

ABC News, the 7.30 Report  
and the 'Waterfront Dispute(s)'  
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*The shifting interpenetrative nature of speech and image in television news gives discussion about its objectivity and balance a distinctive complexity. At the same time, the very popularity and institutional dominance of the form makes this discussion inevitable.*

**John Corner, Television and Public Address, 1995, p.3.**

# Bias and Television Journalism

Accusations of 'bias' or 'partiality' are easily made but difficult to justify by reliable empirical means.

All verbal and visual representations are partial (incomplete) and involve selection at every stage of their production. Every image selected, word chosen, and every camera angle or graphic, not to mention each 'sound bite' edited and each person interviewed is selected according to complex journalistic criteria of their newsworthiness and relevance to the item (report, interview) being produced.

News and Public Affairs programs are not transparent, uninterpreted 'windows' on reality. They construct versions of social events and processes according to professional constraints and the physical limitations (eg time, resources, accessibility) of attending, observing, and interpreting 'newsworthy' events. Journalists research the historical background and judge the public significance of events and of more abstract issues (eg the reasons for changing rates of employment, the significance of a High Court ruling).

In a protracted series of industrial and legal disputes, several parties with conflicting, overlapping or independent goals and strategies will attempt to use the media to gain public acceptance of their respective positions. They will liaise with media professionals, produce information and resources or seek to be interviewed in ways which further their interests.

What is produced as 'news' or as a 7.30 Report item is partly the result of journalists using, but not necessarily accepting as 'true' or as unarguable, the material put to them by the respective parties. The media, therefore, mediate such material, seeking to contextualise and balance the claims of the various parties, and, at times, making judgements about the truthfulness of such source materials or seeking out opposed positions. Journalists may see it as their professional responsibility to represent interests which are not directly vying for publicity in a particular dispute (eg the 'public' or community groups affected by the disputes, legal rulings etc).

The 'bias' of the news media is, therefore, likely to be towards their assumed audiences, the 'public' or the powerless, those affected by the actions of the institutionally or commercially powerful, and not necessarily towards some rather than other of these particular interests themselves (including the government of the day).

It is important to bear in mind that any one report or program may show certain interests in a favourable light, even if the totality of coverage of an issue does not. It is in this context that any categorisation and quantification of news or public affairs averages of the 1998 'waterfront dispute' should be considered.

'Partiality' or 'bias' is usually analysed as failures of one or more of: accuracy, objectivity, and balance.

## **Accuracy**

'Accuracy' can be taken to refer to the factual correctness of what is claimed to have happened: to dates, locations, names of participants, etc. It cannot (usually) be established whether a news report is accurate by analysing it alone. By definition, some independent, credible evidence would be needed demonstrate particular inaccuracies.

# Bias and Television Journalism

## **Objectivity**

'Objectivity' implies, at least, that any report is not significantly influenced by the particular values or personal idiosyncrasies of the journalist (ie. that another professional journalist would also prioritise and select from the available material the same principal features because they meet the criteria for newsworthiness, for example).

## **Balance**

'Balance' usually refers to the requirement that a journalist or an institution includes (if not in a single report, then in the totality of items on an issue) representations of the relevant interests' positions, or that each 'side' of an issue be, as nearly as practicably, equally visible and audible, and that they be challenged to defend their positions in similar ways. This often assumes that (as in the Westminster parliament) these are 'two sides' to each newsworthy issue, and that both should be given equal exposure (as in a debate involving the right of reply). However, there is seldom such a dichotomous range of interests or affected parties in complex social or industrial matters, so mathematical balance with the journalist or broadcaster as the fulcrum is seldom a meaningful concept. (However, 'equal time' criteria are sometimes imposed on State-funded broadcasters which seek to mirror the 'two-sides-to each-issue', party political assumption.)

## **Bias**

Given these difficulties, 'bias', might best be seen as the failure to represent in a balanced and objective way, the interested parties, and the events, statements or other evidence which the journalist judges, in good faith, to be in the interest of the audience (the 'public') 'on whose behalf' a program is made. In news and, more obviously, in public affairs programs, this necessarily involves presenting the political/social and historical contexts of the issue. Clearly, interpretations of what is at stake for interested parties in a particular dispute will be made in such programs, either by journalists or by quoted or cited parties themselves or by independent expert analysts.

It follows that charges of bias (other than as explicit editorialising or when it involves suppression of relevant material, for instance) must rely on judgements of the kind that the practising journalists themselves make in producing the 'story', judgements about: which interpretive framework to construct around events; how to label and describe conflicting interests; what social values are at stake, and who is responsible for what, to name but a few.

# Reporting Industrial Disputes

The professional values and practices of journalists, as well as the accessibility of visual and oral material might be expected to bias television news towards the actions of antagonists and their consequences for the 'public' and away from the structural/historical causes of a dispute or its economic and legal contexts (which are abstract and not easily represented in brief audio-visual reports). So it has been organised labour which has typically objected to the way television decontextualises strikes or pickets and shows the consequences of these actions for 'the public' rather than the reasons ('injustices?') to which they are only the most visible (televisable) response. Television news is likely to emphasise the short term effects of actions not the long-term causes of complex situations. In the 'waterfront dispute', however, the short-term effects of the precipitating action (the 'sackings' rather than a strike) were initiated by the employer and the structural reasons for this action were difficult to communicate televisually.

In short, the media often must attempt to communicate aspects of a complex situation in which certain interpretations are more easily rendered than others, regardless of the fairness and good faith of the journalist.

## ‘Devil’s Advocate’

# Interviewing on Public Affairs Television

The television interviewer speaks from a position defined by the conventions of his or her profession. The questions asked, the challenges made, the agenda set – all are predicated on an adversarial model of the interview as dramatic (theatrical?) conversation, the unstated rules of which are set by the interviewer in his/her studio to which the interviewee (‘guest’) is subject. The initiative (and, perhaps, the audience’s sympathies, because they habitually watch the program) are with the resident interviewer. Especially on television, he/she (think of Ray Martin, Jana Wendt) is recognisable, familiar, and it is fair to say, seen as a legitimate proxy for the audience. The interviewer tests the interviewee against ‘the facts’, seeks to have them clarify their positions, checks and tests their consistency, truthfulness or credibility. This usually involves confronting the interviewee with contradictory statements from their colleagues or (worse) from themselves. The nearest equivalent mode of questioning is adversarial, legal cross-examination.

The ‘devil’s advocate’ practice is dramatic, confrontational and antagonistic to interviewees regardless of their political colour. But, given that the audience is assumed to be ‘represented’ by the interviewer, it is likely that, in formal interviews in the studio, the more powerful the guest, the more testing will be the questioning. For the interview is, in a sense, a contest. But it is a contest which only the interviewer can ‘win’. The interviewees, at best, can demonstrate their good faith, sincerity, credibility, or their personal qualities (especially grace under pressure). Evidence suggests that audiences remember and judge the interviewee on their ability to be a credible television guest, not on the detail of their answers.

# Content Analysis

Content analysis defines empirical dimensions of the manifest content of a collection of media programs. Reliable criteria are taught to trained 'coders' (observers) who classify the material, allowing it to be quantified and described comprehensively according to the dimensions of content distinguished by the researcher.

Quantification of news material or public affairs items can be seen as a necessary but not completely satisfactory step in meeting particular accusations of 'bias'. It can cover a large corpus of material and employ objective criteria and reliable observations to assess how much coverage, if not the subtle tenor of the reporting, has been given to various participants and events. The salience or priority of reporting particular interests can be assessed, and quite detailed visual and verbal 'interpretations' (such as attributing agency or responsibility) can be quantified.

# Covering the Dispute: Questions

The following sections of this report summarise an empirical analysis of the coverage given to the series of inter-related disputes between the employer, Patrick Stevedore ('Patricks') and the Maritime Union of Australia (the MUA), between April 8th, 1998, and May 6th, 1998, on ABC 7.00 pm news (Sydney) and the 7:30 Report.

The questions addressed were:

- How many times and for how long were representatives of the various interested parties or political spokespersons or expert commentators interviewed in each type of program?
- How frequently were various groups or individuals shown (ie. visually represented) on each type of program?
- How many times were the respective parties shown making verbal comment ('sound bites') on each type of program?
- In 7:30 Report interviews, how frequently did the interviewer:
  - challenge a particular class of interviewee about factual matters, or
  - challenge his/her truthfulness or credibility, or
  - interrupt the interviewee?
- How frequently were groups or individual participants whom the program/report identified (eg. named explicitly) shown as the agent of verbal abuse or of physical conflict?

Verbally, in the initial 'headline' or 'framing' sentences of news reports or 7:30 items,

- How were the various interests labelled?
- How often was success or failure (eg. 'victory' or 'loss') explicitly attributed to various interests?
- How was responsibility for negative consequences imputed to various interests?
- What metaphors and connotations were constructed for 'the dispute(s)'?

## Quantitative analysis: Results

### Who spoke? News and 7:30 Report

The exposure of various interests claims and counter-claims is indicated by their broadcast 'sound bites'. Table 1 groups the participants' sound bites according to whether the speakers were generally seen as antagonist to, or supporters of, the Union or of management.

Table 1

Number of 'sound bites' for various participants: News and 7:30 Report.

<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>NEWS</b>	<b>7.30 REPORT</b>
Reith	25	20
Howard	21	17
Corrigan	14	22
Coalition (other)	11	11
NFF (or other 'farmers')	10	11
Legal (Patrick)	1	0
	<b>82</b>	<b>81</b>
ACTU	28	13
Coombs	33	38
Beazley	15	5
ALP (other)	11	7

The total numbers of 'sound bites' for each of the above groupings suggests that the news and 7:30 reporters/producers sought to balance, in quantitative terms, the presentations of various interests by including their representatives' own words in programs. As 'sound bites' are all usually only one sentence long, the 'balanced' numbers suggest editorial fairness. This assumes that expert commentators were disinterested and commented on 'technical' aspects of the dispute, legal outcomes etc.

# Quantitative analysis: Results

## Visual presence – the participants

Tables 2(a) and 2(b) report the number of times the principal participants were shown in the broadcasts, using discrete visual sequences as the measure of exposure.

Table 2(a)

**Total numbers of visual sequences depicting (focused on) various classes of participants: News (excludes interviews)**

<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
Unionists and supporters	213	44.3
Politicians	68	14.1
Police	65	13.5
Non-union employees	46	9.5
Business representatives, including Patricks	33	6.8

Table 2(b)

**Total numbers of visual sequences depicting (focused on) various classes of participants: 7.30 Report (excludes interviews)**

<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>NEWS</b>	<b>7.30 REPORT</b>
Unionists and supporters	161	35.2
Business representatives, including Patricks	99	21.7
Politicians	59	12.9
Police	38	8.3
Judicial	35	7.7

Visibility per se is not indicative of any single connotation. Visual sequences showing picketers may or may not be interpreted as endorsing the legitimacy of their actions. However, the tables demonstrate what viewers saw during the period under review. They indicate the bias of television towards showing physical locations and actions, perhaps towards dramatising the events into an ongoing story with the most easily filmed participants given priority of exposure, especially on the (less analytical, less verbal) news. Hence, police also are relatively visible while

# Quantitative analysis: Results

NFF interests are not. Given that the actions shown in these sequences (below) were frequently abusive or violent or, at least physically confrontational, high visibility may not have furthered the interests of the parties involved.

## Interviews: 7:30 Report

The 7:30 Report included reports and/or interviews on 17 days out of the 20 days analysed. On four evenings, the entire program dealt with the disputes. In total, 4 hours, 34 minutes and 44 seconds of coverage was presented, including 1 hour, 43 minutes and 18 seconds of interviews with relevant parties.

Table 3

### 7:30 Report Interviews

NAME	NUMBER	TOTAL DURATION MIN.SEC
Reith	6	44.30
Howard	1*	11.31
Corrigan	1	7.37
	<b>8</b>	<b>63.38</b>

(\*The P.M. was interviewed in two parts, the first of which concentrated on the waterfront issues, the latter, not included in this analysis, on Wik.)

The question of numerical 'balance' in these data can only be answered conditionally. If one sees exposure to the 7.30 Report audience as a positive, then The Federal Government could be regarded as advantaged relative to the Union and the ALP. If one sees such exposure as the risk of embarrassment or worse in the face of 'devil's advocate' questioning, one might see the figures differently (see table 4, following).

# Quantitative analysis: Results

## Challenging the Interviewee

As interviews on public affairs or current affairs programs are generally adversarial (especially in relation to parliamentary political interviewees), the numbers of direct ‘challenges’ and ‘interruptions’ were recorded. ‘Challenge’ was noted if the interviewer put to the interviewee a contested fact (‘But Mr Reith...’) or contested his/her truthfulness or credibility. An ‘interruption’ was recorded where the interviewer broke into the interviewee’s speech but where the latter tried to continue to speak, not allowing the question to change his/her discourse. (So an ‘interruption’ was noted on a strict criterion, which involved more than the interviewer trying to insert a question in a pause in the speaker’s discourse and the speaker accepting this by allowing the question to be put. Interviewers typically seek to insert questions in pauses when they think their previous question has been answered or where they wish to take up a point raised in the answer, or to move on.)

The frequency of these interactions for the various participants is shown below:

Table 4  
**Challenges and interruptions made by interviewers in relevant 7:30 Report interviews, calculated as a function of time, in seconds\*.**

INTERVIEWEES	CHALLENGES EVERY...	TOTAL TIME MIN.SEC
Reith	53 seconds	44.30
Howard	43 seconds	11.31
Corrigan	92 seconds	07.37

(\*excludes times when more than one interviewee ‘talked over’ each other.)

Given the challenges of adversarial interviewing, it appears that:

- Politicians were more likely to be challenged or interrupted than non-politicians. They were likely to be ‘tested’ by the ‘devil’s advocate’ who checked their knowledge and credibility more than those of business or union leaders (who are not elected by the program’s audience); or
- Politicians are more likely to insist on ‘finishing what they want to say’ (which causes the interviewer to intervene).

Of course, all interviewees wish to ‘get their message across’, but the program’s agenda will not necessarily facilitate this. For the program speaks on its audiences’ behalf.

# Quantitative analysis: Results

Finally, it is instructive to see in these indices of confrontation between interviewer and interviewee the difficulties inherent in claiming ‘bias’ on the basis of a two-part conversation in which both participants are professionally-trained to achieve different outcomes. This problem can be seen in the following two descriptions of the same event.

*‘The interviewee (Mr McMullan or Mr Reith) was challenged and interrupted frequently by the interviewer’,*  
and,

*‘The interviewer had to challenge or interrupt the interviewee (Mr McMullan, Mr Reith) frequently.’*

## Violence and abuse – visual evidence

The image of any (groups of) participant(s) in the disputes will be as complex as the events and actions in which they are depicted. The (negative?) images of violent action and verbal abuse which characterised the visual sequences focus on the union and its wharf-side supporters, the police and non-union workers were quantified to yield Table 5, below.

Table 5

**Depictions of violent or abusive actions by antagonists**

AGENT	ACTION	NUMBER IN NEWS		NUMBER IN 7.30 REPORT	
Unionist	Abuse	37	43%	12	19.3%
	Conflict	31	36.0%	26	41.9%
Police	Abuse				
	Conflict	16	18.6%	15	24.3%
Non-unionists	Abuse	1	1.2%		
	Conflict	1	1.2%	9	14.5%

## Negative agency

A narrow, but commonly used criterion of ‘bias’ relates not to ‘partiality’ or ‘lack of balance’, but to the ‘blame’ or responsibility attributed for negative events in news stories or public affairs reports (or the converse, praise for positive events). Such interpretative framing of issues is quantified in the following analysis. (It must be noted, however, that judgements of the linguistic attribution of agency are subtle, and it is therefore necessary to adopt a conservative criterion for identifying these. Secondly, the present study only examined the framing sentences and questions in reports and interviews, not the entire verbal texts.)

Examples of these framing sentences include:

- *Judgement day on the docks: a stunning legal victory to the Maritime Union. (7.30 Report, 23.4).*
- *This is an Australian dispute, under Australian law, passed by both houses of a democratically elected parliament: how do you justify buying into it, internationally, with threats to sabotage Australian shipping? (7:30 Report, 8.4, to David Cockroft, British unionist.)*
- *You’ve spent years getting trade practices legislation into place, but what we’re looking at is mayhem on the wharves, the first factory closures have been announced; and it seems that it could be weeks before the courts even rule on the legality of Patrick’s dismissal of employees. How sweet is your victory now? (7:30 Report, 16.4, to Mr. Reith).*

## Quantitative analysis: Results

Table 6 shows the small numbers of such explicitly interpretive verbal constructions (according to the narrow criterion, above). These could be judged to ‘bias’ the interpretation of the events which they describe.

Table 6  
**Imputed ‘loss’ or responsibility for negative events or consequences  
 in framing verbal introductions of News and 7.30 Report.**

		NEWS	7.30 REPORT
MUA/Coombs/‘Wharfies’ etc	Loss	7	10
	Responsibility	9	9
Patrick/Reith/Govt. etc	Loss	5	5
	Responsibility	10	10

Only unambiguously tendentious or evaluative statements or questions were included in this table. It is, however, consistent with the interpretation that reports showed the Union interests as more ‘successful’ but more responsible for negative consequences than their opponents who were represented as less successful but less responsible for negative consequences.

### Suppressed agency

Generally, news ‘headlines’ and introductions did not explicitly attribute agency (nor, therefore, responsibility) for the events or actions that their various reports narrated or depicted. The most obvious sign of this is the use of passive voice sentences such as:

- ‘Sacked in the night. Patrick Wharfies sacked to make way for a non-union workforce’(8.4)
- ‘The stakes rise in the waterfront dispute with the threat of an early morning showdown’ (11.4).
- ‘Tonight in the waterfront war, the first ship unloaded in Port Botany under the non-union regime’ (12.4)
- ‘Tonight, short-lived success at the High Court puts the wharf dispute on hold’ (24.4).

Who has actually done what to whom, to put the matter concretely, is not explicitly stated in many such reports’ introductory narration. Linguistically, these ways of speaking distance the news from the participants and narrate events or happenings rather than actions by particular persons or groups. The visuals to which they relate, then, can be seen to ‘speak for themselves’. (Visuals seem not to involve the kind of interpretation found in language, although, of course, they are also selected, arranged and linked to verbal interpretation.)

# Quantitative analysis: Results

## Metaphors

The principal verbal metaphors, and the concentration on visuals of the pickets and confrontations on the wharves, connoted:

- war-like conflict ('fights', 'salvoes', 'casualties', 'victories', 'battles', 'clashes');
- a game or sporting contest ('tug-of-war', 'hurdle', 'cat-and-mouse', 'players', 'stalemate');
- chaos or confusion ('tumult', 'upheaval', 'chaos', 'torrent', 'erupt').

The 'dispute' itself became the nominated agent of the events which occurred, as in *'the dispute turns ugly'*; *'the waterfront war continues with an Australian family caught in the cross-fire'*, or *'clashes in the night as thousands of jobs are threatened by the docks dispute'*.

## Conclusions.

The analysis of the quantitative (sound bite and temporal) data, the verbal framing, and the dynamics of the interviews which rendered the 'waterfront dispute' to ABC TV audiences, indicates that the producers and journalists gave a balanced coverage of the events and issues if one takes account of the total coverage over an extended period.

Almost mathematically equivalent exposure (as measured by 'sound bites') was given to the principal antagonists.

Where interpretation of agency and responsibility for negative consequences were implied, it is difficult to see any particular linguistic bias, although the rhetoric of TV 'news-speak' dramatised the conflict as 'war', sport and as chaotic.

The practice of 'devil's advocate' interviewing on the 7:30 Report showed through as challenging questions, especially directed at politicians (from both sides of parliament), although union representatives and, to a lesser extent, Mr. Corrigan, were challenged much less frequently.

Visually, in the recurring sequences of news and current affairs, the wharf workers were predominant. They were shown as the agents of almost all the physical confrontation (including violence) and of verbal abuse in the coverage (especially in the early part of the dispute). Later they were more frequently than other participants depicted in positive ways, as a 'community', for example.

Hence, the relationships between 'what is reported' and 'what actually happened' is problematical in this case as in all others. It is not possible to judge whether the frequency, say, of negative images 'reflects' the degree to which picketers were in fact violent and abusive.

## Quantitative analysis: Results

Instead, one might ask whether the news reporters/producers acted in good faith, whether they tried to be fair and 'objective' in using these images rather than others. This question arises in relation to each of the domains of visual and verbal representation of the dispute discussed in this report. It is not an issue which can be adjudicated by objective means, except in extreme cases where inaccuracies, factual distortions, suppression of 'evidence' of relevance and of public significance can be demonstrated.

In reviewing the output of the ABC News and 7:30 Report during the 'waterfront dispute(s)' in April/May 1998, it is possible to conclude that the programs acted professionally and fairly insofar as balance and accuracy can be judged. The headlines of the news were emotive and conflictual, its images likewise. News constructed the events in terms of two opposing interests 'clashing' (ideologically, legally, physically). The 7:30 Report examined the contexts and the goals of the participants in the dispute in ways that are accepted in contemporary media as professionally responsible. It employed a number of journalists, some economically expert, and interviewed (and quoted) many expert commentators. It tested the principal participants' motives, goals and credibility.

It is possible that the claim that these modes of television are 'biased' reflects a distaste for the increasingly 'tabloid' (emotive, conflictual) headlines of the news or the increasingly confrontational approach adopted in current affairs programs as the ABC seeks to compete for audience share while at the same time maintaining its responsibility as a non-commercial ('public') broadcaster.