public opinion ‘by the formation of new authorities or symbols which will have acceptance’ (Habermas, 1989, p. 194). In this case, acquiring public sympathy and acclamation of the war in Iraq, and the ‘war on terrorism’ in general.

The *Sydney Morning Herald*’s political reporter, Louise Dodson, claimed that ‘suddenly the sedate and slickly managed federal election campaign had been disrupted’ (Dodson, 2004). Dodson incorporated the attack into the campaign narrative by arguing that how ‘Mr Howard and Mr Latham respond to the renewed threat of terrorism will play a large part in determining the outcome of the election’ (Dodson, 2004). The ABC news and current affairs programming presented the story in a similar manner. On the evening of the Jakarta bombing, as well as the following evening, the *7.30 Report* dedicated the entire show to covering the terrorist attack. The program’s host, Kerry O’Brien, said that in the context of an election campaign the attack on Australian interests, albeit abroad, was unprecedented, and that the ‘reverberations from the bomb in Jakarta stopped the campaigning politicians in their tracks this afternoon in Australia’ (O’Brien, 2004). The program included interviews with the Foreign and Shadow Foreign Ministers, Jemaah Islamiah (JI) and terrorism experts. O’Brien claimed that ‘how politicians respond to this affront and a nation of electors read and react to it, will dramatically inform the election campaign’ (O’Brien, 2004). It was clear at this stage that the news media were expecting that the bombing would have some bearing on the campaign, and how the public ultimately voted.

There was speculation in the media over whether or not the bombing in Jakarta was used to create pressure on the Australian government to withdraw its troops from Iraq. Such a scenario had already played out in Spain only days before their national elections, with the incumbent losing government. After the Madrid train bombing Mick Keelty (Keelty, 2004) declared that ‘the reality is, if this turns out to be Islamic extremists responsible for this bombing in Spain, it’s more likely to be linked to the position that Spain and other allies took on issues such as Iraq’. Before making such a claim Keelty may have done himself a service by reflecting on Ernest Renan’s (cited in Said, 1995, p. 148) claim that it is ‘better to be mistaken along with the nation than to be right with those who tell it hard truths’. Downer countered Keelty’s comment by claiming that he was ‘expressing a view which reflects a lot of the propaganda we’re getting from Al Qaeda’ (Aust warns

Spain, 2004). General Cosgrove was also prompted to comment. While believing that Keelty and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) were doing a 'fantastic' job, Cosgrove stated that 'I see the same intelligence as [Keelty has] seen and I disagree with him on this occasion'. Keelty's comments prompted a public reprimand from Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. Keelty had to be publicly censured to show a unified front against terrorism, and, most importantly, reinforce the perception of John Howard as a strong leader.

Security and the economy have always been key factors involved in controlling populations and consolidating their support, even for some of the most unpalatable government policies. This is mostly because of the complexity involved in international relations, the disinterest in military budgets and the clandestine nature of security agencies (Firth, 1999, p. 70). These are some of the reasons why reporters, such as Greg Sheridan of *The Australian*, believe 'John Howard owns the American alliance politically'... the war on terror and... owns national security' (Sheridan, 2004). It is also no doubt why governments choose this over other policy areas to run on during a campaign, as it is an easier platform from which to attain public support. Habermas states that within an expanded mediatised public sphere public opinion has the potential to become the:

object to be molded [*sic*] in connection with a staged display of, and manipulative propagation of, publicity in the service of persons and institutions, consumer goods, and programs (Habermas, 1989, p. 236).

Michel Foucault (cited in Burke, 2003, p. 23) claims that to successfully govern a state is to 'reinforce the state itself', and that 'government is only possible if the strength of the state is known; it can thus be sustained'. It is important, then, that a government gives the public at least the perception of strength, power and control through performances played out in the news media. While not privy to the internal manoeuvrings of the two major parties, it would not be a stretch to argue, regardless of party specific goals, that the mechanics of party operations do not differ drastically. Therefore, from the perspective of a news media saturated electorate, the perceptions that a public has of its politicians is everything.

## 2.4. *Insiders and Outsiders*

L. F. Crisp, Emeritus Professor of Political Science in the Australian National University, believes that ‘Democratic Cabinet government based on a virtually two party system does not allow either major contender for power to be a ‘purist’ or an ‘absolutist’ in ideological matters’ (Crisp, 1983, p. 53). In this election we saw reports of Latham seeking to win the aged vote and Howard talking about forests. Robert Cox (in Habermas, 2001, p. 58) argues that:

All politicians move to the center to compete on the basis of personality and of who is best able to manage the adjustment in economy and society necessary to sustain competitiveness in the global market.

Leading up to, and during, the election campaign both leaders appeared to be advocating less government intervention, and greater public autonomy. However, the political philosophies and the way that the news media report them are ideologically oriented. Historically, the Australian Labor Party, says Crisp, centres its image on a democratic socialist ideology, while Liberal Party ideology consists of liberal private enterprise capitalism (Crisp, 1983, p. 53). Rhetorically speaking, Latham has his ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, Howard his ‘battlers’ and ‘elites’. Habermas cautiously distinguishes the ‘loosely organised actors who “emerge from” the public, as it were, from other actors merely “appearing before” the public’ (Habermas, 1996, p. 375). Actors *emerging* from the public, or civil society, depend largely on sponsored support in the form of finance, organisation, knowledge and social capital.

For example, one businessman, Ian Melrose, attempted to have an influence on the moral perceptions of the Australian public, and used his own money to finance a series advertisements (Appendix C) highlighting the plight of the East Timorese people affected by the Australian government’s dealings over contested gas reserves. Melrose ‘paid around \$30,000 for a 30-second television commercial’ (Businessman takes on the Govt, 2004). According to Melrose, his motivation came from ‘involvement with health causes in East Timor, and as a result... I’ve decided that something’s got to be done, where East Timor gets a decent health system’ (2004). Channel Seven and SBS have recently pulled the advertisements claiming that the advertisements depicted graphic scenes not suitable for children. However, Melrose claims that the advertisements were cleared by the appropriate

authorities deeming them suitable for free to air television (Timor Sea justice, 2005). This example demonstrates how difficult it has become for members of the public to raise an issue for public debate. Even with the finance available, securing support from large influential media organisations is not always assured, especially if it is in contradiction or conflicts with the internal agendas and strategies of private television networks, despite their continual appropriation of the forums of public debate.

The actors *appearing* before the public have organisational power, resources and endorsement with which to conduct their endeavours from the very start. The motivation of these actors is derived from the reward of successful continuation of the organisation itself, and the profit or power to be made that legitimates their existence. These actors may include representatives of political parties, unions, professional and pressure groups (Habermas, 1996, p. 375). In the case of political parties, inter-organisational relations with other autonomous actors are sustained through an exchange of power, resources and social influence. On the topic of receiving political party donations, for example, Dr Andrew Leigh, an economist in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, and a member of the ALP, writes that:

the biggest advantages for the Coalition were in the finance sector (ANZ, JP Morgan), food and pastoral (Inghams, Manildra), industrial and manufacturing (Pratt, Amcor) and resource companies. Sectors that most strongly favoured the ALP were professional firms (accounting, law), clubs and hotels (the Australian Hotels Association) and the union movement (Leigh & Wolfers, 2004).

Roberts and Crossley claim that the style and manner in which modern election campaigns that are focused on winning votes through promises of public spending undercut and make Labour movements impotent (Roberts and Crossley, 2004, pp. 7-8). During the election campaign, headlines and opinion columns in *The Australian* contained articles focused on the ALP and their supposed attitude to labour and industrial reforms. One *The Weekend Australian* Opinion column was entitled 'LABOR MUST STAND UP FOR THE WORKERS' (Labor must stand, 2004, p. 18) and another front-page headline made the claim that 'BUSINESS DUMPS ON LABOR' (Gluyas & Boreham, September 18-19, 2004, p. 1). The first article supports the government's intended industrial relations reform, an area that is high on the list of the coalition government's policy priorities. Asked, in an interview

with radio 3AW's Neil Mitchell, about the government's position on industrial relations, the Treasurer Peter Costello stated (Costello, 2004): 'Unfair dismissal number one'. The second article conveys the apparent fears that large Australian corporations hold toward any changes a Latham government may make to industrial relations, and an increased role for unions in work place negotiations.

Along similar lines *The Australian* reported the Commonwealth Bank of Australia's (CBA) Chief Executive, David Murray, as saying that he would always be wary of reforms that would 'threaten productivity' that has been fastest where there has been a 'flexibility of (employment) contracts' (Gluyas & Boreham, 2004). Murray's take on flexibility echoes a speech made by John Howard, in February 2004, to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, where he stated that 'simplifying the award system and [the] framework for agreements at the workplace level has provided greater flexibility for both employees and employers', which has led to 'greater labour market flexibility, higher productivity [and] a fall in unemployment (Howard, 2004). In this case, however, *The Australian* fails to mention Murray's past dealings with CBA staff, and instead uses Murray's influential position to supply an opinion that discredits Latham's proposed social IR reforms.

Murray's comments came only one year after he oversaw a restructuring of the Commonwealth Bank that was designed to 'empower, motivate and skill staff' (Commonwealth plans, 2003). The strategy also proposed cutting 3 700 staff, whose job security was probably already very tenuous, as approximately '80 per cent of new jobs in Western industrialised nations are not permanent positions. Full-time jobs have risen by 14 per cent and part-time jobs by 70 per cent' (Letcher, 2001). Furthermore, Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that jobless rates have increased, and close to two million people are seeking employment in vain, which subsequently has a discouraging effect on others seeking jobs. This does not take into account other disadvantaged job seekers such as, for example, those lacking the appropriate skills and training needed to find gainful employment (Letcher, 2001). In a recent interview with Associate Professor of Philosophy, Giovanna Borradori, Habermas reasons that our communicative relationships with others in society are defined by the normative values to which we grow accustomed. Habermas (cited in Borradori, 2003, p. 35) claims that 'we in the West do live in peaceful and well-to-do societies, and yet

they contain a structural violence that, to a certain degree, we have gotten used to'. He goes on to say that common language and experience witnessed collectively via the news media cultivates a climate of 'common background convictions, self-evident cultural truths and reciprocal expectations' (p. 35). Based on these communicative conditions, claims Habermas:

the coordination of action runs through the ordinary language games, through mutually raised and at least implicitly recognised validity claims *in the public space of more or less good reasons*.

So, our understanding of each other is very much reliant on the institutions that inform our understanding of the society in which we live. However, it is precisely because we share a common perspective on our society through these institutions, like the news media, that these social bonds can be exploited, where 'conflicts arise from *distortion in communication*, from misunderstanding and incomprehension, from insincerity and deception' (p. 35). Quite apart from the common good of a society, these common social bonds can be used as a cynical tool against an indoctrinated public. For example, when the powerful claim that the public must make sacrifices, usually in the form of job or wage cuts, in order to keep a particular industry afloat. This tactic can only work if most of the public believe the economic rationalism that is at the heart of such arguments.

On *Lateline*, Murray stated that 'nobody likes the idea that we'll have less employment, but the idea that we will be ineffective as a competitor in the financial services industry is even worse. We have to be competitive, and this is the best way of doing it'. Patently, employment environments consisting of a high level of casual and part time jobs that rely on fluctuating market trends of corporations place employees in a position of greater financial risk and job uncertainty. John Howard would have people believe that emancipating workers from the reins of bureaucracy and unionism gives them more freedom, but when markets dictate the state of human resources the powerful actually have the potential to rob the vulnerable of their freedom, and hence a 'failure to protect them from the misuse of economic power' (Popper, 1974, p. 124). A collaborative research paper into transitional labour markets, conducted by the University of Melbourne's Centre for Public Policy, finds that:

union membership, and hence bargaining power, is particularly low in those occupations and industries most prone to precarious working conditions, which means that enterprise bargaining merely exacerbates the fragmentation of employment conditions. Some form of regulation through legislation or centralised bargaining may be necessary (Considine, Hancock, Howe & Ziguras, 2004, p. 10).

As Habermas observes, corporations and political parties left to their 'own internal logics' can have a destructive effect on society. It was a hollow boast, then, when Prime Minister Howard proudly announced to The Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) crowd that 'we now have an economy where fewer than one in five private sector workers belongs to a trade union' (Howard, 2004). We are only left to ponder whether Prime Minister Howard's delight in low levels of union membership and reduced job security characterises what he terms 'modern conservatism in social policy' (2004). However, as long as the news media continue to give a voice to the voices of large organisations over civil society their philosophies on society will remain dominant, and to some degree accepted as valid.

While there are news media organisations, like the ABC, SBS, *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, who often report on corporations' shortcomings, other organisations, such as *The Australian*, generally tend to be a little more conservative in this department. Turner claims that:

As media corporations diversify, and as their level of integration with the business sector as a whole increases, it is not surprising that we have seen an increasing degree of discretion in dealing with financial and commercial stories

In this respect, we can argue that the relationship between the corporate sector and the corporate news media is an unsurprisingly protective one. When the news media focus upon the nuances of domestic economic concerns they tend to ignore the political push for Australia to have a more active role within a global economy. In doing so the news media resolve the problem of reporting on the human cost of such economic rationalism. Dee Margets claims that over the past twenty years, during a period of great economic restructuring and rationalising in Australia, much of the media focus has been distracted from the bigger picture of Australia's global economic role. This is inconsistent, claims Margets, in a lecture delivered at Curtin University, televised by community broadcaster Channel 31, because while

the mainstream news media report on domestic issues of the General Sales Tax (GST), petrol prices and the National Competition Policy (NCP), they really should have more focus, analysis and political accountability on shifts that will have widespread economic fallout, such as the recent Free Trade Agreement with the United States. As has already been suggested in previous examples, journalists, publicity agents and members of the press 'to a certain extent control the entry of topics, contributions, and authors into the mass-media-dominated public sphere' (Habermas, 1996, p. 376). If the processes of campaigns and politics are in effect invisible to the public, yet journalists are going to report anyway, political parties would rather have some influence over what the media report.

Media control has become a necessary element of a political party's operations. Ward states that during the 1970s, Malcom Fraser formed the Government Information Unit (GIU), which was designed purely to control news media and to become alert to news media developments in general. Despite the Australian Labour Party's protestations of GIU's existence, the ALP created their own media control body called the National Media Liaison Service (NMLS), dubbed aNiMLS by the Canberra Press Gallery (Ward, 1997, p. 170). At the time Paul Kelly (cited in p. 170), a former press gallery correspondent, described the aNiMLS as a '*de facto* research unit for the press gallery'. Both GIU and the NMLS can be viewed as partisan political apparatuses. Tiffen believes that since the 1970s and 1980s, political campaigning practices have progressively made them an inadequate 'vehicle for accountability and meaningful public choice' (Tiffen, 1989, p. 152). *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist and once ABC's *Media Watch* host, David Marr, claims that:

Canberra doesn't leak in the way it once did. The cabinet and the party room are superbly disciplined. Bureaucrats are nervous. Leaks happen, but these days the government leaks to favoured journalists who give the public sneak previews of government policy (Marr, 2004).

This approach has largely been at the expense of speaking plainly and openly to the public on policy matters. Margets claims that there is little public discussion promoted by government because central to any debate on these topics would be the ongoing privatisation of public utilities and the casualisation, or increased 'flexibility', of Australia's workforce. This, together with Firth's observation that

news media editors do not use foreign policy issues because they are too complicated for audiences, means that there is little coverage of developments that significantly affect Australian's lives. The point here is that alternative economic viewpoints that may counter established political and economic experts do not often get a hearing in the mainstream press. That is, while there were reports that followed Mark Vaile's progress on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the US, and other reports that addressed Labor's initial opposition to the agreement, the FTA did not become a defining election issue. This, despite the controversy that continued over the effect that the FTA would have on the Pharmaceuticals Benefits Scheme (PBS), shows how debate can be buried even during the heightened political awareness of an election.

For political parties' organisational affiliations, together with mainstream news media attention can lend support to their campaign, and define election policy. The philosophies behind news media stories are, to some degree, complex. For example, judging *The Australian* by its actions, the CEO and editors perhaps felt that the way the government handled asylum seekers was ethically questionable during the 2001 election campaign and, therefore, took the government to task in a major front page story for its cynical management of the children overboard affair. On matters of finance and the economy, however, the editors and opinion writers of *The Australian* seem to hold a different perspective, regardless of ethical concerns, as was highlighted in the previous section.

As businesses themselves, they have a vested interest in deregulation and the reform of cross-media ownership laws that will allow for a greater share in domestic and global media industries (Acker, 2000, pp. 187-195). There is also another factor, according to *The Australian*'s CEO Michael Stutchbury, that determines the content to be published or broadcast in the news media. Stutchbury's research into Australian defamation law was delivered as a speech at the International Media Ethics Conference in Canberra on July 4, 2002, and appears in transcript form, entitled 'Rising Culture of Suppression', on *Crikey.com*. It is worth mentioning that *Crikey.com* (About Crikey, 2005) defines itself an online news media website that is 'independent and... not part of a media empire', and brings its readers 'the inside word on what's *really* going on in politics, government, media'. Stutchbury (2005) argues that:

High quality journalism... is in the public interest. Yet, the substantial and increasing defamation costs imposed upon media companies act, in effect, as a tax upon quality journalism. In the political debate over media regulation, much is made of the need for “diversity” of media outlets. One source of diversity is small-scale and low-cost outlets, sometimes renegade in nature, which irritate the big companies in various ways. The crap-shoot of the defamation explosion can threaten to wipe out such outlets such as Crikey.com. And in much more pervasive ways, the uncertain threat of defamation litigation has a chilling effect on the media's ability to vigorously report and analyse public events. In this way, the public's right to know and its ability to speak out is infringed, to the detriment of the democratic system.

Selective journalism, due either to the vested interests of news media organisations, or forced upon them by defamation laws or as a result of the closed nature of government, demonstrates a failing in the systems and institutions that are supposed to inform our judgments that ultimately shape the public's perspective on government and their political institutions.

In this respect, legitimacy of government derived from the processes of private news media organisations, distinct from a reasoning public sphere, can be called into question as without consistency in journalism there will likely be scepticism among the public. Unlike non-public opinion, such as the clandestine opinions of political parties and corporations that, nonetheless, have public implications, public opinion must emerge from the public sphere itself after actors with strategic intent candidly put their case or policy forward to private citizens (Habermas, 1996, p. 364). ‘Candidly’ is the operative word in this case, as the public must be aware of the kinds of activities public representatives are conducting in their name. If opinion is seen to be manipulated then it is most likely that voters will resist or disengage from the political process. One unionist, who has no particular liking for either party leader, claimed that while watching our politicians slug it out on television may be entertaining, ‘it leaves the entire institution discredited in the eyes of the public. Which is classic Tory political tactics – take away faith in politics and social change will never flourish’ (Dirty Deeds, 2002). The following accounts are examples of how the ‘discrediting’ can occur.

Despite calling the election date, Howard allowed the Senate to proceed with an inquiry into the children overboard affair, officially known as ‘a certain maritime incident’. Howard stated in *The Age* that ‘I didn't want anybody to suggest that I

was trying to prevent the Senate doing any pointless political business it might want to do' (Campaign to be about trust, 2004). This, however, did not mean that the government would be a passive observer to the inquiry. Patrick Walters of *The Australian*, who carries the title of 'National Security editor', claimed that Senator Robert Hill (in Walters, 2004) believed Labor was 'trying to drag the Senate into the gutter rather than debate issues of real interest to the electorate'. Again another government minister, this time Robert Hill, was trying to discredit any action taken by the Senate, claiming that any new probe into the Scafton revelations was an 'unprecedented abuse of the Senate'. Howard and his government continually played down and dismissed the new children overboard allegations as irrelevant, claiming the public were bored of the issue. Howard (cited in Tell voters about future, 2004) stated:

I do believe that the Australian public want to hear from both parties about the next 10 years, not about the last three days of the last election campaign.

John Anderson, leader of the National Party and Deputy Prime Minister, also helped in trying to control any potential public interest in the inquiry, while also protecting Howard's credibility. On Channel Nine's *Today Show*, a less hostile interview arena for the government, Anderson (cited in Today Show, August 18 2004) pointed to a 'ferocious campaign from some quarters, to establish the premise that we can't be trusted'. Anderson stated 'I trust the Prime Minister, and I trust him very deeply, and I believe that people who know him trust him and I believe that the bulk of Australians do as well' (August 18, 2004). The rhetoric coming from the government attempted to show the Labor Party in a hostile light, as though they were the ones under Senate scrutiny. Government ministers' interactions with the press were aimed at trying to placate the electorate and divert attention away from the Scafton claims.

As already stated, *The Australian's* stance was not supportive of the government's handling of the children overboard affair. As a result, opinions that may not otherwise have surfaced were made public by the newspaper. On August 16, *The Australian* ran comprehensive story entitled: 'REVEALED: THE MISSING LINK IN THE CHILDREN OVERBOARD AFFAIR. HOWARD WAS TOLD THE TRUTH' (Walters, 2004, p. 1). The article, comprised of a number of different sections throughout the newspaper, provided detailed background and recent updates. The

‘missing link’ was of course the former senior advisor to Peter Reith, Mike Scafton. Scafton’s presence just prior to the campaign was a central reason that Howard was running his campaign on ‘trust’, or what Scafton describes as the government sidestepping a ‘critical issue’ (the children overboard affair), trivialised and distorted by the slogan ‘truth in government’ (Scafton, 2004). In a letter published in *The Australian*, on the 16 August, 2004, Scafton wrote:

The report of the Senate committee inquiring into a Certain Maritime Incident – the children overboard affair – found the inquiry had been “significantly hampered” by my refusal to testify before it. The salient issue for the committee was “the extent of the Prime Minister’s knowledge of the false nature of the report that children were thrown overboard” and therefore “the extent to which the Government as a whole wilfully misled the Australian people on the eve of an election” (Scafton, 2004, p. 8).

In this new chapter of the children overboard affair, Scafton rhetorically asks: ‘What would I have told the Senate Committee?’ Scafton claims that after viewing video tapes, taken from the HMAS Adelaide, on November 7 2004, that were supposed to show children being thrown overboard by asylum seekers he spoke to John Howard three times by mobile phone. Scafton writes that:

In the course of those calls I recounted to him [Howard] that: a) the tape was at best inconclusive as to whether there were any children in the water but certainly didn’t support the proposition that the event occurred; b) that the photographs that had been released in early October were definitely of the sinking of the refugee boat on October 8 and not of any children being thrown into the water; and c) that no one in Defence that I dealt with on the matter still believed any children were thrown overboard. During the last conversation, the Prime Minister asked me how it was that he had a report from the Office of National Assessments confirming the children overboard incident. I replied that I had gained the impression that the report had as its source the public statements of the then minister for immigration, Philip Ruddock (p. 8).

When the Prime Minister asked how this could be the case, Scafton advised that he should ask the director general of the ONA, Kim Jones (p. 8). The objective that ALP Senators had, then, was to determine what the Prime Minister knew at the time and if the Prime Minister had in fact spoken to Jones.

Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Senator Conroy, asked Senator Hill ‘Did the Prime Minister take Mr Scafton’s advice before he released it to the media at the

National Press Club on 8 November 2001?' (Senate Hansard, 2004, p. 26626). Senator Robert Hill continued with the Coalition's campaign strategy, stating:

I suspect that this reflects the Labor Party campaign for this election. This is the alternative that they are putting to the Australian people. no policies, no alternative vision for Australia. Where is their tax policy? What about interest rates? We remember that when Labor was last in government housing interest rates were 17 per cent (p. 26626).

Despite the renewed news media coverage of the children overboard affair, there was no way of knowing how the electorate were responding to the issue of truth in government. Hugh MacKay's suspicions of a 'disengaged', 'leave it to the leader' (McKay & Brown, 2004) mentality prevailing within certain sections of the electorate was beginning to sound prophetic. Grahame Morris, a 'former' advisor to Prime Minister Howard, predicted that it would be unlikely that the ALP would continue with the children overboard Senate inquiry. Morris (2004) claimed on *Lateline* that:

I would actually doubt that because they may well find that this piddly little thing is running through the entire election campaign and it is overshadowing their education policy, their health story, their tax policy, their family policy.

The news media did indeed appear to mirror the government's belief that the public were bored with the Scafton enquiry, as the Scafton saga was now competing with terrorist acts playing out in Russia, and the bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta.

Participants on the Special Broadcasting Service's (SBS) own focus group forum conducted on the program *Insight*, an episode entitled Who Do You Trust?, voiced concerns at the level of trust the public had to oblige the government. One woman (cited in Who Do You Trust?, 2004) made a claim that in her own experience:

we have to take our politicians on face value because, frankly, we may not have the resources, we may not have the education to gather source documents, to look at source documents and come to an intelligent decision.

During the forum there were a number of comments that reflected this opinion. Some members of the *Insight* audience felt that they were not being adequately informed vital information about how Australia is governed. They demonstrated a

certain amount of contempt toward newspapers, with one man (cited in *Who Do You Trust?*, 2004) stating that ‘I know that whenever I pick up this newspaper [holds up a copy of *The Australian*], they’re for John Howard and George Bush. Everything they say is manipulated’.

Feedback from people participating in another focus group study conducted by Michael Pusey among middle Australia indicate that it is difficult to:

orient [their] actions to others, and how to find, and to read, reliable feedback in a depleted civil society in which informal communication channels seem scrambled with noise and contradiction (Pusey, 2003, p. 136).

A study by David Denmark into televised election campaigning in Australia used the Converse model of media effects. Denmark maintains that central to ‘Converse’s model of media effects on electoral behaviour is the importance of individuals’ existing political interest, loyalties and awareness in mediating those effects’ (Denmark, 2002, p. 663). The above examples perhaps show individuals who question, analyse and find bias in the information that they receive via the press or television, yet find it frustrating that there are no clear representations of political authority and power. In addition, Iyengar, Peters and Kinder (cited in p. 664) discovered that televised political communication had a substantial effect on news media viewers who were ‘less able or willing to counter-argue with a news presentation’, while their politically informed opposites appeared better able to ‘resist agenda-setting through effective counter-arguing’. What Denmark claims these findings show is that those with the least amount of interest in politics are the same people who will more likely be influenced by television news media coverage of an election campaign. These relationships become complex when the ‘two-step’ flow of communication theory is taken into account. Two-step flow of communication theory, attributed to Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld, examines the ‘informal social relationships’ between ‘opinion leaders’, those who are to a greater or lesser degree engaged with messages via mass media, and those whose exposure to media content is limited or nonexistent (De Fleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982, p. 193). Importantly, opinion leaders are often, though not always, from a similar social structure, which is a ‘key variable in determining who would influence [and] shape the voting intentions of those to whom they were passing on information’ (p. 193).

A society is comprised of many views and opinions, which is why authority and expert opinion alone can never democratically represent legitimate public opinion. Non-public opinions that act as the self appointed voice of the people are either misguided in their assumptions or deliberately manipulative. C. W. Mills claims that journalists and political analysts tend to overemphasise middle levels of power. While neglecting the top and bottom of the social structure, political journalists risk obscuring the structures of power in their entirety (Mills, 2000, p. 244):

As a professor or as a free-lance intellectual, the political analyst is generally on the middle levels of power himself. He knows the top only by gossip; the bottom, if at all, only by 'research'. But he is at home with the leaders of the middle level, and, as a thinker himself, with their bargaining (p. 245)

Middle level political commentators and journalists are still, like Martin Luther before them, 'locked in a battle for men's minds' (Anderson, 2003, p. 40). As opinion leaders in their own right, they can use their influence to convey certain opinions to an audience of listeners whose own unspoken opinions they can articulate. The success of commentators like Alan Jones and John Laws can be attributed to their persuasive and shrewd use of the vernacular. As Benedict Anderson observes, 'Protestantism was always fundamentally on the offensive, precisely because it knew how to make use of the expanding vernacular print-market being created by capitalism' (p. 40). One need only exchange the word Protestantism for its counterpart, the ideology of 'consumerism', and we have a neat description of the commercial media industry today. That is, the pervasiveness and popularity of commentators such as Jones and Laws is a predictable symptom of an amalgamation between capitalism, the news media and politics. It highlights a system that values profit as its own end, where the integration of corporate news media and political power sustain the conditions under which the channels of public discourse are severely compromised (Acker, 2000, pp. 185-187). Perhaps this is why political and social commentators like Paul Kelly, Janet Albrechtsen and Philip Adams can appear together in *The Australian* without apparent contradiction, despite often extreme political and social differences.

It would indeed be difficult to understand these relationships based on small groupings of individuals within a social stratum in the context of an election. Given that the key determinant of two-step flow is the influence of opinion leaders is

horizontal, it could be argued that any one social group may share the same set of social and economic concerns and may, therefore, reflect a mutual understanding. Habermas argues that Katz and Lazarsfeld's 'opinion leaders' work on a much greater vertical, hierarchical level, with the wealthier and more educated having a certain amount of influence over those in the lower status groups who hold no particular party loyalty. However, interaction that occurs in this way should not be mistaken for public opinion and will-formation within the public sphere. Why public opinion formation under these circumstances cannot be considered as legitimately emerging from the public sphere is because these roles become fixed, creating a two-tier system of influence that precludes rational-critical debate (Habermas, 1989, p. 213). That is, opinions held by opinion leaders have a tendency to go unchallenged and their legitimacy assumed without argument. Given the opportunity to respond, however, sometimes reveals a more complex truth.

During SBS's *Insight* program, for example, journalist Margo Kingston and John Roskam, a political scientist and former coalition advisor, assumed the existence of two types of voter. The first is a small group of 'elites' who have the time and money to concern themselves with issues of honesty and trust in government, such as the children overboard affair and the invasion of Iraq at the hands of the alleged 'coalition of the willing'. The second group are the working class, Howard's 'battlers', who are only concerned with interest rates and economic security. One woman (cited in *Who Do You Trust?*, 2004) from the focus group resented the idea that someone could consider that there was only a small elite group of people to whom the issue of truthfulness is important. Continuing, she said:

I'm not a member of a small, elite group, I'm a member of a large working class. The principle of truth, of an elected representative is such a fundamental core issue I find it hard to believe that there are other people out there who can say, "I have my doubts about this person's fundamental integrity," yet "I'm going to set their basic lack of regard for the truth aside and I'm going to accept their reporting at face value," I just find that inconceivable.

This demonstrates that it is only through rational discourse that generalisations, symbolism and ideology can be avoided and a move toward understanding is achieved through communicative bonds. Proper dialogue and discourse are essential ingredients that are missing from the news media channels that deal in

political comment, and as a result such comments are often met with hostility and resentment. Kingston's distinction between the two voter bases may have validity, and she no doubt used the distinction as a convenient way to argue a point. However, faced with a member of the public whom Kingston identified as working class and therefore without a capacity for moral reflection highlights the complexity of communicative relations. Furthermore, it demonstrates how impoverished polls, demography and the overall scientific reduction of society can be, and the assumptions, manipulation and miscommunication they can cause when used deliberately, irresponsibly or without thinking.

## *Conclusion*

The function that the new mass communications had in the previous centuries was to maintain mercantilist connections among the bourgeois. What followed was a period in which actors in government became open to public scrutiny that was cultivated by the connection of private persons coming together as a public via mediated accounts by persons close to power themselves. However, news and information has in itself become a commodity, and the news media, as private organisations, seek legitimacy by way of public acclamation and loyalty in order to remain competitive enough to exist alongside their rivals. Additionally, in response to the pervasiveness of the mass media, political parties, and their affiliates, use the news media in much the same way as corporations do in selling manufactured products and services to the public. Subsequently, the intended function of the news media, to inform the opinions of private persons who then test these opinions together as a public via rational-critical debate, continues to be eclipsed by powerful and influential actors external to any common sphere of lived experience and communicative bonds that this generates. That is, opinions held by powerful organisations outside the common concerns of everyday life experienced by private persons are reached without the acknowledgement of the public to be addressed, but whose acclamation is sought publicly. As a theory that claims that our news media systems cannot adequately execute their function as an institution that holds government accountable, Habermas's theory of an eroded public sphere is predictably a controversial one. The news media and the mass media in general now serve many functions within a diverse Australian culture. They entertain, educate, and keep us informed about the society in which we live, and this is as it should be. However, the emphasis that the news media place on entertainment value is a direct result of the competitive nature of market economy news media, where the highest profile, highest rating and most entertaining stories have priority.

The techniques used in an attempt to attract public support for private organisations often rely on the acquisition of the nascent, untested private opinions of isolated persons. That is, private opinions can be manipulated by surveys and polls because the way in which a question is posed and structured can inform the answer. While poll results can have a positive role to play in providing an idea of public sentiment on an issue they should be used with care, as the great concern is that results may be used to determine government policy, or to legitimate a policy without public

debate. The other concern is the way in which they are used by the news media in the creation of stories that are reported as if factual, and as a result news becomes prophecy, rather than journalism. This kind of integration is again an example that further distorts information intended to inform a public with disinterested information, which results in a lack of public faith in news media or political institutions.

Despite the growing forms of new media available online, the majority of people source their news media from traditional forms like television and newspapers. Much of the public do not have the time, education, money or resources available to research what their politicians tell them. As such, news organisations should feel that they have a great responsibility toward the information they provide to the public about our politicians and government. On reading Habermas, one can only conclude that without an informed public there are fewer opinions and active members of the public emerging from within the public sphere that have the ability to express opinions on our media or political institutions. News and current affairs programs such as the ABC's *Lateline* and *7.30 Report*, SBS's *Insight* do offer the public a chance to hear different perspectives being argued on a given political or social issue. The interactions between experts, focus groups and politicians on *Insight* seems a very informative and engaging way of addressing concerns common to public experience. This kind of debate is also useful in exposing assumptions and crossing communicative barriers raised by the distortion and the categorisation of commercialised integrated media that makes the public sphere ineffective. That is, while there is not always agreement on certain issues between the participating parties, a communicative bond is created during the process of rational debate.

By the same token, however, SBS, along with Channel Seven, has demonstrated that they can discriminate between the public voices that they allow broadcast time to for the purposes of advertisements and public messages. While they happily advertise cars, finance and computers, all aimed at the higher end of the market, they will not broadcast an advertisement depicting the plight of needy East Timorese people. To remain balanced, however, we should also note that the journalists and editors of news programs may be constrained by other factors, such as defamation laws, that subvert a free and open flow of information. The task of

holding power to account is not an easy one, but, as White and Pilger argue, such pressures should be ignored in the pursuit of an open society.

However, one of Scafton's major coups was being able to have letters published in *The Australian* in regard to the 'children overboard' affair. In a chapter devoted to the relationship between the public service and the press, Henry Mayer (Mayer, 1994, pp. 132-140) offers the suggestion, that perhaps in the future, public servants will have a greater public role in informing and keeping up to date with the press on political matters. While it is arguable what influence, if any, the Scafton inquiry had on the election campaign, none would argue that the case did not generate interest among the news media, albeit briefly. However, the Scafton letters may do more to show the selectiveness of the letters page - after all what editor could resist publishing them. Letters pages in newspapers, while making public opinion visible, do not as effectively contribute to public debate as well as real-time interaction. In the pursuit of fairness, equal weight is given to all letters and there is usually fifty-fifty split between politically left and right leaning contributors. This seems to be the only real way of being fair, but a number of things should be taken into account, such as strength of argument and why editors from one week to the next choose letter topics. It is interesting to note that in the recent wake of government rollbacks, such as the Medicare safety net, *The Australian* letters page (Rotten to the core, 2005, p. 18) was filled to capacity with vehement anti-government contributions. It is as though *The Australian* had offered a cathartic outlet for disgruntled voters. As such, it can perhaps be viewed as an attempt at placating a section of their reading audience and a reinforcing loyalty to the newspaper. This altruism will no doubt eventually fade, as will the cavalier behaviour of the government, the closer we move toward the next election.

While research relating to audience reception and behaviour toward news media is amorphous, it would be a mistake to simply label media effects on the public sphere too difficult to interpret. Generally speaking, there seems to be a correlation between the format, quality, speed, volume and frequency, of public communications and the effectiveness of political strategies. This is at least true in the minds of political strategists and politicians. Political campaigns have been reduced to slogans, fear mongering, discrediting of opponents and the choice of stagnant policy repetition and resistance to debate, rather than engaging in discourse that involves new ideas, alternative perspectives and real-time public

opinions on policy. While we cannot say with any certainty how an audience receives and interprets news media, we can say that since it is the source of many people's political information politicians, like corporations, believe that it does have some effect. Therefore, because they believe that it has an effect, corporations, political parties and government feel they need to manage their own appearance in order to gain acclamation of the audience by casting themselves in a positive light. This interpretation of Habermas is central to this thesis. That is, it is not, as some critics would argue, Habermas's intention to label the audience as incapable of resisting the outside influences of powerful actors. It is the processes involved in seeking public acclamation and the quality of information emanating from these processes that produces news media that is inconsistent. It is this constant barrage of information lacking in consistency or veracity entering the public sphere that contributes to a public's lack of confidence in their own opinions and a disengagement with politics altogether. As a result, this chain of events ostensibly arrests and impoverishes public debate on government dealings, and obscures important debates that potentially define a nation's moral integrity in a global setting.

We may conclude by noting that these interactions and integrations are happening as a predictable result of an amalgamation between capitalism, the news media and politics. After all, if we invest our faith in a system that values profit as an end in itself, where the corporate news media and politicians advocate and actively encourage distinctions between winners and losers, the conditions under which the channels of communication operate will continue to be severely compromised.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix: A

### **The McQuillan Report: A different way of covering daily television news**

[Full transcript can be found at:  
<http://www.abc.net.au/sydney/stories/s1229586.htm>]

1. There is little consistency in each network's ability to provide 'exclusive' Australian stories to lead the network bulletin, or to have an exclusive story good enough to place in the top four stories.
2. Each network covers the main story of the day in strikingly similar ways, often using the same talent and similar vision;
3. There is little variance in the coverage of a network story in terms of story ideas, angles, vision or grabs;
4. The vision and talent are usually set up for the reporters/crews and producers by way of media conferences and/or doorstops. While this reflects and accommodates the pressures that each reporter/crew/producer face in getting a story to air, it also ensure that the main points which talent want to get across do actually get across. There is little or no independent analysis of, for example, new political policy analysis and thus the media conference is the focus of the story;
5. There is questionable value in the current system of each network sending a reporter and crew to the same event for what will inevitably be the same story;
6. That the element of competition is by and large failing to produce significantly different news programmes

The networks need to consider:

- Why many bulletins are similar to the opposition bulletins, in both perceptions of story importance (selection), angles and content;
- That in the cities where the networks are locked in fierce competition, the populations are significantly high enough to provide stories that reflect the breadth and depth of people and events that make up the approximately eight million people;
- That by pooling resources on what the network news executives consider to be the main common stories of the day, each network would have more resources to provide a greater variety and depth to the news stories for their audiences;
- That by pooling resources to help create for what are considered the main common stories of the day, the networks would be able to explore

exclusive stories to cater for the demands of different demographics, including the demographic that researchers say are declining TV news viewers, i.e. the 16-25 year olds.

#### Summary of Findings:

1. An analysis of the breakdown of the main stories covered in this limited snapshot of nightly news coverage in Sydney and Melbourne reveals:
2. There are few differences in the networks' perceptions of the important stories of the day;
3. Most networks run the same or similar stories in their bulletins, often using the same/similar grabs from the same/similar talent, sourced from the same media conference or doorstep;
4. Each network runs only one, perhaps two stories, that are not run on another network but this is not a consistent pattern;
5. It should be noted that while this survey compared the local content of Channels 2, 7, 9 and 10, a point of difference between the commercial networks and the *ABC* was the *ABC*'s more comprehensive international coverage.

## Appendix: B



Audio transcript: 'Strengthening Medicare' advertisement. (Strengthening Medicare, 2004).

\*\*\*START\*\*\*

**Q:** What's this about the new Medicare safety net?

**A:** It's one of the ways we're strengthening Medicare.

While Medicare has always covered you in public hospital, the new Safety Net protects you against high medical costs when you haven't been admitted to hospital.

**Q:** Like what I pay to my GP?

**A:** Yes, the costs for a whole range of treatments - like specialists, x-rays, tests, scans...

**Q:** But we already get a Medicare rebate on those.

**A:** And that will continue

But often you need to pay a gap, and that's where this helps.

**Q:** So how does it work?

**A:** Now, once your extra costs reach a certain level, Medicare will pay eighty per cent of that gap for the rest of the year.

**Q:** Sound good - but when does it kick in?

**A:** For most families with children and concession card holders, the level is \$300 a year.  
For everyone else - \$700.

**Q:** Is that \$300 each

**A:** No, for couples it's for both of you. And for families it includes all of you.

**Q:** That should be a help.

**A:** The New Safety Net. It's just one of the ways we're strengthening Medicare.

**A:** To find out more, watch out for this booklet.

\*\*\*END\*\*

**Appendix C: Timor Sea Justice Campaign**  
**Friday 25th of March, 2005 - For immediate release.**  
***SBS AND SEVEN PULL TIMOR SEA ADS***

Channel 7 and SBS have announced that they will not be screening the latest television commercials about the Timor Sea dispute written and funded by Australian businessperson Ian Melrose.

The two advertisements were to be screened over the Easter Break to mark the anniversary of the Australian Government's withdrawal of recognition of the maritime boundary jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice.

The ads accuse the Australian Government of stealing \$2 billion from East Timor and claim that "stealing from a third world country kills their children".

The networks have not yet supplied written statements outlining the reasons why they will not screen the ads, but have indicated that there were concerns about the content of the ads for young viewers. But Ian Melrose dismisses that argument claiming, "The ads have already been approved by the appropriate bodies and were deemed suitable for free to air television, so that can't be the reason."

"What I want to know is, have the networks received any directives or suggestions from the Australian Government? What's changed since the last ads were screened?" asked Mr Melrose, who was motivated to run the advertising campaign after reading about the death of a 12 year old East Timorese girl from worm infestation. A 20 cent tablet could have helped prevent her death.

Tom Clarke from the Timor Sea Justice Campaign Melbourne, claims it can not be the figures that the networks object to as the \$2 billion is a conservative figure based on publicly accessible financial reports published by Woodside Petroleum.

"The figures are accurate and stealing simply means taking something that is not yours, so I don't see what grounds the networks would have for not screening these ads." said Mr Clarke.

The \$2 billion worth of royalties the Australian Government has taken, come from the Laminaria Corallina fields alone. These fields are outside of the Joint Petroleum Development Area, but are likely to belong to East Timor if maritime boundaries are set in accordance with current principles of International Law.

The Timor Sea Justice Campaign also backs Mr Melrose's emotive claim that 'stealing from a third world nation kills children'. Tom Clarke claims, "There is a direct link between the high number of preventable deaths in East Timor and the drastic lack of funds to establish a working health system, run de-worming programs, the provision of clean water and so on. The Australian Government is taking billions of dollars from the poorest nation in Asia, of course that's having a direct and sometimes fatal impact on East Timorese children."

Officials from SBS and Channel 7 were unavailable for comment today due to the Easter public holiday.

Mr Melrose will continue his advertising campaign to raise awareness of the Timor Sea dispute, saying his next focus will be the Australian Government's betrayal of the ANZAC spirit.

The advertisements can be viewed online at: <http://www.timorseajustice.org/tvcs.htm> For further information please contact: Tom Clarke, Co-ordinator, Timor Sea Justice Campaign, Melbourne. 0422 545 763 [tom@timorseajustice.org](mailto:tom@timorseajustice.org)

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