True blue view from the red centre

New research on political bias may surprise Peter Costello, write Joshua Gans and Andrew Leigh. Cartoon by Lindsay Foyle

It is a hardy perennial of public debate: politicians, or their shills, attack a media outlet because they believe it to be slanted against their cause.

In the US, this has been seen in Republican attacks on The Washington Post as a "left-wing newspaper," and in the US media market the right-wing Freedom Forum.

In Australia these issues also arise occasionally, most recently in this foray from Peter Costello against the ABC: "With the ABC the line of questioning is always predictable. It always comes from the Labor/Green perspective," he wrote. By way of preparatory argument, the ALP put up a free ride. Costello continued: "I am not now at the mercy of the media so I can afford to say what everyone on the conservative side of politics knows: the ABC is hostile territory."

Are such perceptions true? The alternative hypothesis is that the ABC is doing its job and giving a hard time to any politician who fronts it for an interview. Let's face it, under a well-informed grilling it's easy to imagine the interviewer might be a mole for the other party.

A number of US studies have set to explore media slant in that country. Instead of looking at isolated instances, these studies have sought a more "objective" test, covering a large volume of news-outlet reporting. In one study that built upon the US's flourishing "think tank" population, researchers Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo sought to identify a coincidence of citation. First, they looked at which politicians referred favourably to particular think tanks. They scored this in terms of citations relative to one party or another. Groseclose and Milyo then tested whether particular newspapers cited certain think tanks more often than others. If it turned out a newspaper cited think tanks that were more heavily cited by politicians of a particular party, they could score the degree of slant of that outlet relative to all other outlets, or what should have occurred had think-tank attribution been simply random.

In many respects the study produced the expected results. First, there was a significant degree of polarisation among US news outlets. Some were right-leaning while others were left-leaning - and they were the "usual suspects". Overall, however, media outlets in the US were to the left of the typical US voter. (If you have recently visited the US and find this hard to believe, remember the US electorate is also well to the right of the Australian electorate.)

We set out to replicate this approach. Australia does not have the same think-tank population, but we do have a set of public intellectuals who perform the same role and are regularly cited by politicians and news media alike. So in principle, we can use public intellectuals as a "crosswalk" between parliament and the media. We adopted a list created in 2005 by Michael Voss of the "true blue" view of the Sydney Morning Herald, and supplemented it until we had 155 individuals. We then whittled down the list as follows: make the cut, the intellectual had to be favourably cited at least once in Hansard between 1996 and 2007. An attack by John Faulkner on "doddering fools" ... Paddy McGuinness and Piers Akerman did not count as an ALP vote for the pair.

Of the 155 public intellectuals on our initial list, 48 received no favourable mentions in parliament, leaving 107. Of these, 21 were cited significantly more often by one side of politics than the other. Coalition politicians were more likely to cite Marie Bashir, Geoffrey Blainey, Ron Brunton, John Howard, Helen Hughes, Paul Kelly, Hugh Mackay, Wendy McCarthy, Noel Pearson, Ken Phillips, and Paul Sheahan. ALP politicians were more likely to mention Larissa Berelowitz, William Deane, Mick Dodson, Gerard Henderson, Michael Kirby, David Marr, Les Murray, Barbara Piwowar, Anne Summers and George Williams.

It was time to look at media slant. Of our 107 intellectual "favourites" we found that outlet with more to the right, but it was not always more "objective." Without the slanted: why is the Australian media so centrist? One theory is that in the US, there is greater competition in the media market and more variety. That might mean consumers are better satisfied, and perhaps also that the truth is being distorted. These are matters for further study. For now, our hope is that star-crossed politicians think twice before claiming the media really is out to get them.

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The study, How Partisan is the Press? Multiple Measures of Media Slant, is available at www.andrewleigh.org.