

# **Beyond ‘Fake News’? A longitudinal analysis of how Australian politicians’ Attack and criticise the media on Twitter<sup>1</sup>**

**Under Review, Journal of Language and Politics**

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## **Introduction**

A significant amount of attention has been placed on whether and how politicians have adopted a discourse of ‘fake news’ to attack the media. Much of this research has focused on the United States, and particularly President Trump (Ott 2016; Kreis 2017) - or other populist leaders such as in Latin America (Waisbord and Amado 2017) - and how journalists have responded to this (Lischka 2019; Kramer 2018). Studies outside of the US are rarer though (Farhall et al, 2019; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019), and we cannot assume that the discourses and strategies deployed by politicians in other contexts are similar. Furthermore, there might be differences in practices between political leaders and the broader base of elected representatives. Most studies have focused solely on recent practices, and specifically on the use of terms like ‘fake news’ (e.g. Brummette et al. 2018). This fails to capture the wider range of discourse used by politicians to attack journalists; to contextualise the use of such discourses alongside how they more broadly engage with journalists and the media; and how such practices have changed over time. There is a tendency to frame this as a recent phenomenon, or at least one that has only become significant and problematic recently.

This article addresses these challenges. It analyses how a sample of Australian politicians have engaged with, and attacked and criticised, the media and journalists on Twitter longitudinally. By capturing their wider comments and interactions, it seeks to better understand and contextualise Australian politicians’ relationships with the media on Twitter. Broadening out the focus from ‘fake news’ discourse to include other forms of attacks and criticisms provides a holistic account of their practices. The article assesses how these practices have changed over time, and how they vary across politicians from different political persuasions.

## **Understanding Attacks on Journalists**

A fractious relationship between politicians and the media is arguably a necessary aspect of democratic political communications. This makes disentangling legitimate criticism and healthy scepticism from strategic attacks very difficult. Indeed, there is a long history of politicians attacking the media; it is part of the political communication ‘game’ to go after the messenger (Crawford 2006; Griffen-Foley 2003; Tiffen 1990). It has been common in US politics, for example, since at least Nixon (Maltese 1994), with famous incidents including George Bush Sr’s interview with Dan Rather (Crawford 2006). However, the general view is that contemporary attacks – at least in the US – are unprecedented in scale (Carlson 2018; Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; McNair 2017; Guess et al 2017, 11; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 199-200).

Attacks on journalists and the media by politicians can be separated into two broad categories. One type of criticism can be understood as ‘talking shop’; metajournalistic discourse or media criticism (Carlson 2009, 2017, 2018), and is often directed at journalists themselves: evidenced, critical reflections on journalist-politician relationships and the nature of media coverage that can serve an important democratic function. From reports into broadcasting standards to detailed critique by politicians. For example, British Prime Minister Tony Blair (2007, 478-9) famously argued that the media was often “like a feral beast just tearing people and reputations to bits”, while Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull

called for a shift from “aggressive” to “forensic” interviewing (Bourke & Whitbourn, 2015). This may form part of a wider cynical relationship between politicians and the media (Brants et al. 2010). A second, more common and diverse, type of attack is targeted more for a public audience, is often vitriolic, and appears designed to influence how audiences perceive and trust (or not) the media (Albright 2017; Carlson 2017). Such attacks can include claims of ‘bias’, that the media support ‘liberal elites’, or they are ‘fake news’ – largely without supporting evidence (McNair 2017). These kinds of attack still bring pressure to bear on journalists, both directly and indirectly, and serve to undermine trust in journalism – though this varies from country-to-country (Hanitzsch et al. 2018).

One common refrain in the US particularly is that the media – or parts of it – represent a liberal elite against which conservative outlets such as Fox News claim to be ‘fair and balanced’. Domke et al (1999, 55) argue that such “complaints about news coverage are at least partly strategic” because complaints of bias were higher when Republicans received more positive coverage and thus may “represent an attempt by conservative elites to cast doubt about the credibility of news media in the minds of voters.” Research has found that such attacks appear to be effective, impacting how some citizens perceive the news (Ladd 2012). Experimental research has shown that “elite attacks [on the media] increase perceptions of bias in the direction of the attack ... even when no bias exists” and “persistent attacks” can have an “influence on public perceptions of the mainstream news media” (Smith 2010, 320, 332 – see also Zaller 1992; Watts et al. 1999; Baum and Groeling 2009). However, there may be something akin to a backfire effect where people come to defend journalism from attacks by elites such as Trump (Whipple and Shermak 2020).

Discourses of fake news appear to be a new front in this wider strategy. While most research has focused on actual or genres of fake news – mis/dis/malinformation and the like (see e.g. Bakir and McStay 2017; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) – the labelling of legitimate news and journalism as fake has received much less scholarly attention (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). Research from the US has largely focused on Trump’s tweeting behaviours, identifying informal, ‘authentic outsider’ discursive practices, particularly during the campaign period or immediate aftermath (see e.g. Enli 2017). Research has shown his tweets contain extensive attacks, with many of these directed at the media and journalists (Ott 2016; Kreis 2017; Ouyang and Waterman 2020) often to deflect from other issues (Ross and Rivers 2018). Shear et al. (2019), for example, finds that Trump had attacked the media 1308 times between January 2017 and October 2018, largely focusing criticisms on ‘liberal media’ as ‘fake news’ or the ‘enemy of the people’ (38 times) – which has echoes of Stalinism (Herman and Seldin 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 181) - while praising conservative media such as Fox News 758 times. Similarly, Meeks (2020, 221) content analysis of Trump’s tweets finds that he mentioned the media in nearly 20% of all tweets, adopted attack frames more as president than candidate, with frequent attacks (44.5%) often focused on credibility (38.9%) and bias frames (23.6%) directed mainly at non-conservative media, and praise and appearance frames directed at conservative media outlets. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this language has been picked up by the wider Twittersphere, occurring in homophilous groups using emotionally charged language (Brummette et al. 2018).

As with broader attacks on the media, discourses of ‘fake news’ has been shown to have an impact: even mentioning the phrase “fake news” in news articles (Guess et al 2017, 12), or by political elites on Twitter (Van Duyn and Collier 2019), can decrease some people’s trust in the media in general (Denner and Peter 2017 – cited in Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). This is compounded because research has shown that the media often parrot fake news discourse (Farhall et al 2019) and by using fake news discourse across a broad range of contexts, the media and politicians have also normalised it, leading Egelhofer et al (2020, 1338) to

conclude that “while fake news started out as a problem of an increase in disinformation, it has become a discussion of attacks on the news media and has been normalized as a catchy buzzword to express doubts about information in general” and “arguably represents the globally most visible symptom of a greater trend in political communication, namely, an *increase in delegitimizing media criticism by political actors.*”

### **Australian Politicians’ and Attacks on the Media**

In Australia, there is an equally long tradition of attacks on the media. The national public service broadcaster, the ABC, has faced sustained attacks, particularly from the right (McNair et al. 2017). For example, former Liberal Prime Minister, Tony Abbott (cited in Ireland 2014), stated that the ABC took “everyone’s side but Australia’s” and it was at times a ‘lefty lynch mob’. Turner (2005, 98, 103) argues that politicians “have deliberately used the accusation of bias to bully the ABC into taking a more conservative line...” and, worryingly, at times ABC management has been “strongly inclined to cooperate with government” making: “[p]olitical censorship... a fact of life for those who have worked at the ABC for any length of time.” This is all the starker because politicians largely leave commercial broadcasters alone (Griffen-Foley 2003; Turner 2005).

Another important factor in Australia is that media organisations, and individual journalists, often attack each other (Dodd and Ricketson 2015, 73; McNair et al 2017, 145; see also Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Egelhofer et al 2020, 1338). Critical reporting of media coverage through shows such as the ABC’s Media Watch, and claims that the ABC has a “narrative of bias” in the Australian’s media section, is mixed with personal attacks and trolling between journalists – often on Twitter (McNair et al 2017, 145-9; Dodd and Ricketson 2015).

No study has, however, systematically analysed how Australian politicians engage with, or attack, Australian journalists and media. Farhall et al (2019) focused solely on the use of fake news discourse (‘fake news’, ‘post truth’, and ‘alternative facts’) by Australian politicians across different communication platforms in the 6-month period after Trump’s victory. They found some evidence of the use of fake news discourse, but this was relatively limited, particularly on the right of politics, and often introduced by journalists themselves. In some cases, they were refuting claims of fake news. While an important intervention, it is limited by the relatively short time frame, and by the narrower focus on fake news discourse. As we have seen elsewhere, discourses have fake news have continued to grow and even become normalised in the years after the election. Furthermore, this research design fails to capture other forms of attack such as claims of bias, that we have seen appear prevalent. Fuller et al’s (2018) analysis of former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s tweets captures some examples of criticism and abuse, but this is mentioned in passing and limited by its narrow focus.

Given these gaps in the literature, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do Australian politicians engage with the media on Twitter, and how has this changed over time?
2. How do Australian politicians attack and criticise the media, and how has this changed over time?

The next section presents the method by which the research questions will be answered.

### **Method**

To address the research questions, this article deploys an innovative longitudinal content analysis of tweets by a sample of Australian politicians. The sample of politicians mirrors one

for a previous article that analysed the use of the phrases “fake news”, “post-truth” and “alternative facts” over a 6-month period across Facebook, Twitter, Hansard, newspapers and politicians’ personal websites (Farhall et al 2019). The same sample was chosen so that comparisons could be made. In total, all of the available tweets (standalone tweets, replies and retweets with comment<sup>2</sup>) of 26 politicians were collected from the Twitter API between 2011 and June 2018. Most were in parliament through this whole period, but if they were not, the analysis focuses on only their tweets while an MP on the assumption that they might tweet differently at other times. The dataset was filtered using 88 keywords that related to the media. This included general terms like media, radio, press, TV, ‘via @’, news; then the generic and/or specific name of media e.g. Mail, Times, ABC, Telegraph, Courier, chronicle, examiner, perthnow, tiser, Sky; the names of some key journalists (e.g. Tingle, Oakes, crabb, Cassidy, Farm51, Kenny, Bongiorno, Uhlmann, Probyn, Rowland, Fran Kelly, and a few phrases that might relate to attacks on the media (e.g. bias, fake news, theirABC). This resulted in many tweets being captured in duplicate (e.g. ‘ABC is biased’ would appear twice). After duplicates were removed there were 45,612 tweets. There was then a further significant manual cleaning process as many tweets were not related to actual media (e.g. ‘lovely sky’, ‘don’t be crabby’, ‘e-mail’), leaving a final sample size of 7,053 tweets.

A content analysis was conducted on the tweets in two phases. The first phase had 3 code topics and was applied to all of the 7,053 tweets in the sample. The goal here was to analyse more broadly how politicians engage with the media and journalists by looking at who they communicate with, the volume of this, and the communicative form and functions of their tweets. First, the type of media was coded. A list of well-known local and national media organisations (print/TV/online) was created and this was inductively added to during the testing and refining phase as new outlets were identified. A small group of international media were also included. In total, 43 specific news outlets were listed. There were also codes for if a tweet mentioned either 1) a journalist only by name 2) a local (up to state level) news organisation not in the list; 3 a national news organisation not in the list; 4 tweet that mentions no specific media or journalist but talks about the news, media or journalists/journalism in a general sense (e.g. ‘journalists are awful’). In doing this, the article captures a very broad range of engagements with, and mentions of, the media – both specific and general. Second, the location of the media were coded, and whether they were local or regional, national or international. Finally, the function of each tweet was coded. These codes were developed inductively, and a dominant coding procedure was used.

Location of Media	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Local Media: mentions a local or regional news outlet or talks about "local media" in a general way</li> <li>2. National Media: A tweet that mentions national media. National can refer to country-wide media such as the Australian or Saturday Paper as well as topic-based media with a national reach such as Farm Online. ABC is coded as national unless it explicitly refers to a regional ABC station [If both, local and national, code as national]</li> <li>3. International Media: reference to international media (e.g. New York Times, Fox News)</li> <li>4. No location specified: No media or location is specified but general claims about the media or journalists are made</li> </ol>
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Function of Tweet	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Advertising appearances</u>: forthcoming or recently past interviews. May include clarifying or correcting things said during interviews.</li> <li>2. <u>Press Releases</u>: Tweets that share or discuss press releases</li> <li>3. <u>Seeking news coverage</u>: Tags or replies to a journalist or news organisation letting them know they have an opinion – often states ‘get in touch’ or similar (informal press release)</li> <li>4. <u>Sharing a news story</u>: shared by link or saying via. They may also comment on the news. If it is sharing something that clearly promotes them code as advertising</li> <li>5. <u>Evidence</u>: using media as a source e.g. to support claims</li> <li>6. <u>Discussing the News</u>: discussing news with no link - comment on a news story e.g. election vote, policy, can include replies</li> <li>7. <u>Discussing the Media</u>:</li> <li>8. <u>Informal chat with journalists</u></li> <li>9. <u>Defend, support or praise media</u></li> </ol>
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**Table 1: Media Codes**

A further code frame was deployed to analyse the different forms of criticism and attack. Again, this was a combination of deductive and inductive coding. In other words, codes were drawn from earlier literature that analysed attacks on the media (e.g. Domke et al. 1999) alongside more recent work that looks at discourses of fake news (e.g. Meeks 2020; Farhall et al. 2019), but this was supplemented and refined through a reading of the data. Inductive coding is particularly helpful as we cannot assume the Australian experience mirrors that in the US; there is an exploratory element to this work. Initially, the hope was to create a code that separated out metajournalistic discourse from vitriolic attacks. A code frame was tested to try and disaggregate bias, criticism and manipulation, and then an “Other Attacks and Criticism” category. However, it was not possible to achieve reliability. The production standards and practices code was designed to capture metajournalistic discourse, but, in practice, some politicians tweets combined metajournalistic discourse *with* vitriolic language: there was no neat separation. To help overcome these issues, each code was applied separately (so one tweet may feature multiple attacks and criticisms). This means that the production standards and practices codes is a reasonable indicator of metajournalistic discourses. To highlight and draw these nuances out, the analysis is supplemented with examples. Intercoder-reliability testing was conducted on 10% sample of tweets, and a Krippendorff’s Alpha between 0.71 and .89 was achieved across all codes using two coders.

Code	Definition
Bias and Balance	Tweets that talk about different forms of media bias. This includes calling the media lefty, biased, or phrases such as ‘their ABC’. It can also include comments about imbalances in the make-up of audience or panels, or topics.
Fake News	Tweets that mention fake news, #fakenews or describe the media as fake.
Personal Attacks and Criticism	Tweets that attack or criticise a journalist directly, either by writing their name or by retweeting a journalist’s tweet and making a critical comment about the journalist or their work. This can include personal accusations of bias, bad reporting practices, derogatory or offensive statements about <i>named</i> journalists

Production Standards and Practices	Tweets that criticise media production standards and practices. This can include criticisms about how reports are produced (news processes) as well as how news articles are framed
Corrections	Tweets that make an explicit call for, or make, corrections to media reports.
Media Policy	Tweets that critically discuss media policy. This must refer to a policy debate and may include references to debates and motions in parliament, or statements of their own personal opinions about a specific media policy
Waste, Inefficiency and Funding	Tweets that make claims about waste and inefficiency in the media, or discuss the funding of the media or question whether the media provides value for money

**Table 2: Code Frame for Attacking and Criticising the Media**

This study has some limitations. First, the keyword list was designed to be broad and inclusive, but it will have missed some mentions, most likely with individual journalists not in the list. This approach was adopted because to make reading every tweet feasible it would have necessitated a reduction in the sample of politicians and/or a reduction in the analysis period. The use of wider terms like news, TV and paper should help to limit these issues. Second, the data focuses only on the tweet that mentions the keyword. In some cases, the tweet was made as part of a thread in a longer back and forth discussion with a journalist. This was not captured in the dataset unless the tweets mentioned the keyword, and so is not part of the analysis. The research shows that most tweets were comments rather than replies, so this issue should be relatively limited. Third, this study only includes a relatively small group of Australian politicians, and this was not a random sample and so no claims are made to its representativeness (Farhall et al 2019). Fourth, it only includes Twitter data, and, following Farhall et al. (2019) we would expect to see different communication styles across other platforms. Some Australian politicians, such as Craig Kelly and George Christensen, are highly active on Facebook, spreading misinformation and conspiracies (Taylor and Davies 2021).

### **The Discursive Form of Engagement**

Australian politicians engage extensively with the media, news and journalists on Twitter, but there are huge variations between the different outlets (Table 3). First, it is worth noting that politicians were far more likely to mention national media (3,227) than local media (1,990) with only 116 tweets mentioning international media and the remainder mentioning no specific media.<sup>3</sup> This engagement was primarily by tweeting (5,330), with 1314 replies and 406 retweets with comments. To compress the table, only those outlets mentioned in more than 10 tweets are included here, with the remainder collapsed into the relevant broader category<sup>4</sup>. The politicians engaged by far the most with the ABC. It had exactly double the mentions of the commercial channels, Sky, 7, 9 and 10 combined. Politicians engage more with the regional print mastheads, with Nine (which now incorporates Fairfax) outlets such as The Age, Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), Canberra Times and the Australian Financial Review (AFR) receiving far more engagement than News Corp mastheads including the nationwide newspaper, The Australian. The Canberra Times is something of an outlier. First, many of its mentions were because one of the MPs, Mike Kelly, represented a Canberra seat and regularly shared news stories from the local paper. Second, at the seat of parliament, MPs spend a lot of time in Canberra, and thus it seems they engaged with this outlet regularly.

ABC	1632	Channel Seven	75
media/unspecified	1099	News.com.au / News Corp	70

Journalist Only	646	Channel Nine	69
Sky	626	SBS	56
Canberra Times	550	Buzzfeed Australia	48
Other media specified	294	Channel 10	46
Sydney Morning Herald	282	Courier Mail	43
Other Local Media	223	Conversation	36
Australian Financial Review	184	Daily Mail	26
The Age	163	Fairfax	25
Australian	149	New York Times	24
Guardian Australia	114	Adelaide Advertiser	22
Daily Telegraph	104	Saturday Paper	18
2GB Radio	102	Crikey	14
3AW Radio	100	Brisbane Times	12
Herald Sun	83	Triple J	12

**Table 3: News Outlets by Mention (note one tweet may mention more than one article – all are counted)**

We now turn to the functions of tweets by politicians (Table 4). Three activities were far more prominent than others. First, politicians would often share a news story and comment on it in some way (2,134 tweets) – either retweeting with a comment or sharing a link with comment. Such tweets performed a variety of functions from criticising opponents to highlighting their opinions to constituents and followers, to simply sharing news. Second, politicians were often sharing their own appearances in the media, or occasionally a colleagues appearance (1,956 tweets) with the ABC (421) and Sky (160) most common, but newspapers also featured, including advertising opinion pieces that they had written (e.g. AFR 109). There was a mixture of advertising forthcoming appearances to sharing clips or transcripts of recent ones. Third, they were discussing news stories without sharing a link (1,723 tweets). The Discussing the Media category includes tweets that discuss the nature of coverage or media (e.g. media policy) in some way.<sup>5</sup> There was also evidence of more light-hearted chat between politicians and journalists that may speak to a more convivial relationship. This varied significantly between politicians again though, with a small number who engaged in “banter” with journalists (e.g. Sam Dastiyari) as Fuller et al. (2018: 95) correctly characterise it. It was also noticeable that some journalists engaged in more banter with politicians, with Alice Workman (then of Buzzfeed) probably the most frequent.

Advertising Appearances	1,956
Press Releases	368
Seeking News Coverage	28
Sharing a news story	2,134
Evidence	36
Discussing the News	1,723
Discussing the Media	561
Informal Chat	230
Defend, support or praise media	155

**Table 4: Function of Tweet**

How politicians engaged with individual journalists was treated as a separate code: any tweet that mentioned a journalist was coded. There were significant differences in practice again. The most frequent mentioners of journalists were Chancellor Josh Frydenberg (436) and now Prime Minister Scott Morrison (175) – this was almost always in the context of advertising an appearance or thanking the journalist for the interview. Others – often from the right fringes of politics such as David Leonel (172), Malcolm Robertson (112), George Christenson (82) and Pauline Hanson (77) were more often engaging in debates or criticising journalists. With the exception of Sam Dastiyari (118), politicians from the left directly engaged with journalists less frequently (e.g. Bill Shorten 31, Richard Di Natale 40).

Research has found that Trump regularly defends and promotes conservative media (Meeks 2020). The Australian politicians in this sample did this comparatively rarely. Many of the tweets were praising individual journalists who were retiring, or praising non-political shows such as on history. These differences may speak to the peculiarities of Trump’s psyche; because the media might be perceived as less partisan as their US equivalents; or that the public service broadcasters have a moderating effect. If this is the case, it might make it harder for politicians to attack the media because they often rely on the media to get their message out. Having provided an overview of the interactions between politicians and journalists on Twitter, we can now turn to the appropriation of fake news discourse, and then, finally, to wider attacks and criticisms.

### **Fake News Discourse**

Donald Trump first used the phrase ‘fake news’ on Twitter on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2016, not mentioning it again until 10<sup>th</sup> January 2017 before his use increased rapidly. In this sample there were 47 tweets that used fake news discourse. The first mention occurred slightly before Trump’s tweet, in November, when the populist Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party (PHON) senator Malcolm Roberts tweeted about “Fake Climate News”. This is the only tweet that in the sample that does not say either “fake news” or “#fakenews”; interestingly, fake was not attached to the media before this point, and after it, Australian politicians either used the phrase directly, or again avoided the association.<sup>6</sup> On December 13<sup>th</sup> 2016, George Christensen was the first to use the phrase directly, in a tweet about the Russia hacking story, with 3 further tweets in 2016. There were a further 6 tweets in January, 5 in February and 4 in March (of 26 total). In the 6 months of 2018 included in the data, there were 15 mentions of fake news discourse. Fake news discourse was propagated by a small number of politicians, largely from the right of the Liberal Party and PHON. Malcolm Roberts (PHON) and George Christensen (Liberal) were responsible for 60% of the tweets featuring fake news discourse.

When the politicians used fake news discourse, they often made a general claim against the media without specifying an outlet (16 tweets). The state-funded public service broadcasters, the ABC and SBS (9) were the outlets most frequently linked to a claim of fake news, with BuzzFeed (6) another popular target. The targeting of specific journalists (2 tweets) was rare. Furthermore, two tweets focused on political opponents and 3 focused on non-political groups – without mentioning the media – suggesting some, albeit limited, evidence of normalisation of fake news discourse. The remainder were single mentions of individual outlets. It is noticeable that News Corp outlets and other right-leaning media were rarely labelled as fake news. When using fake news discourse, it was frequently (10 tweets) also coded as a correction: politicians would explain that a particular story was incorrect, often giving details, and add the hashtag or phrase. For example, Matt Canavan tweeted: “ABC says Indian report shows no need for ‘additional coal-fired capacity’. Actual report shows 94GW over next decade #fakenews”. This form of fake news discourse is a bit different than the blanket, dismissive approach often used by Trump. However, the most frequent user of fake news discourse, Malcolm Roberts, often either replied to stories or retweeted with a



comment that it was fake news with no explanation. Discursive practices varied from politician to politician.

There is evidence that some Australian Prime Ministers have used fake news discourse in other settings (Farhall et al 2019). In this cohort, which includes former Prime Ministers Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull alongside the current Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, only Abbott had used fake news discourse – once – in 2017, when he was no longer leader. This is obviously very different to Trump’s widespread use of fake news discourse. Indeed, it seems as though each leader stopped attacking and criticizing the media on Twitter once they became leader (table X). Prior to his term in office, Turnbull was in the Communications brief, so it is not surprising that he engaged critical and policy debates. However, once he became Prime Minister, critical tweets stopped completely – supporting Fuller et al.’s (2018, 94) finding that Turnbull’s use of Twitter changed significantly over time. Though Morrison had only just taken office during the analysis period, there were no attacks.<sup>7</sup>

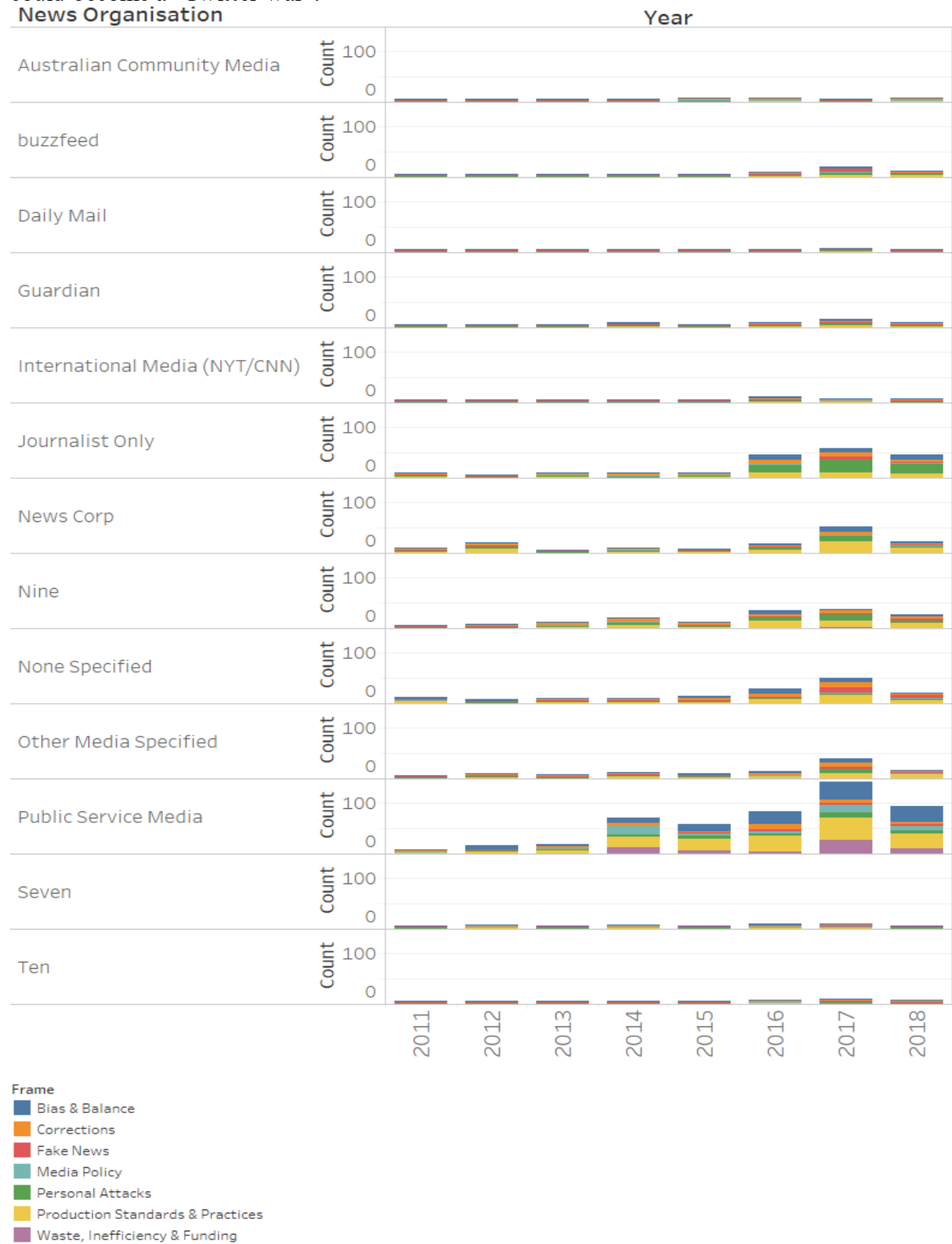
The timing and tone of the data suggest that some Australian politicians did pick up on the fake news discourse being used by Trump. However, while Trump’s use of the phrase grew rapidly, in Australia it was never widely used, and was largely limited to populist and hard right politicians and has been shunned by Australian Prime Ministers. Fake news discourse was deployed in a variety of ways including to attack or discredit the media, but also other political actors. Focusing solely on fake news, though, paints an incomplete picture of how politicians attack and criticise the media. The next section assesses whether and how the politicians attacked and criticised the media more broadly.

### **Beyond Fake News**

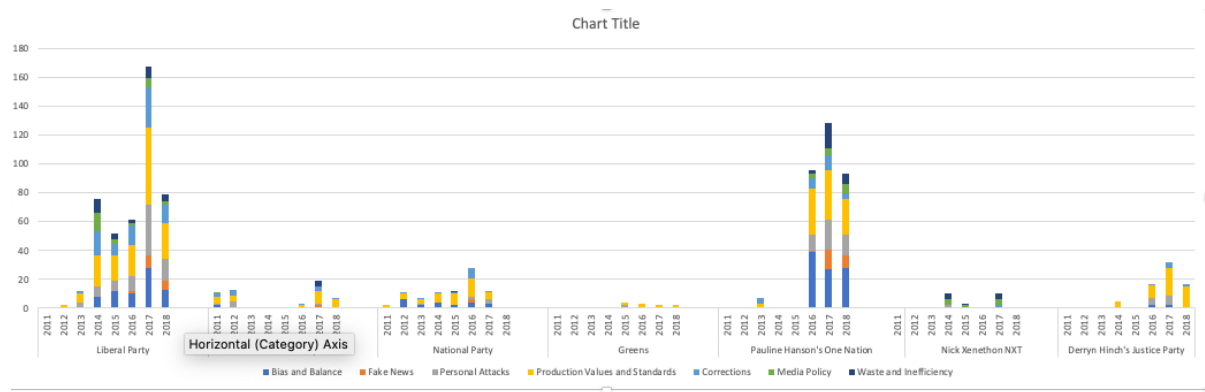
The Australian politicians in this sample have attacked the media with increasing frequency on Twitter, particularly since Trump ran for, and won, the presidency in 2016 (Chart 1 and 2). In total, 547 tweets were categorised as attacking the media<sup>8</sup> with a total of 1018 attacks and criticisms coded across the different categories. The figures for 2018 include only half of the year, and if they continued at the same rate for the rest of the year, the rise would have continued on a similar trend. There is, though, a strong left-right divide, with the 4 Labor politicians responsible for 5% of the attacks and criticisms, compared to 32% by the 2 PHON politicians, 44% from Liberals and 8% from Nationals. To simplify the chart and to express these party differences clearly, the data in chart 2 is clustered by the party of the elected representative.

Direct attacks and criticisms of journalists were fairly rare (154), again with the vast majority coming from Liberal (50%) and PHON politicians (29%) – with the same core group dominating (Chart 2). As will be seen in the examples below, there were significant differences in the tone of attacks and criticisms between politicians. Most were what might be considered temperate in tone and often seeking a correction or calling out issues in reporting. Vitriolic attacks were rare, and generally from the PHON and right-wing Liberal backbenchers. For example, David Leonel described one journalist as “a mouth in need of a brain” and asked another if their position was up for renewal as they “Can’t think of any other reason to push this shit”; George Christensen stated that he had “Never seen such bullsh\*t drivel” as published by a named Guardian journalist; Pauline Hanson stated that one ABC presenter’s “leftist bias is so extreme he is unwatchable”<sup>9</sup>; and Malcolm Roberts targeted a journalist as a self proclaimed media elite who we are fighting against #deplorables<sup>10</sup>. Another stream argued that specific journalists were basically working for the Labor Party; one was described as working to “shield and hide”<sup>11</sup> the Labor leader and was a “senior cheerleader”<sup>12</sup> and in another example, a journalist was described as having being “recruited” to “spread” a politicians “#FakeNews #PayPerTweet”<sup>13</sup>. It was noticeable that three

journalists, in particular, were subjected to running attacks, and that journalists would often defend themselves from attacks and criticism, leading to short back and forth threads that could become a “Twitter war”.<sup>14</sup>



**Chart 1: Volume and Type of Attack and Criticism by Media over Time ( Stacked)**



**Chart 2: Type of Attack by Party of Politician (2011-2018)**

When combined with the previous section, the data suggest that there may have been a kind of ‘Trump effect’ in that attacks on the media increased significantly during the Trump period. It might be that more mainstream politicians deliberately avoided fake news discourse to limit an association with Trump, but that Trump’s use of fake news discourse helped to normalise a more critical and confrontational approach with the media in Australia. While there is limited data available to draw direct comparisons, it seems likely that Australian politicians attack the media less frequently than those in the US.

The Australian politicians in this sample employed a wide range of attacks and criticisms against journalists and the media. Of the 1018 attacks and criticisms, 43% were aimed at the public service broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, 10% at Nine outlets and 9% at News Corp brands. Production standards and practices came in for the most frequent criticism (361 tweets). Tweets about production standards and practices could be fairly straightforward criticisms – that a story was “untrue”<sup>15</sup> or “misleading”<sup>16</sup> to an example of “dishonest reporting”<sup>17</sup> but some also used more critical and aggressive language. Malcolm Roberts and David Leonel, described journalists or the media as “Dolts”<sup>18</sup>, “dopes”<sup>19</sup>, “knuckleheads”<sup>20</sup> and “twits”.<sup>21</sup> Former journalist, Derryn Hinch, tweeted: “WTF 3AW? Nick McCallum interviews Ch 7 director Jeff Kennett for 15 minutes. Not one question about CEO Tim Warner sex/drugs scandal”. Former Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce criticised the standards on the popular breakfast TV show Sunrise: “OMG sunrise have gone from bad to worse pathetic soapbox for destructive rubbish.” Frequently such comments were accompanied with corrections, such as: “Memo 3AW News: The NRL Grand Final trophy is not a cup”<sup>22</sup>. This line of attack was also used alongside comments that questioned the biases in media coverage in 12 tweets. For example, David Leonel questioned: “Why is there at least one anti-Trump story on @SBSNews every night, without exception? Worse than @abcnews. It's getting tedious.”<sup>23</sup>

Bias and balance was the second most frequently applied category (200 tweets) – with 57% of these focusing on the public service broadcasters, the ABC and SBS. David Leonel, for example, stated: “Imagine if they ban the far-left; there’ll be hardly anyone left. No ABC, SBS, Fairfax” while Eric Abetz described the ABC as a “lefty love-in” and Malcolm Roberts claimed that: “All Australians want of the #ABC is a diversity of views. It’s not that hard to hire conservative presenters is it?” A common refrain was to describe the ABC as “their ABC” (as opposed to ‘our [Australia’s] ABC’) linking this to bias: “While their #ABC wallows in bias...”.<sup>24</sup> The ABC was often said to be focused on inner city elites or the “far-left spoilt presenters”<sup>25</sup>; was a ‘mouthpiece for the Greens or Labor’<sup>26</sup>; or served the interests of a few “whiny, far left spoilt presenters”. The ABC debate show, Q&A, which has become a political hot potato (McNair et al 2017) was also the subject of many accusations of bias – particularly around the makeup of the audience and a perceived lack of support for right wing

views. On 23 occasions, accusations of bias were directed at individual journalists, and another 21 times it was a more general statement that the media were biased. News Corp was mentioned in 6% of the tweets accusing bias; again there was a strong divide in the data between the different news organisations.

A strong theme across the categories - and the political spectrum - was to criticise the ABC for having too many journalists based in Sydney and its headquarters in Ultimo, and for a lack of journalists based in the regions. The ABC, it is said, does not 'get the bush'. This was linked to questions of policy and funding, with calls to cut or defund the ABC or to specify more funding for rural areas. This raises a paradox: the ABC is the most trusted media outlet and popular with many voters. Its work on covering the bush and important issues such as droughts and bushfires is widely recognised. Attacking the ABC comes with potential risks. The approach of praising parts of the ABC, but criticising its urban and political reporting arguably brings some political cover. There remains the danger of a backfire effect from criticising the media that should be considered (Whipple and Shermak 2020). These nuances highlight the importance of analysing attacks on the media in a range of contexts, not just the US.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has analysed how a cohort of Australian politicians engaged with, attacked and criticised journalists and the media on twitter, and how this has changed over time. The research has found that the use of fake news discourse is relatively limited and largely propagated by a small group of populist and right-wing politicians. Most Australian politicians in this sample largely engage in a broadly respectful and functional relationship with journalists on twitter, at times engaging in convivial banter with them. While the Australian politicians in this sample have largely *not* adopted a discourse of fake news, there is a correlation between Trump's election in 2016 and significant increases in other forms of attacks and criticism of the media. It might be that most Australian politicians do not use fake news discourse to avoid the association with Trump, but that it has normalised a more critical and confrontational tone between Australian politicians and the media.

When Australian politicians attack and criticise the media, the public service broadcaster, the ABC, receives by the far the largest brunt of these comments. Conversely, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, whose mastheads account for around 70% of print circulation alongside Sky News, Foxtel and News.com.au, was rarely subjected to criticism and attack. What might explain these stark differences? First, the majority of attacks come from right wing Liberals and PHON, whose policies have generally been to cut or even defund the ABC – often egged on by the News Corp media. Arguably both would stand to benefit from such a change. However, attacking the widely popular and trusted ABC does not come without risks, and often attacks focused on the ABC's political coverage and a perceived urban bias while also praising the ABC's rural and crisis reporting. Second, it might be that politicians are impacted by what former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has described as a "culture of fear" about criticising News Corp because of its dominant position (cited in Simons 2020). Indeed, there is a long history of politicians attacking the ABC while largely ignoring commercial media (Griffen-Foley 2003; McNair et al 2017; Turner 2005; Tiffen 1990). Rudd's recent high profile campaign for a royal commission into the power of News Corp would likely have led to significantly more criticism – and, indeed, support – for them, which speaks to a final point.<sup>27</sup>

Trump's approach to the media is highly polarised, attacking perceived enemies *and* praising media that he perceives as supporting him (Meeks 2020). There was limited evidence of this kind of praising in the Australian data. When politicians praised the media, it was often to

acknowledge a journalist that was retiring or about a specific (non-political) show. It is not clear why politicians largely chose not to praise the media. It might be that the media is perceived as less partisan, or that this is simply considered inappropriate.

This study has highlighted the importance of taking a wider approach to how politicians engage with the media, including different forms of attack, criticism and praise and support. Fake news discourse matters, but it is one but one part of the picture – at least in Australia. These differences between the Australian and US experience also highlight the need for research beyond the US and Europe. Further research might extend the geographic scope, and undertake comparative analysis. It would also be helpful to look beyond Twitter to other media and platforms such as Facebook or political speeches.

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<sup>1</sup> I have included this under review piece as it sole-authored and reflects my work on fake news and fake news discourse.

<sup>2</sup> Retweets without comment were excluded because the core focus here was politicians own words. Removing these also helped to reduce the large dataset, making the work more feasible.

<sup>3</sup> Note for this data a tweet can mention multiple media, and here dominant coding was applied – so a tweet than mentioned local and national media was coded as national.

<sup>4</sup> Other media that were captured with 1-10 mentions were: 4BC, Perth Now, Huffington Post, NITV, Junkee, WIN News, CNN, AAP, Mamma Mia, Newcastle Herald, Bloomberg, NT News.

<sup>5</sup> As noted, this was a dominant code scheme. Tweets about bias in the media were always coded as bias, trumping this category.

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/MRobertsQLD/status/802990029941317632?s=20>

<sup>7</sup> Twitter advanced search was used to check his tweets since he became Prime Minister: no tweets using fake news discourse were identified.

<sup>8</sup> Although quite rare, some tweets featured more than one outlet. For some parts of the analysis these were separated out into individual units (i.e. a tweet that attacked the ABC and



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News Corp would become two units or rows in the dataset to count all media). For this analysis there were 578 tweets/units of data.

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/PaulineHansonOz/status/808482459272609792?s=20>

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/MRobertsQLD/status/806061746859319296>;

<https://twitter.com/mrobertsqld/status/994677048156217344>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/MRobertsQLD/status/994679116438822917>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/mrobertsqld/status/994677048156217344>

<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/MRobertsQLD/status/930546630071263232?s=20>

<sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/MRobertsQLD/status/806061746859319296>,

<https://twitter.com/adamgartrell/status/929540813591273472>

<sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/JoshFrydenberg/status/787591597021999104?s=20>

<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/TurnbullMalcolm/status/446547839233957888?s=20>

<https://twitter.com/TurnbullMalcolm/status/505315047506051072?s=20>

<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/HumanHeadline/status/804953365377470464?s=20>

<sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/DavidLeyonhjelm/status/762430950303117312?s=20>

<sup>19</sup> <https://twitter.com/DavidLeyonhjelm/status/947409854322262016?s=20>

<sup>20</sup> <https://twitter.com/DavidLeyonhjelm/status/995490288473812992?s=20>

<sup>21</sup> <https://twitter.com/DavidLeyonhjelm/status/845067563801362432?s=20>

<sup>22</sup> <https://twitter.com/HumanHeadline/status/782684780571734016?s=20>

<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/DavidLeyonhjelm/status/820963555344142339?s=20>

<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/MRobertsQLD/status/841487987292565504?s=20>

<sup>25</sup> <https://twitter.com/DavidLeyonhjelm/status/943261424289058818?s=20>

<sup>26</sup> <https://twitter.com/DavidLeyonhjelm/status/965383562164805633?s=20>

<sup>27</sup> News Corp's coverage of climate change has come in for particular attention. Concerns have also been raised about the evening content of Sky News; so-called 'Sky News After Dark' features a host of right wing commentators such as Andrew Bolt, Peta Credlin, Paul Murray and Alan Jones, and has echoes of Fox News, with Labor receiving sustained attacks (Stapleton 2019).