

We need to talk about Tony...

Media coverage of the Abbott Opposition 2009-2013

Australian Oppositions have long complained of poor, even unfair, coverage in the mainstream media and of the struggle to secure substantive coverage of their alternative platform. However, the advent of a hung parliament after 2010 seemingly elevated the position of the federal opposition. The Gillard government occupied a precarious position as a minority government, only a heart-attack or a few scandals away from disaster. The minority Gillard government constantly struggled to exploit the advantages of incumbency while the Abbott-led opposition arguably became one of the more effective oppositions since Fraser. For three years the opposition, rather than the government, has set the news agenda, driven debate and set the tone in the parliamentary chambers. How then has the media covered and presented this extraordinary time in Australian politics. How has the media adapted their practices and treated the opposition differently?

The relationship between government and opposition is the heart of political practice in Australian politics as it is in other Westminster parliamentary systems (Maddox 1996, 278-9; Rhodes et al. 2009, 207-209). The significance of the government-opposition relationship is obscured by the fact that we tend to conceive the dynamics in purely adversarial terms of government and opposition as political party A versus political party B. Ultimately, it is through the contest between government and opposition that public policy is debated, assessed and come election time, judged by voters. This partisan reality is reflected in the way Australian politics is reported in the media. It regularly acknowledges the presence of the opposition, noting their reactions to government announcements and policy implementation, but also reflecting the lesser status of opposition, only focusing on it either doing very well, or failing miserably.

Oppositions find themselves in the difficult position of being both opposition and alternative government at the same time. These roles, while clearly related, are different in emphasis and a

clear tension exists within the role of opposition. The Opposition is caught between the institutional demands of 'responsible opposition' as defined by Jennings (1966, 30-2) or what we might think of as opposition as the alternative government. This is in contrast to what Kevin Tuffin (2007, 378) as neatly termed the *real politick* of the official opposition: their role as the government's opponents which engages in relentless critique of the executive in the hope of first destroying and then replacing the government.

Australia's hung parliament has coincided with a long-term and increasing global trend in the personalisation of politics as a result of the changing nature of political parties, the rise of identity politics and the growing complexity of government (see Poguntke and Webb 2005). However, despite the general trend towards personalisation in parliamentary systems, each jurisdiction has seen the trend develop differently (Boumans et al. 2013, 215). Here in Australia, Simms (2005, 76) argued that the 2004 Federal election saw a major elevation and focus on the role of leaders and in the 2010 election Bean and McAllister (2012, 346) noted increased attention paid to leadership. The focus on leaders, personalities and character is the combined result of changing media strategies by political parties that seeks to communicate more directly with voters and the media which seeks to root the focus of news in human and relatable narratives (Langer 2007, 372).

Yet, scholars in the presidentialisation thesis literature have generally focused on Prime Ministers and scholars studying media and politics have largely ignored the media's interaction with the opposition with the notable exception of Julian Fitzgerald (2008) and Kevin Tuffin (unpublished manuscript). Despite all the pressures on the media in the past decade from increasing concentration of ownership, hollowing out of news rooms, less resources and appetite for detailed policy coverage and the rise of social media and the blogosphere (see Jericho 2012) the media remains a conduit between political representatives and voters and a transmitter of expert opinion (Ward 2002, 401). Both the media and opposition have a crucial role to play in free societies, and the

hung parliament has elevated the importance of coverage of the opposition which was closer to forming government than at any time since the 1940s.

This paper will examine how the mainstream media has reported on the Abbott-led opposition. The paper is part of my research interest in the politics of oppositions, which is currently held by the Coalition. While my research interest is about the conservative side of politics, I am myself not a conservative. The paper will examine coverage in the major broadsheets and the ABC. This paper will supplement this evidence with interviews with practicing journalists in the parliamentary press gallery and my own experiences as a researcher for over five years in the parliamentary press gallery working for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and Fairfax Media's daily online broadcast *Breaking Politics*. Through this research I spoke with five press gallery journalists, which have all served in the gallery for more than ten years, and a majority for in excess of twenty five years. Scholars should always be cautious of information gathered from elite interviews. Participants can be self-serving and their analysis may be vulnerable to post ad hoc justifications. However, elite interviews give scholars access to actors and information that is otherwise not available.

The analysis identified three themes of reporting: coverage of the personality or character of the opposition's leading spokespeople; the opposition's policy development and political tactics; and the media's commentary on the opposition's relationship with the media and media coverage.

Reporting on the opposition

Journalists are attracted to power exercised and it is a key driver of political news. Consequently, the opposition, because of its political impotence, is, as a rule, less newsworthy than the government.

The opposition's impotence is both the main cause and the primary obstacle which the opposition must overcome to project itself to the public. Much of what the opposition does or has to say is reactive to the government's agenda and places the opposition, as it is in the chamber, in a permanent position of disadvantage. That said, the opposition generally becomes more newsworthy

at four times during the election cycle: close to, or during election campaigns; as the result of set pieces like the budget reply; when launching a major policy initiative and; during a leadership crisis.

The journalists interviewed for this paper agreed that opposition is more newsworthy closer to an election and the most newsworthy during election campaigns when its position is elevated to that of equal status with the government. There are also a number of set pieces where the opposition is given lots of attention, most notably the budget reply. For example, Tony Abbott's budget reply speech will receive blanket coverage and analysis, whereas even a major policy speech may not be given the same level of attention and only a report of the event and the key themes might be presented rather than the text of the whole speech itself.

The opposition is also newsworthy when it presents a new idea or is making an election pitch. However, while the opposition might be able to gain initial coverage, it may struggle to organise follow up coverage over the long-term to explain a complex policy idea. For example, some Coalition MPs in opposition from the 1990-1993 era, felt that the opposition was able to generate initial widespread coverage of their complex reform package *Fightback!* However, the opposition struggled to control the agenda and the presentation of *Fightback!* — despite producing a significant body of supporting material for journalists— during the eighteen months in the lead up to the 1993 election (Hewson 2013). Ultimately, what the opposition announces, despite their merits, remains only a proposal until the opposition wins government.

The bruising experience of *Fightback!* and the so-called 'unlosable election' has since encouraged oppositions to refrain from putting out too much policy ahead of election campaigns. While the opposition has made a number of policy announcements prior to the 2013 election, it is notable that these policies are either continuations of previous policy pronouncements from the 2010 election, such as the paid parental leave scheme (Griffiths 2013) and the emissions reduction direct action policy (Hunt 2011), or early releases of policy designed to neutralise their negative impact during the

2013 election campaign, such as the coalition's broadband policy or its industrial relations policy. These were policy announcements designed to limit the amount of initial and follow up coverage.

For the media, political coverage that is dominated by conflict is considered good copy, and consequently, oppositions are guaranteed wall-to-wall coverage during a leadership crisis. Ironically, this is exactly the sort of news coverage that oppositions seek to avoid because voters are turned off by internal party instability. Once a leadership story has taken hold, all news about the opposition is viewed and presented through the leadership-crisis lens. Policy announcements which may have received scant coverage by the press are instead elevated and analysed according to how it will affect the power relations internally rather than the substance of the announcement itself. For example, the announcement of the negotiation progress of the Turnbull-led opposition for the then Rudd government's Emissions Trading Scheme announcements were largely reported through the prism of how it affected his grip on the leadership (McDonald 2009; Taylor and Franklin 2009; Banks 2009).

As Economou and Tanner (2008 35-36) note, much of news reporting about politics is routinized through socialisation of apprentice journalists in newsrooms and standardised patterns of information gathering through sources, news management by political actors and news narrative models such as balanced news coverage, often characterised as 'two sides to every story' or more pejoratively as 'he-said-she-said' journalism. Reporters also place an emphasis on precedence and regularly compare today's events to previous political events and happenings and report on them in a similar style (ibid, 96, 100). These practices routinize the information gathering processes for journalists (ibid, 105) and result in similar news angles at different Australian news outlets. A squeeze on the costs in news rooms since the late 1990s has seen the market for journalists shrink and successive rounds of redundancies in the past five years had reduced the overall quality and depth of news coverage (Tanner 2011).

The increasing numbers of political staff has changed journalists relationships with the opposition. Media advisors are there to 'heavy' journalists in order to stop a story from gaining traction with the media, offering an alternative point of view, spread misinformation, provide vital information or simply threaten to withhold vital information (Fitzgerald 2008, 97). Yet, while there may be more gate-keepers, the journalists interviewed stated that their relationship with the opposition tended to be with the opposition spokesperson themselves and was more informal. Compared with the government, the opposition has less capacity to discipline journalists by withholding information because their information is less valuable in general and more importantly, the opposition generally needs journalists and media coverage more than journalists need them. However, opposition media staffers will engage in acts of protest and complain about coverage they dislike, both as an act of registering their feelings and to encourage journalists to think twice about writing critical copy (Kenny 2013).

Abbott and the Hung Parliament

However, the Hung Parliament has elevated the Abbott opposition and forced journalists to pay more attention to the opposition because of the precarious position of the government (Grattan 2013; Kitney 2013). Additionally, at the beginning of the current parliament, Abbott signalled that he would exploit the legislative opportunities of the hung parliament as part of his tactics designed to make the parliament ungovernable. The potential for the opposition to actually have an effect on legislative outcomes in the house naturally increased the opposition's newsworthiness. Yet, the opposition only made limited use of these leavers (Taflaga 2012a).

Last, many journalists struggled to adapt to reporting on the different dynamics of politics in a hung parliament with a minority government. Much emphasis was put on how messy the legislative process became in the chamber. The government was regularly criticised for having to make deals with the country independents on the one hand and criticised on the other for refusing to put legislation it had no hope of passing before the House. This had the effect of putting the government

on the back foot and complimenting the opposition's overall strategy of creating a sense of chaos and disorder (Cassidy 2012).

Writing about the Abbott-led opposition

Returning to the three themes: personality and character assessments; policy development and political tactics; and Abbott's media strategy. Let us examine them in turn.

Personality Politics

Australians have always been interested in the personalities and characters of their politicians, particularly leaders, and arguably wish to 'get to know them' before trusting them with high office. However, where Australian politics was more focused on party identification as a driving force of voting behaviour (see McAllister 2011), today, in a world of declining party identification, leadership of the two political parties has taken on a new prominence and importance. This personalisation of politics has increasingly framed elections as a political contest between opposing leaders rather than parties or party platforms (Simms 2005, 76). As Langer (2007, 373) notes, personalisation encompasses the centralisation or presidentialisation of power in leader's hands, increasing emphasis on leader's character and governing skills and the politicisation of a private persona. Party's focus on personalities means they are able to use different media technologies which allow direct communication with voters and also allow for the engagement of voters otherwise less interested in politics (Ibid., 2007 372).

The increased personalisation of Australian politics, at least in as much as its focus on the leader, has had the effect of elevating the leader of the opposition as well. While a key focus has always been on the leader, this personalisation has had the effect of crowding out the wider shadow ministry from coverage. Phil Coorey (2013) noted that shadow Ministers were very competitive, more so than government ministers, to get themselves into the paper because they understood that building their media profile and being seen to have done a good job in the shadow portfolio would help them to secure the job in government. An article by Peter Van Onselen (2012) illustrated the point when he

criticised Abbott's reluctance to reshuffle his frontbench despite the failure of several shadow ministers, namely David Johnson and Marise Payne, to build a media profile and thus put the coalition on the electoral map.

Opposition shadow ministers are usually less well known than government ministers and undergo a process of appraisal during the parliamentary term. Alongside the appraisal of the opposition's competence is the appraisal of the character of the leader of the opposition—the alternative Prime Minister— and to a lesser extent, the shadow cabinet. Indeed, politicians play a role in this themselves, seeking to project and shape their image. This parliament has seen the shadow cabinet benefit from this type of softer media coverage, mostly in the form of profile pieces such as a feature on Julie Bishop in *The Daily Telegraph* (Baker 2013) which discussed her personal ambitions and the choices she had to make to not have children to further her career. Andrew Robb's memoir *Black Dog Daze* (2011) elevated his profile with the public and helped to both humanize his image and showcase his competence in the political arena. Moreover, shows such as *Kitchen Cabinet* had provided a half an hour platform for politicians, including opposition members, to present a domestic and personal portrayal of themselves, which then filtered into news coverage in the following weeks (Blundell 2012; Mamamia 2012).

Opposition leaders are especially targeted for this kind of profiling, and unlike coverage of the shadow cabinet, which is more about educating the public about a politician, articles about leaders are most often structured around whether they have the temperament to be Prime Minister. As Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott was subject to extraordinary scrutiny of his personal history and views — even for an opposition leader. Much of the coverage focused on his so-called 'dark side'.

Since becoming opposition leader, Abbott has been the subject of one polemical biography *Man's Man* (2011), A quarterly essay, *Political Animal* (2012), which was then later adapted into a longer book by David Marr, several articles and features in the Monthly Magazine (MacCallum 2012; Nowra 2010; Aly 2013) and regular opinion pieces in the daily press. *Man's Man* was a hostile account of Abbott's life which sought to present him as anti-women (Mitchell 2011, 119-132) and that his male dominated world view make him unsuitable as Prime Minister. David Marr's *Political Animal* (2012) was a complex and nuanced essay which explored the interaction of Abbott's strong catholic belief system and his fierce political ambition. Yet, the main focus of the press's coverage of the essay was a few pages which detailed the accusation of Barbra Ramjan that as a student politician, Abbott had punched a wall on either side of her head. This sparked a flurry of pieces (for example see Patch 2012; MacCallum 2012; Oakes 2012) and even a discussion on Q&A about Abbott's attitude towards women (Q&A 2012). Indeed, such is the focus on Abbott's perceived aggression that any small bit of information that could push the story forward was dutifully reported months later (Snow and Robertson 2013).

Abbott's view and relationship with women became a widely discussed subject again in the wake of Julia Gillard's misogyny speech (2012, 11581) after Abbott accused the Prime Minister of propping up disgraced MP Peter Slipper, even after sexist text messages written by the former speaker emerged. This fed into the long-running discussion of the political significance (or lack thereof) of Abbott's 'woman problem' and the growing perception by women voters of Abbott as aggressive and a man uncomfortable with women (Murphy 2012; Ghazarian 2012; Shanahan 2012). The discussion even reached the point where research was conducted and reported on that noted that women did not like how 'Abbott walked like a primate' and that they viewed him as an 'angry negative primate' or particularly as a 'silver backed gorilla' (Urquhart 2012).

Abbott has also sought to do a number of profile pieces to counter his image as a head-kicker and a junkyard dog with a piece in *The Australians Women's Weekly* soon after becoming opposition

leader which caused controversy in the media because of comments Abbott made about his daughter's virginity as 'the greatest gift that you can give someone , the ultimate gift of giving' (McCabe, 2010). The second profile was in response to the escalation of the Labor Party's gender strategy, which aimed to depict Abbott as uncomfortable with women in general and powerful women in particular. Splashed across the front pages of the *News Limited* Sunday tabloids, this profile was more successful, but betrayed the Coalition's concern about Abbott's image. Abbott pictured and interviewed alongside his wife, was able to humanise himself and portray himself as a regular bloke with a family in contrast to the unmarried and childless Julia Gillard. His wife, Margie, discussed how he was prone to shed a tear over a movie and that he enjoyed watching *Downton Abbey* with her (Jones 2012).

Abbott's clothing and dress is also often the subject of comment. Abbott is depicted in daily cartoons in his red speedos after images of him dressed in his surf life savers uniform were splashed across the front pages during his tilt for the leadership in late 2009. Regular comment is made of Abbott's tight fitting lycra cycling gear. Indeed, even Abbott's blue ties were the subject of national debate after then-Prime Minister, Julia Gillard (2013), raised the issue of men in power at a forum for women voters. Gillard argued that should she lose the election, the result would be the diminution of female power in Australia, replacing it with the dull dominance of the patriarchy. The speech backfired and instead made wearing a blue tie a political protest much like driving in daylight with the headlights switched on during heady days of 1975.

It is also difficult to deny a vein of sectarianism that runs through the commentary of Abbott which often references his strong catholic views. Moreover, this religious suspicion of Abbott, despite his repeated promises to not allow his Catholicism to influence his government (Wright 2013), is more discernible the comments section of newspapers and online sites like *The Drum* or on the types of questions asked about him on programs like Q & A. Interestingly, Abbott is the author of a book

which outlines his policy vision for Australia, *Battlelines* (2009), which has generally received scant coverage in the press.

Policy development and Political tactics

While policy, political tactics and internal party manoeuvrings can feature as the sole subject of news reports and opinion pieces, these three aspects are commonly bound up together. Indeed, this is hardly surprising as policy, political tactics and internal party competition and manoeuvrings are the stuff of opposition politics.

The overwhelming majority of coverage of the opposition is about policy and it is covered in the news sections of the paper. The framing of the opposition in policy stories is overwhelmingly reactive. On any given day in the newspaper, the opposition is quoted as responding to government announcements or initiatives, most often in a negative frame. In fact, as Phil Coorey (2013) noted, the opposition's negative carping is predictable and it is therefore unsurprising that the opposition is usually covered in this way. Less common, is for the opposition's complaint or argument to frame the issue covered in the story. This is still a reactive model, but it places the emphasis on the opposition's claims or criticisms at the top of the story and is therefore significantly more positive coverage for the opposition, which is seen to be on the front foot and achieving results.

Coverage of the opposition's policy releases is standardised in that it reflects the way in which government policy is covered. To date, much of the policy released by the opposition has received critical coverage largely as a result of the opposition's political strategy to release the more controversial and difficult policy areas well before the election. Take as an example the Coalition's industrial relations policy which was subject to generally lukewarm and critical reviews because Abbott was seen to have played smart politics but presented timid policy (Van Onselen 2013; Kenny 2013). The Coalition's Direct Action Plan has also been the subject of sustained policy critique, namely by Lenore Taylor who has tenaciously pursued the coalition on this policy for four years. Indeed, direct action has received more critical attention than many government policies. In

political commentary, much of the discussion of the opposition's policy is a discourse about the opposition's refusal to provide policy detail. This debate reveals a tension for journalists who understand that it can be politically smart to hold off releasing policy until the election, but struggle to reconcile it with good democratic practice (Hartcher 2012; Uhlmann 2011).

Discussion of political tactics is often the subject of opinion pieces. When these pieces are positively framed, they are designed to provide an explanation of the Opposition's political strategy and are often puff pieces. For example Chris Kenny's (2013) commentary on Abbott's response to the proposed electoral reform laws aimed to explain Abbott's tactics and frame them in a positive light. More critical assessment can represent full scale attacks on the opposition, and can often go to the core of the opposition's fitness to replace the government (for example see Hartcher 2012). This genre of article is also more likely to feature the partisan bias of the reporter and can range from open partisan attack to constructive criticism for one's 'own side'.

Reporting of internal party manoeuvres are almost always a negative for the opposition. More often than not they expose the views of disgruntled shadow ministers or backbenchers and undermine an opposition's capacity to present as a united front. Given that news is governed by something happening, it follows that rarely is it newsworthy that the opposition leader is unconditionally supported. During the hung parliament stories that focused on internal party wrangling tended to focus more on internal management, squabbles over preselection and policy debate or disagreements. There were few leaks from the opposition seeking to undermine the leader. This is reflective of the opposition's strong political position during the majority of the term and the widespread belief— until the return of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister— that the Coalition would win the 2013 election. Given their winning position, there was little incentive to leak internal party wrangles to the media which would undermine the coalition's polling position.

Media commentary on coverage of the opposition

During this period of parliament, there has been significant criticism of the Abbott-led opposition's media strategy. Journalists have accused the opposition of by-passing the press gallery in a deliberate attempt to avoid scrutiny. Abbott, they charge, seeks to do doorstops away from Canberra where the press pack is less expert and more likely to ask easy questions or to avoid appearing on long format interview programs like *7.30* or *Lateline* (Jones 2013). The press has retaliated against this strategy by reporting on the attempts of Tony Abbott's office to control the media appearances of shadow ministers and backbenchers (Grattan 2011). This strategy is particularly prevalent on the ABC, which the opposition leader has largely avoided. Barry Cassidy, the program host of *Insiders* announced on air there was a standing invitation to any shadow ministry member to come on the show, which had until that time refused to come on. As a result, *Insiders* did see more shadow ministers come on the show, but Cassidy has repeatedly extended the program's open invitation for the opposition leader to come on the program. Likewise, the ABC launched an attack on the opposition leader in the first week of July 2013 with presenters on the broadcaster's flagship news programs mentioning that that the opposition leader had not appeared on *Breakfast* with Fran Kelly for 362 days, *Lateline* for 583 days, *Q & A* for 1054 days, *Insiders* 362 days and *7.30* for 72 days respectively (Jones 2013; Crikey, 2013).

Bernard Keane (2013) for *Crikey* tested the media's claims and undertook of a study of Abbott and Gillard's press appearances from 1 June to 30 November 2012. The results of Keane's analysis found (see table) that Abbott and Gillard answered almost the same number of media questions (Abbott answered 1051 questions and Gillard 1074), but that Abbott did more press conferences away from Parliament House and favoured talkback radio and commercial television over the ABC. This suggests

| <i>Media appearances Jun-Nov 2012</i> | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| | Press Gallery questions | Media conference questions | ABC radio i/vs | AM radio i/vs | FM radio i/vs | ABC TV i/vs | Other TV i/vs |
| Gillard | 226 | 848 | 23 | 8 | 3 | 5 | 10 |
| Abbott | 142 | 909 | 3 | 12 | 4 | 1 | 16 |

(Keane 2013)

that the media's criticism of Abbott's media strategy had some justification.

The change in reporting technology has changed the way that politicians engage with the media and how they are in turn covered by the media. While the rise of television has generally changed the nature of politics and political coverage globally the rise of 24 hour news has changed the coverage of politics further and, significantly, opened up new opportunities for the opposition. Dennis Shanahan (2013) noted that in the days before the internet and 24 hour news channels that if a journalist had an interesting story they would hold on it for publication in the morning paper which would then drive radio and television coverage of politics throughout the day. In addition, typically there would be only one news story a day and it would be the goal of the opposition to get their comments and reaction reported and, if they were lucky, their own initiative or policy idea.

The nature of this type of reporting meant that there was significantly limited opportunities for the opposition to break into the news cycle and they were more constrained into fulfilling the reactive role of opposition. It was a news model characterised by a fixed amount of space and thus less material needed to be provided for journalists and more importantly, they could afford to be more selective, choosing only the most newsworthy and interesting. For politicians this meant fewer and more targeted appearances. Indeed, in 2006, then Prime Minister John Howard commented on the changing pace of the news cycle stating that 'there was a time where if you had an initiative a week

you'd done very well and you'd provided enough for the media. You now need virtually an initiative a day' (Howard 2006).

The rise of online and 24 hour news has changed the media strategies of politicians and particularly, oppositions. During the Howard years the media strategy was increasingly focused on media appearances designed to produce a transcript of the days' key messages which journalists could then be directed back to throughout the day (Fitzgerald 2008, 99). The easy distribution of transcripts via email to journalists and stakeholders meant that politicians no longer need to wait for information to filter back in order to respond (Fitzgerald 2008, 105). The combination of quick distribution and significantly expanded space that the media needed to fill, encouraged the emergence of a multiple news cycles in a day.

The last five years as seen further changes in the media landscape which have escalated this 'war of transcripts' (Shanahan 2013). The emergence of ABC News 24 as a second 24 hour news channel, the rise of online reporters aiming to file for the large lunchtime surge of readers, increased copy sharing between the papers, the emergence of newspapers branching out into the broadcasting space, and the rise of *Twitter* and other social media platforms means that it is now easier than ever before to distribute information, commentary and debate and that the explosion in bandwidth available for political news has made media organisations desperate for political talent.

This is a boon for the opposition for four reasons. First, 24 Hour news channels grant daily opportunities for the opposition to participate in and drive forward the new cycle. Second, participation in these programs is relatively low risk given that the format of programs like *The Drum* or *Sky Agenda* leans towards political exposition and comment rather than the more interrogative style of programs like *7.30*, *Lateline* or *Meet the Press*. For the government, 24 hour news represents a higher level of risk and an opportunity to be caught out making a mistake, yet for the opposition, it is significantly less risky because the opposition is called on less to explain and justify its actions in general. The exposition style of continuing news coverage is well suited to the

opposition's role as critic-in-chief, as the media is constantly searching for reaction to drive the day's news stories forward. Third, 24 hour news also gives ambitious backbenchers an opportunity to build their media profile, which is critical to success, and importantly for leaders, regular media appearances keeps their colleagues on message and busy (Coorey 2013). However, it is interesting to note that Abbott largely avoided going on 24 Hour news programs. Instead, Abbott himself uses doorstops, where the questions are one way, there is little chance for interaction and it is harder to ask follow up questions.

Last, online reporting and 24 hour news has given the opposition more opportunities to influence the daily news cycle. Where previously, the opposition had to work hard to make it into the top story of the day— often as the last paragraph of the story— today the availability of the media means that the opposition has greater flexibility in its media strategy. The fact that there are now two 24 News channels means that an opposition doorstep event is more likely than ever before to receive coverage because if either ABC News 24 or Sky News decide to cover the event, then the other channel must also cover the doorstep to match the competition. In this environment, the opposition can launch a debate in the middle of the day and because of the media's need for continuous copy, the opposition will often see their political lines posted in online stories and repeated multiple times on 24 hour news channels. As several journalists noted, the availability of 24 hour news and the impact of copy sharing between major newspapers such as the *News Limited* tabloids or *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* has meant that the opposition has not needed to work individual journalists in every outlet as diligently as they had in the past (Coorey 2013).

The impact of technology and the architecture of new Parliament House has reduced much of the journalistic work 'done over lunch' (Kitney 2013) and replaced it with a more 'business-like' relationship (Grattan 2013). However, despite the opportunities available to the opposition as a result of the 24 hours cycle, interaction between journalists and opposition members remains more personal. Shadow Ministers will give senior journalists in particular their mobile telephone number

and journalists are more likely to contact the shadow directly rather than going through the office (Kenny 2013). Journalists will often call a shadow minister directly where they would reserve that tactic for special occasions with a Minister (Kenny 2013).

The 24 hour news cycle has facilitated the creation of a virtual 'third chamber' in parallel to the parliament (Taflaga 2012b). Unlike Parliament, this chamber is always sitting, and more importantly, more people are paying attention. Where Menzies held only a weekly press conference (Lloyd 1988, 174) today the venue is 24 hour news. Now the thrust and counter thrust of debate is to be had on an electronic platform, available to all players instantaneously and 24 hours a day. It has had the effect of speeding up debate but not necessarily deepening it.

Conclusion

The media's coverage of the Abbott opposition focused on the personality of high profile coalition figures and particularly questioned Tony Abbott's fitness for high office, the policy formulation and political tactics of the opposition and the media's own coverage of the opposition. Tony Abbott himself was the subject of extraordinary scrutiny of his character and views. All oppositions leaders are scrutinised by the media, most are criticised for their personal style in exercising the role. Previous opposition leaders, like Bill Hayden or Alexander Downer, were subjected to outright character assassination and charges that their leadership was insipid. Abbott, if anything is the reverse. While much of the coverage is about his excessive aggression and political combativeness, Abbott also benefits from being perceived and portrayed as active and tough-headed. The media in general have regarded the Abbott opposition as tactically astute but relatively lazy and timid on policy. Finally, the media, particularly the ABC, is highly critical of Abbott's media strategy to deliberately avoid long format interviews where his policy positions can come under sustained pressure and scrutiny. Indeed, Abbott as leader has struggled to perform in long form interviews: two of Abbott's few appearances on 7.30 in 2010 and then again in 2012 were damaging for Abbott's credibility as alternative Prime Minister (O'Brien 2010; Sales 2012). This study has provided a general overview of the media's coverage of the Abbott opposition. A long-term content analysis

of key newspapers, broadcasters and news websites would enlighten researchers further about how the media covers oppositions.

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