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### Quality of politics and political reporting is a two-way street

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## Quality of politics and political reporting is a two-way street

### Abstract

Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese recently bemoaned the decline in the quality of political reporting in Australia. Albanese is not the first current or ex-politician to question the standard of reporting. Many politicians – federal and state – have accused journalists and the organisations they work for of bias and incompetence, or both.

But Albanese's statement is interesting in that it links the decline in the reporting of politics to the enormous technological and structural changes that have transformed the media in recent years.

It is further interesting in that it comes now that Albanese is in opposition. Would he be so inclined to call for an increase in the number of political reporters working out of Parliament House if he were a minister in a government that was subject to intense, perhaps even negative, media scrutiny?

### Keywords

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# Quality of politics and political reporting is a two-way street

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Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese worries that a depleted press gallery is affecting the quality of political reporting. AAP/Lukas Coch

Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese [recently bemoaned](#) the decline in the quality of political reporting in Australia. Albanese is not the first current or ex-politician to question the standard of reporting. Many politicians – federal and state – have accused journalists and the organisations they work for of bias and incompetence, or both.

But Albanese's statement is interesting in that it links the decline in the reporting of politics to the enormous technological and structural changes that have [transformed the media](#) in recent years.

It is further interesting in that it comes now that Albanese is in opposition. Would he be so inclined to call for an increase in the number of political reporters working out of Parliament House if he were a minister in a government that was subject to intense, perhaps even negative, media scrutiny?

Oppositions are inevitably of less interest to the media than governments. Opposition MPs, even shadow ministers, tend to struggle to gain publicity on all but the most important of issues.

The purpose of this article is not to take Albanese to task. In fact it is difficult to disagree with much of what he says.

It is inevitable that the [widespread job losses](#) within Australian media organisations, [particularly newspapers](#), will [affect their capacity](#) to cover politics. Job losses will result in a

[brain-drain](#), particularly if it is the experienced political journalists who respond to the call for redundancies.

However, the long-term impact of these redundancies is yet to be determined. Who is to say that the new breed of political reporters who step up to take their place will not prove to be great exponents of their craft?

## **Media respond to public's loss of interest**

The move to online publishing may also provide further incentives for media organisations to cover politics. However, this will only happen if people are interested in politics. And the reality is that the [public's interest in politics is declining](#).

The question is: why? Is it due to the quality of political reporting? I doubt this is the case.

There is little evidence to suggest that the quality of political reporting has declined over the last few years. Certainly the focus has changed, as has the space devoted to parliament. No longer do we see dedicated parliamentary pages in our major newspapers, or major events like budgets.

Today, much of what we read and hear about politics focuses on the cut and thrust: negotiations over the passage of legislation in a hung parliament, question time, leadership contests, opinion polls and MPs behaving badly.

There may be 226 federal MPs (150 MHRs and 76 senators), but the reality is that the media is interested in only a handful at any time. These include the leaders of the major parties, senior members of Cabinet, crossbench MPs who wield the balance of power, and possibly recalcitrant MPs. The remaining MPs are virtually invisible to the media, but this reflects the nature of politics as much as it does media interest.

## **Blurring fact and opinion**

Critics of Australia's political journalists often complain that they spend too much time commenting on the news, while devoting little time to reporting it. Further, it is sometimes argued that the journalists become [actors in the political process](#), rather than remaining detached observers. This is a serious allegation, because one of the responsibilities of journalists is to present political news so that electors can make up their mind on issues that may ultimately influence how they vote.

This is not to say that there is no place for commentary, which plays an important role in value-adding to the political debate. Some of our senior political journalists often have a greater insight into political issues by virtue of their experience than the MPs they are reporting on. Such commentary is not only welcome, it is important.

But commentary needs to be identified as such. There needs to be a clear separation between news and commentary that enables the average reader, viewer, listener to determine how much trust to place in it.

This debate over the news-commentary divide prompts another question. If the two are increasingly being merged, why is that happening? Is it a response of media organisations to the structural changes that have taken place?



Malcolm Turnbull has lamented that young ‘Google journalists’ don’t develop their own personal contacts. AAP/Joe Castro

It is easy to point a finger at job losses and the [loss of experience](#) in [the press gallery](#) following the retirement of older journalists. But that is only part of the answer. Likewise, the introduction of [the 24/7 news cycle](#), and the commensurate expectation that journalists produce copy for multiple platforms, would add additional layers of stress for the journalists.

## Politicians are culpable too

Of greater concern, from my perspective at least, is the widespread practice whereby politicians seek to manage the media. As respected University of Sydney academic Rod Tiffen points out, [their tactics](#) can be overt or covert.

Former Canberra press gallery journalist and educator Nick Richardson has [identified a number of strategies](#) that politicians and their minders use when trying to control the flow of information. These include, but are not limited to: the time limit, the leak, the freeze, the spray, the wedge, the drip, the spin, the agenda and the briefing.

As their titles suggest, these strategies are built around a number of approaches, including cajoling, intimidating, pandering to and even isolating journalists.

Media management strategies are all about getting your message out, while seeking to discredit any alternative views. While the journalists understand this, they are justifiably cynical of those ministers and backbench MPs who seek to determine when contact with journalists will take place and under what terms.

In a democracy, ministers should be accessible to the media in good times and bad. Ministers who refuse to talk to the media when they are in crisis-mode, or seek to dissemble when they reluctantly appear before a media scrum, do little to reassure voters as to their credibility.

This was highlighted in recent comments by veteran journalist Paul Kelly about a “crisis” in Australian politics, when he [wrote](#):

The business of politics is too decoupled from the interests of Australia and its citizens.

While the media are not blameless when it comes to the coverage of politics – some is good, some is average, and some is woeful – politics is a two-way street. For both journalists and politicians to do their jobs effectively, they need to be able to work together. And that requires a level of trust that perhaps does not exist today.

The benefit of such an approach would be more and better-quality information from politicians, more informed reporting from journalists and, perhaps, greater interest in politics from the wider public. Everyone wins.