Objective journalism cannot hold politicians to account

Marcus O'Donnell

University of Wollongong, marcuso@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

O'Donnell, M. (2013). Objective journalism cannot hold politicians to account. The Conversation, (08 August)
Objective journalism cannot hold politicians to account

Abstract
The major story of day three of the election campaign was the coalition’s announcement of a 1.5% cut in the rate of company tax.

The way this story was covered by The Australian and The Guardian represent two completely different views of the role of journalism in an election campaign.

It was an unfolding story throughout the day as the ALP demanded to know how the cut would be paid for.

Treasurer, Chris Bowen rejected Tony Abbott’s claim that the cut could be paid for by previously announced spending cuts as: “magic pudding economics” and double-counting. Although both sides were strong on rhetoric neither party was keen to put detail to their claims.

Keywords
account, journalism, objective, cannot, hold, politicians

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
O’Donnell, M. (2013). Objective journalism cannot hold politicians to account. The Conversation, (08 August)
Objective journalism cannot hold politicians to account

The major story of day three of the election campaign was the coalition’s announcement of a 1.5% cut in the rate of company tax.

The way this story was covered by The Australian and The Guardian represent two completely different views of the role of journalism in an election campaign.

It was an unfolding story throughout the day as the ALP demanded to know how the cut would be paid for.

Treasurer, Chris Bowen rejected Tony Abbott’s claim that the cut could be paid for by previously announced spending cuts as: “magic pudding economics” and double-counting.

Although both sides were strong on rhetoric neither party was keen to put detail to their claims.

The Australian’s report by Lauren Wilson and Ben Packham: “Coalition pressed on how it will pay for company tax cut,” sounds like it might take a critical approach to the opposition announcement. But it is classic he said, he said journalism.

It begins with a two par opening that sets out the competing claims:

“TONY Abbott says the cost of his 1.5 per cent business tax cut has already been found by the Coalition in previously-announced savings measures.

“Labor has today gone on the attack over the $5 billion pledge, demanding to know where the money will come from to fund the policy, which will help offset the Coalition’s paid parental leave scheme.

It then proceeds with back and forth paragraphs restating these basic claims from Kevin Rudd, and Chris Bowen for the Labour case and Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey for the coalition.

It is classic objective journalism, balanced paragraph for paragraph. It has multiple sources. It fairly represents the opposing views of the day’s debate.

From its heading, The Guardian’s piece by political editor Lenore Taylor: “Tony Abbott claims savings already announced will pay for company tax cut,” appears like it might be taking the opposition leader’s side. But the sub head:

“Labor attacks ‘all right on the night’ approach to costing’s as Abbott refuses to specify which measures will pay for cut”.
shows that it will not be a one sided piece. It too has multiple sources, quoting Abbott, Hockey, Bowen and Liberal Senator Mathias Cormann.

The big distinction is that Taylor has also done her own research. She tests Tony Abbott’s claim that previously announced cost-savings would cover the expense of the new tax cut. She lists these previously announced cuts and other spending promises and concludes:

“These cuts do not appear to cover the ongoing cost of the company tax cut, which is also likely to increase over time.”

Rather than just indulge each party by repeating their ping-pong rhetoric, Taylor has tried to determine what the facts actually are.

Taylor does not account for the full $17b in savings that Abbott referred to in his announcement but she attempts to list the concrete dollar values of the announced cuts from his previous speeches to the National Press Club in January and his budget-in-reply speech in May. The discrepancy might in part arise from Abbott’s failure in those documents to specify costings on some savings such as those associated with his planned reduction of the public service.

But Taylor is beginning to provide accountability journalism not just engaging in what Gaye Tuchman described long ago as the “strategic ritual” of objectivity.

You might think that The Australian’s piece was a quick news summary and Taylor had produced a much later analysis. In fact it was the other way around The Guardian posted Taylor’s piece at 1.35pm while the Wilson & Packham piece wasn’t posted by The Australian until 4.35.

It wasn’t about timing, it was about fundamentally different approaches to journalism.