Young, Sally. "Government communication in Australia." *Government Communication: Cases and challenges*. Ed. Karen Sanders and María José Canel. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 99–114. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544629.ch-006>>.

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6

Government communication in Australia

Sally Young

Australia is one of the few countries to have continuously been a democracy since the early 1900s and is also one of a comparatively small number of countries (approximately 30 worldwide) to have compulsory voting. Over 94 per cent of registered voters usually turnout at federal elections in Australia (AEC, 2010). And elections are held regularly, on average, every two and a half years at the federal level (where there are no fixed terms and, by convention, the prime minister determines the election date). This means, unusually by international standards, that the vast majority of Australians of voting age make regular assessments of their governments based on the information they receive. Because politics is highly mediated, much of this information comes from media representations. Australians are big media consumers and news is a very popular genre. In 2007, over 80 per cent interviewed for the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes said that catching up with the news was a regular part of their day (Phillips, Tranter, Mitchell, Clark & Reed, 2008). However, not all of this news consumption was about seeking out political news and, as in other mature liberal democracies, media use patterns are changing. Newspaper circulation has declined significantly and television news and current affairs programmes have generally (and, in many cases, quite dramatically) been losing viewers (Young, 2009). At the other end of the spectrum, internet usage is very high in Australia by international standards (Tiffen & Gittins, 2009, pp. 171, 177) and this is impacting upon the way in which Australians access news. Other factors are also altering the media landscape including digitalization, changing leisure patterns, the use of personal video recorders with the ability to timeshift broadcasts and the use

of portable devices such as 'smart' phones and tablet readers (for those able to afford them).

In terms of the media-politics environment, Australia has a dedicated portion of Parliament House set aside for the media (the Press Gallery) (see Lloyd, 1988). As a result of this close contact between politicians and journalists, especially in Australia's national capital, Canberra, critics accuse the Gallery of being prone to 'capture' by the politicians they work with (and vice versa). The Gallery has also been criticized for being 'out of touch' with citizens and for operating like a 'club' where reporters share similar backgrounds and mindsets and engage in a type of 'group thinking' (see Simons, 1999). Some Gallery journalists vehemently deny this and point to differences in journalistic styles and opinions as well as the competition that occurs for scoops and exclusives. Other journalists accept there is often homogeneity in topics and output (e.g. Kelly, 2001). Yet others note that, outside of the Gallery, a raft of other commentators, opinion columnists, bloggers and broadcasters also play an important role in communicating politics and government.

Australia has a federal system with three tiers of government (federal, state and local) which makes efficient government communication between the levels of government both important and challenging amidst the propensity for dispute, duplication and buck-passing of responsibility which can characterize a federal system. A unique physical landscape and vast geographical distances also pose communication challenges for Australian governments. While most of Australia's population is concentrated in coastal areas with the majority living in state and territory capital cities, some areas still face unique conditions. To take just one example, the state of Western Australia covers a land mass area of over 2.5 million kilometres making it larger than Alaska and Texas combined and 11 times bigger than the United Kingdom. Australia's demography is also an important factor in government communication. Australia is culturally diverse. English is Australia's official language but more than 4 million residents speak a second language and there are more than 200 languages spoken in Australia (Young, 2007a, p. xxv). Although Australia is, by international comparisons, a wealthy country, the resources necessary to participate in political life – including education, time and money – are spread unevenly – as they are in other comparable countries. However, of particular concern in Australia is the level of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (SCRGSP, 2007).

Political and media environment

Compared to journalists in many other countries around the world, Australian journalists work within a relatively free media environment. There is no explicit

constitutional protection for freedom of the press but there have rarely been any attempts at overt government censorship of the media in Australia, save for times of war. Significant High Court judgements in the 1990s pointed to an implied right of free political speech in the Australian Constitution (Stone, 2001; Williams, 2002). There is also, by world standards, a high degree of political rights in Australia in relation to electoral processes, political pluralism and civil liberties and a high degree of institutional checks and balances constraining the executive. In the Transparency International (2010) ranking of corruption, Australia was ranked number eight in 2010 as 'very clean' of 'corrupt practices in both the public and private sectors'.

In Australia, the most negative effects on the public sphere come not from government oppression nor censorship but rather the ways in which media and governments interact in a system of concentrated media ownership.

Australia's media system combines public and private broadcasting. Its public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), is smaller in relation to national broadcasting than the BBC and some European public broadcasters, but larger than others (such as the United States). The ABC has a very large radio audience, a share of the television audience that has increased in recent years and an important internet presence. It has a reputation for displaying a high degree of journalistic scepticism and critical inquiry. Not surprisingly then, the ABC has been criticized by both progressive and conservative governments but it was particularly criticized by the conservative Howard government (1996–2007) over its reporting of the Iraq War in 2003. The government complained ABC reporting was 'anti-American' amid vocal claims by some conservative critics that the ABC exhibited general 'left-wing' tendencies (see Young, 2011, pp. 250–1). That era of criticism led to even more detailed editorial policies cementing the ABC as having the most prescribed, monitored and evaluated political coverage of any media organization in Australia.

In the commercial sector, Australia has one of the most concentrated media ownership structures of any liberal democracy in the world deriving, at least in part, from its relatively small national market but also from favourable public policy decisions made by various governments that advantaged the largest media players and consolidated their dominance (Chadwick, 1989). A handful of major companies dominate across commercial television, radio, magazines and pay television. Two companies control more than 90 per cent of metropolitan newspaper circulation and one of those – Rupert Murdoch's News Limited – has 68 per cent of the daily newspaper market and over three quarters of the Sunday newspaper market (Gardiner-Garden & Chowns, 2006; Tiffen, 2010, p. 85). This has an important impact on journalists' working conditions in Australia but also on the relationships between governments, politicians and other political actors with powerful media owners and their organizations.

News Limited (part of the global News Corp company) plays a particularly important role in political debate in Australia and its Australian-born owner Rupert Murdoch is a controversial figure wherever he operates. Murdoch's news outlets have tended to display 'an intellectual orthodoxy and an ideological uniformity' (McKnight, 2005, p. 54; see also Greenslade, 2003). When the conservative Liberal-National government determined that Australia would participate as a member of the 'coalition of the willing' in Iraq, the Murdoch press was conspicuously supportive. Political scientist Robert Manne (2005, p. 96) argued that between 2002 and 2004, the opponent Labor Party's policy on Iraq was reported with 'contempt' and 'persistent, harsh and frequently shrill criticism' in Murdoch's Australian newspapers. While the 'weapons of mass destruction' justification for Iraq and the mismanagement of the post-invasion seriously damaged Labor and Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, 'Iraq was barely discussed', during the 2004 election, in Australia. Manne (2005, p. 97) suggests that a plausible explanation for the differences in public debate was Murdoch's domination of 'the metropolitan press' in Australia.

For their part, many Australian journalists have identified problems in government-media relations as stemming not from media power but from the other side of the equation – the myriad ways in which governments seek to 'spin' and to influence media representations. Various Australian governments have been criticized for being inaccessible and secretive, for suppressing information, refusing to allow staffers to give evidence at parliamentary inquiries or for ruthlessly plugging 'leaks'. Journalists have stated that it has become increasingly difficult to gain information from the public service in particular (Grattan, 2005). Journalists have also expressed concerns that politicians and their media advisers (especially in incumbent governments) have come to play too dominant a role in newsmaking. All of the major media organizations in Australia joined together in 2007 to launch Australia's Right to Know Coalition (ARKC), citing concerns about media freedoms including being hindered by more than 350 state and federal secrecy laws. However, at the launch, Mark Scott (2009), the head of the ABC (one of the ARKC partners), pointed out that 'for many in the public, media excess is an issue generating more commentary than media freedom. Many would argue that the media has never been more intrusive, has never had more power.' There have since been high-profile cases of media-manufactured scandals, 'beat-ups' which sensationalize and dramatize, and controversial 'gotcha' journalism including the ethically dubious 'public interest' rationale used by a television station when it 'outed' a married MP who was filmed leaving a gay bathhouse and the publication by a News Limited outlet of nude photographs taken decades ago which the newspaper wrongly claimed were of controversial politician Pauline Hanson. After the presentation of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Hanson was paid a confidential settlement and given a public apology.

The development of 'the PR state'

Since the 1970s, but especially since the 1990s, Australian governments have dedicated substantial resources to influencing media representations of their actions. One of the most obvious indicators of this has been the growth of the 'PR state' (Ward, 2007). In the mid-1960s, the prime minister of Australia, Robert Menzies, had a personal staff of only four (Millar, 2010). In 1972, it was a controversial novelty when the Whitlam Labor government supplied all ministers with a press secretary. But, only three years later and using a broader definition of promotional activities, in 1975, the Coombs Royal Commission found more than 800 public servants were engaged in some form of public relations.

On coming to power in 1983, the Hawke Labor government further professionalized and extended its communication processes when it established the National Media Liaison Service (NMLS) (dubbed 'ANiMaLs' by journalists for its ferocious approach to media management). It served the Hawke and Keating governments until Labor's defeat in 1996. When the Howard coalition government came to power (from 1996–2007) it used a Government Members Secretariat (GMS) and more than 70 media advisers spread across Ministerial offices and over 450 ministerial staff (Ward, 2007, p. 9; Millar, 2010). The Rudd government (2007–10) and the Gillard government (2010–) have also relied heavily on institutionalized media management techniques.

How to classify the different groups of advisers (given their different titles and functions) makes tallying their numbers difficult but, in one estimate from 2007, there were said to be over 660 'Ministerial minders', press secretaries and Departmental Liaison Officers working for the federal government compared to 241 Press Gallery journalists reporting on federal politics (Fitzgerald, 2008, pp. 14, 17). And this didn't include the many communication officers working across the public service and in statutory bodies. Another estimate made by the newspaper the *Sunday Herald Sun* suggested there were 3,000 'spin doctors employed by federal and state governments' in Australia costing AUS\$250 million (US\$260m) annually in wages (Rolfe & Kearney, 2010, p. 29).

To take just one example of a state government, in 2010, it was reported that the Victorian government (representing a state of 5.5 million people) employed more than 780 public servants as 'media, communications, marketing and public affairs advisers' ('Labor's propaganda army', 2010, p. 1) including 12 who were paid solely to monitor the media plus many other 'subcontractors, PR teams and external consultants brought in for specialist projects'. The then Opposition complained that they had, by comparison, only 'four media advisers [while the state premier] has almost 1000'. The

disparity between the resources available to incumbents and those available to challengers is a serious issue in modern democracies even if there was some hyperbole in the Opposition's complaints that '[the state Premier] has built the biggest propaganda unit outside of North Korea' (Rolfe & Kearney, 2010, p. 29).

For their part, Australian governments have argued that their increased public relations resources are about information and consultation with citizens in an increasingly complex and mediated era rather than being about 'spin' or manipulating the media or public opinion. It is true that, for any citizen wanting government information, there is now a raft of information and resources available today from online and printed Hansards (transcripts of parliamentary proceedings) to live broadcasting and webcasting of parliament as well as extensive government websites and online information. It cannot be said that Australian governments are diffident or do not make information available. They are more likely to be accused of excessive self-promotion than censorship and of selective emphasis than repression.

More broadly, this issue of spin is an interesting one which brings into focus the role of the Australian media and whether it is a victim or willing conduit of government 'spin' given the 'information subsidy' that governments provide for commercial media. The media have traditionally had a heavy reliance on established and authoritative sources but, in the 2000s, declining audiences, revenues and journalism staff made them more receptive to information that was already neatly packaged and available. There was an increased reliance on government and politicians as sources, a more homogenous political news agenda (including an overwhelming focus on major party leaders and on opinion polls) and a greater reliance on government and party-provided material (Young, 2011, pp. 145–200). Some journalists argued they were being overwhelmed by the resources of government including the number of media advisers that governments employ (see Suich, 2004).

The issue of media advisers in government was brought into stark relief in 2010 when the Victorian state government deviated from the usual rhetoric that government-employed media advisers were funded by taxpayers because they play a vital role in informing the community about public policy and government activities. The cause for this backflip was that the Victorian Opposition had taken the state government to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to try to force it to release its government 'media plans' – the plans detailing what government ministers do each week and the strategies involved – under Freedom of Information laws. In order to try to prevent the public release of those plans, the state government argued in a frank but extraordinary manner given previous claims to the contrary, that its media advisers were not about governance (as befits taxpayer funded civil servants) but were really political operatives employed to provide 'political

advice to ministers, which is directed at enhancing the re-election prospects of the government and of individual members' (Tomazin, 2010). Unlike the usual statements designed for public consumption, this was a legal argument designed to avoid disclosure of documents that the government did not want to release. It laid bare the blurry and controversial lines between governance and campaigning, and between policy and politics.

Government communication resources and advertising

Australian governments not only provide themselves with extensive resources in the form of staff but also in government advertising, large communication/postage allowances and expensive public opinion research. These are advantages which challengers cannot afford and which, if used to excess and in an unaccountable manner, distort electoral competition to the incumbent's advantage.

Government advertising has been a particular problem in Australia because of the nature of political (election) advertising. There are very permissive rules on political advertising which have seen Australian politicians rely on it to a significant degree during elections. Once in government, politicians continue to see it as a powerful means of communication and, from the mid-1990s onwards, they began to use advertising more extensively in government. Governments have always advertised, whether the prosaic – public service job ads and commercial tenders – or the altruistic 'social marketing' campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s such as quit smoking campaigns and anti-drink driving campaigns. But the controversial campaigns seen in Australia from the mid-1990s were different and the level of spending was, by both historical and international standards, extraordinary (Young, 2007b).

The controversial campaigns were short term and, often, reactive. Their content suggested less emphasis on 'education' and 'information' and a greater emphasis on political persuasion. Ads were used to try to convince the public of the value of unpopular policies (such as a new Goods and Services Tax in 1998) or of the merits of a particular political agenda (such as industrial relations reform in 2005). There was an unprecedented use of taxpayers' money for partisan advertising during the Howard Liberal-National (Coalition) government. Over AUS\$1.7 billion (US\$1.8bn) was spent over the term of the government including advertising spikes before the 2001, 2004 and 2007 elections (Grant, 2003–4). But a similar misuse of resources was also happening at the state level by Labor Party governments. In NSW, Victoria and Queensland, government ad campaigns publicized government

achievements in electorally sensitive policy areas such as hospitals, schools, trains, crime and police recruitment.

Government advertising is a major resource for commercial media in Australia and provides a direct financial link between governments and the media outlets whose approval they seek. In 2006, five of the top ten newspaper advertisers in Australia were not retailers nor manufacturers but governments (four state governments – Victoria, NSW, Queensland and WA – and the federal government which was the highest spending) (Young, 2010a). In 2007 (an election year), the federal government was the top spending advertiser in Australia (Nielsen, 2009, p. 24).

Compared to media advertising patterns in the United States and United Kingdom, for example, this level of spending on government advertising is unprecedented and, when one political party can access such largesse to communicate their case, it can have highly undemocratic consequences. Australia has had a very stable two-party system from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Governments changed only infrequently at the federal level with periods of government of 23 years (1949–72), 13 years (1983–96) and, most recently, 11 years (1996–2007). But the 2000s were especially a period which saw entrenched incumbency including periods of government at the state level lasting over 10 years (Labor, Victoria, 1999–2010 and Labor, Queensland, 1998–current) and 16 years (Labor, New South Wales, 1995–2011). Arguably, the exploitation of incumbency benefits including government advertising was a contributing factor to the longevity of some of these governments in the 2000s. Yet, large spending on government advertising campaigns does not always have the effect the sponsoring government desires. Government advertising can become counter-productive when it is repeated ad nauseum and irritates taxpayers who know they are paying for it or when it rouses the ire (and deeper pockets) of opposing groups. In recent years, this has served as both a salutary lesson for governments and a worrying indicator of democratic health as important public debates are conducted via expensive advertising wars.

Two government advertising case studies: Industrial relations and mining tax

In 2005, the federal Howard government planned changes to industrial relations (IR) laws that critics argued stripped workers of basic employment rights and were unfair. In the lead-up to the legislation being enacted, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) ran an expensive television advertisement campaign attacking the changes. The ACTU reportedly spent \$30 million on television and radio ads but also posters, car bumper stickers and a national

day of protest. This triggered a very expensive government counter-campaign aimed at promoting the reforms in a positive way.

Stage one of the government's campaign occurred before the release of the legislation and included television, radio and newspaper advertisements, a 16-page glossy information booklet, a telephone hotline and a website. The television ads especially were broadcast repetitively. It was reported that the government bought over 11,000 television spots in October 2005 alone (Andren, 2005). Stage two occurred after the government, reacting to public concern, introduced a 'Fairness Test' to employee contracts. In all, the government spent more than AUS\$120 million (US\$125m) on IR advertising (Marris, 2007).

Yet, despite all of the money spent, towards the end of the government's campaign, there were leaked reports saying the government campaign had failed to convince the public that the IR changes were a positive reform (Humphries, 2005). The degree of widespread concern about the changes was attributed – at least in part – to the effect of the ACTU's television advertisements and its broader campaign drawing attention to the issue. Industrial relations remained a major issue up to, and during, the 2007 election campaign. The Howard government lost office at that election and Howard lost his own seat which had not happened to a sitting prime minister since 1929.

During the government's IR ad campaign, the Labor Opposition had been extremely critical of the use of taxpayer money for such a controversial purpose. Opposition Labor leader Kevin Rudd had attacked the 'partisan' use of government advertising and vowed to address the problem with tighter regulations and a new system of scrutiny once in government. Once in office, the Rudd government seemed to make a fresh start when it instituted a new, more accountable system for government advertising campaigns which involved the Auditor General scrutinizing spending on large campaigns. But in 2010, the government hit a difficult patch over a complex and controversial policy of its own.

Rudd had proposed – it was later revealed without much consultation in Cabinet or caucus – to institute a mining tax or 'Resource Super Profit Tax (RSPT)'. The Rudd government wanted to impose a tax on mining company profits, arguing the resources belonged to all Australians and could only be exhumed once. It was to be levied at 40 per cent and applied to all extractive industry including gold, nickel and uranium mining as well as sand and quarrying activities. The mining companies – with deep pockets and wide influence in the business community and the commercial media sector – argued strongly against the plan, claiming it threatened Australia's economic future and would cost ordinary Australians. They began an 'ad war' against the tax in May 2010 which continued until the downfall of Prime Minister Kevin

Rudd in June 2010. The mining companies spent more than AUS\$26 million (US\$27m) on a six-week ad campaign against the mining tax (Davis, 2011). In response, the Rudd government watered down its government advertising reforms so it could engage in an advertising fightback.

The Auditor General (who had been given some scrutiny powers over government ad campaigns) was sidelined and an exemption provision was used to 'fast-track the government's AUS\$38 million campaign to counter the mining industry's complaints' (Needham, 2010). Unusually, the Auditor General then took the step of publicly criticizing the government for softening the rules and making it more difficult for government ads to be vetted. Along with a series of other incidents (discussed below), the mining tax foray was central to bringing Rudd's leadership into doubt. On 24 June 2010, deputy leader Julia Gillard took over as leader after challenging Rudd to a leadership ballot. Rudd had initially said he would contest but withdrew the next morning when it became clear that he did not have the support of his colleagues. One of Gillard's first acts after taking over was to negotiate a compromise on the proposed tax with the mining industry. On the basis of the resulting version, the mining industry's campaign had saved the companies an estimated AUS\$60 billion in tax over the next decade.

Reaching citizens

In contrast to government advertising and more mediated means, direct communication between governments and citizens (and vice versa) is also important and occurs through many different forms including citizens sending or receiving correspondence from government departments, using government websites and phoning government agencies. Although Australia's population is small by comparison with many other countries, it is still large enough – 22 million in 2011 – to make direct communication between governments and individual citizens extremely challenging but there have been increasing examples of coordinated attempts to communicate directly with citizens.

An example of one noteworthy deliberative experiment was the 'Dialogue with the City' process held in Perth in 2003 which influenced the West Australian (state) government's policy on city planning. It involved a series of deliberative processes including a survey of 8,000 residents and a forum for more than 1,000 residents to discuss the future of their city. There have also been citizens' juries in a number of locations and also community surveys and many interactive online projects (New Democracy Foundation, 2009).

Many experiments have occurred at a local government level where service delivery (and thus communication) tends to be more direct. But at the federal level, and in several state governments as well, there has been the use of

projects such as Community Cabinets. These see government ministers, their advisers and the director general of each government agency all travel to a particular regional or remote community to meet 'with any community person or group wishing to talk . . . no suits, special meeting rooms or closed doors. . . . This is a cup of tea and casual clothing, in a public space' (Davis, 2001, p. 224). These experiments are noteworthy but, more generally, it is still the case that government communication is usually conceived of in mediated terms.

The internet has had a significant impact on government communication but so too has the rise of 24-hour news broadcasting and the changes to the news cycle these media have fostered. In Australia, 24-hour news broadcasting began in 1994 with the ABC broadcasting NewsRadio (news headlines every 15 minutes) followed by the introduction of 24-hour television news channel Sky News (on pay television only) in 1996 (16 years after CNN was launched in the United States and 7 years after Sky News in the United Kingdom) (Young 2010b, p. 245). The ABC launched its own 24-hour news channel on digital television in 2010.

Yet, while new media and technology have made political news and information much more widely available – including breaking news on television, news on mobile phones, online news websites and dedicated television channels – involvement by the public is still selective and uneven. Those media which devote the most time and space to detailed coverage of politics and government (especially broadsheet newspapers and public radio and television) tend to attract smaller audiences 'dominated by men aged over forty who [are] tertiary educated, well-paid, in managerial or professional jobs. They [are] older, richer and better educated than the general population' and this is also the case in other comparable countries (Young, 2011, p. 59). Reaching a broader spectrum of citizens means appearing in a range of media – including popular media and media that are not specifically focused on politics.

Whether to evade informed scrutiny (as Press Gallery journalists lament) or to try to communicate more directly with a greater number of people (as politicians claim), Australian politicians have increasingly tried to reach people beyond news journalism and communicate with more targeted audiences. As prime minister, John Howard relied heavily on talkback radio as it was a medium he believed reached a sympathetic conservative constituency but that also had wider influence. Labor leader Kevin Rudd and his successor Julia Gillard made use of FM radio to reach young people. Rudd and Gillard were also regulars on television breakfast shows which had a high proportion of female viewers. Famously, Rudd also went on a television comedy show in 2007. Some government MPs use direct mail, blogs, websites, YouTube clips and Twitter (in which Prime Minister Julia Gillard was, she admitted, a reluctant participant).

Greater chaos, less control? The future of government communication in Australia

Australia is facing many of the key political and social trends seen in other mature liberal democracies including a decline in party identification (by citizens but also by parties which increasingly try to personalize their appeals to the electorate), along with changing media outlets and audiences, and changing political communication techniques. There is, as there has been for at least two decades, a 'permanent campaign' mindset which means that, once in government, politicians continue relentlessly campaigning and, as Dan Nimmo (1999, p. 75) noted, they turn 'office itself into a full-time campaign platform'. But a more volatile political environment is making governing in Australia far less predictable with consequent effects for government communication.

The entrenched incumbency patterns of the 2000s have been starkly disrupted. In 2010, the federal election (which came only two months after Rudd was deposed by Gillard) resulted in a hung parliament – the first at the federal level since 1940; four independent MPs determined which party would govern. The same year, the Victorian state government was voted out of office after eleven years and the Tasmanian state election saw such a large swing against the government and such a close result between the two major parties that (as with the federal election) it took over two weeks for the results to be formally declared. In March 2011, a NSW state government which had been in office since 1995 saw a crushing defeat and a Labor government that had been in office in Queensland since 1998 was also defeated in 2012.

Of these events, it is the deposing of Rudd as prime minister by his own party in 2010 that best highlights some of the key shifts in the context of government communication including the ferocity of the news cycle, the power of media representations, the significance of trust and reputation for leaders and the importance of internal government communication as well as external media management.

One of the events for which Rudd's premiership is remembered was an act of political communication in the form of oratory – a speech he gave formalizing an apology to Indigenous Australians. But it was also a speech and a key phrase that came to haunt Rudd. He had declared climate change 'the greatest moral challenge of our time' but, in early 2010, when his proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme began to look like an electoral liability, he blithely postponed its introduction. The decision to drop the signature policy item of his first term had an impact on Rudd's reputation and the mining tax fiasco then exacerbated concerns about his leadership.

At the same time as these policy issues were occurring, an increasing number of media stories were turning the spotlight on Rudd's character.

In 2009, it was reported that Rudd had made a flight attendant cry when he abused her after receiving the wrong meal. There were ongoing stories about Rudd's behaviour towards his staff including reports of a high turnover in his office as many staff chose to leave (e.g. Lewis & Rehn, 2009). An essay published in 2010 by a journalist who had spent time with Rudd argued that anger defined him and that Rudd was a 'politician with rage at his core' (Marr, 2010). In media reports, Rudd was increasingly characterized as a micromanaging 'control freak' who refused to delegate, a relentless 'automaton' with a 24-hour work ethic who expected his media advisers to start work at 4.30 a.m. (e.g. see Crabb, 2010; Marr, 2010). The News Limited papers were especially scathing and some critics saw the relentless criticism as part of a News Limited 'war on Labor'. This accusation was so widespread in political and media circles that even News Limited-owned newspaper the *Australian* acknowledged there was talk of a News Limited 'bid to get Rudd' (Elliott, 2010). There were also later claims that Labor powerbrokers had been using the media to wage a destabilizing campaign against Rudd.

Rudd's own internal communications processes were another factor in his downfall as they had encouraged internal strife. Important decisions were made by a 'kitchen Cabinet' – a tight group of Rudd and three ministers – while others in the caucus were not consulted about issues affecting their portfolios. Even the kitchen cabinet was deemed too wide at the end of Rudd's tenure with, reportedly, one of the ministers (Lindsay Tanner) being sidelined to the extent that Rudd held fake budget meetings in front of Tanner (then finance minister) and, 'after the meeting concluded and [Tanner] had left, the other three members of the committee – Rudd, Julia Gillard and Wayne Swan – would reconvene and discuss their budget plans in detail' ('Stay out of the kitchen', 2010). Rudd's office was said to be 'chaotic and dysfunctional' (Lyons, 2008), a bottleneck with information not getting through and decisions going unmade because Rudd wanted to deal with every issue. Backbenchers and even ministers found it difficult to gain access to Rudd. These processes alienated many in his caucus and, when Labor Party powerbrokers decided that Rudd was an electoral liability in 2010, his unpopularity with his colleagues meant he did not have the support to win a leadership ballot against Gillard so he decided not to contest the ballot. And, 20 months later, in February 2012, when Rudd did mount a leadership challenge against Gillard, he secured only 31 votes in the Labor caucus ballot compared to Gillard's 71 votes; the most emphatic result in modern Australian history for a prime minister facing a leadership challenge.

Less than a year before he was ousted, Rudd had been one of the most popular prime ministers in Australian history. The deposing of Rudd happened in an unusual manner and with unprecedented speed because of the mix between a more volatile political environment and rapid and vociferous news cycle. The events showed a curious mix of how information was so available

at an episodic, microlevel – many Australians knew that he yelled at an air hostess, for example – but less so at the larger, thematic, macrolevel. This was particularly true in terms of policy. Through a series of economic stimulus packages, the Rudd government had steered Australia through the worst economic crash since the Great Depression. Australia was one of the few liberal democracies to avoid the late-2000s recession but that larger context was, compared to the economic debates going on overseas, surprisingly little discussed. Rudd government policies including the acronym-heavy NBN (National Broadband Network), ETS (Emissions Trading Scheme), BER (Building the Education Revolution), indigenous housing and reform to COAG (the Council of Australian Governments) were not well covered in the mainstream media. Generally, there was a notable lack of interest in public policy, perhaps overshadowed by the more colourful stories about Rudd's character, but perhaps also part of broader shifts in how the media reports government.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, government communication in Australia is being shaped by a series of realizations: incumbency advantages do not always triumph, political leaders can rise and fall in popularity in dramatic fashion in short timeframes and there are limits to how governments can control information (an old principle in a liberal democracy but one made starkly more obvious in the Rudd case when internal leaks played such a role). Yet, familiar features also continue to shape government communication including powerful media outlets (sometimes with agendas of their own); the significance of moneyed interests and advertising to political debate; the reality that, despite weakening party identification, party powerbrokers still play a powerful role in realpolitik in Australia; and, finally, that media reporting of government is invariably situated, always controversially, between valuable scrutiny of government and idle gossip, between opening up the processes of government while perhaps failing to adequately examine the system as a whole.

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