

## 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 notable in Republican attacks on *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* for a left-wing slant. Indeed, the whole "fair and balanced" positioning of Fox News aimed to counter that perception.

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 comparison, he argued, the ALP got a free ride. Costello concluded: "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 also 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 Visontay for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and supplemented it until we had 155 individuals. We then whittled down the list as follows: to 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 Hirst, Helen Hughes, Paul Kelly, Hugh Mackay, Wendy McCarthy, Noel Pearson, Ken

Phillips, and Paul Sheehan. ALP politicians were more likely to mention Larissa Behrendt, William Deane, Mick Dodson, Gerard Henderson, Michael Kirby, David Marr, Les Murray, Barbara Pocock, Anne Summers and George Williams.

Then it was time to look at media citations. Our 107 stars were cited more than 84,000 times between 1999 and 2007. (By the way, you'll note this covers the period when Peter Costello was most prominent.) To benchmark media slant, we looked at each party's disposition to cite public intellectuals favourably. Some 47 per cent of all citations came from the Coalition, so a score of 0.47 was our benchmark. If a media outlet mentioned those Coalition favourites more often, they were slanted towards the Coalition.

But our measure also allowed us to see just how slanted: yes, an outlet with a score of 0.48 is right-leaning, but it is unlikely to be significantly so. The more times an outlet mentioned public intellectuals, the more precisely we were able to gauge its ideological position.

So to the results. In contrast to its American counterparts, the Australian media is pretty centrist. There are some more to the left, and there are some more to the right, but overall we couldn't say most outlets were significantly slanted. This might be a disappointment to those outlets trying to position themselves as partisan. But others, such as ABC's Radio National, will probably take pleasure from our finding – they were smack-bang in the middle of the ideological spectrum. But one outlet stood out as more slanted than randomness would suggest: ABC TV News. But which way? It will surely surprise the former treasurer to find that all these years ABC TV news was more for his side than against it. To be precise, it is significantly more likely to quote the kind of public intellectuals that Coalition politicians mention favourably in parliament than those Labor parliamentarians cite.

Given the nature of this exercise, we also conducted a few robustness checks using alternative methodologies. In particular, we conscripted a hapless quintet of coders to read all front-page articles from the 2004 election campaign and form an opinion as to whether they were more slanted towards one party than another. We did the same for the article headlines. These results confirmed our main finding – that the Australian press is pretty centrist – although this time *The Age* stood out as left-leaning. (There is a certain irony in the fact that Costello used its opinion page to attack the ABC.) If there is any place in the Australian media where you see substantial slant, it's not on the factory floor but in the corner offices. During 1996-2007, 36 of the 44 newspaper editorial endorsements were for the Coalition.

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 polities think twice before claiming the media really is out to get them.

**Joshua Gans** is an economics professor at Melbourne Business School  
**Andrew Leigh** is an economics professor at the Australian National University  
**Lindsay Foyle** is a freelance cartoonist and writer

The study, *How Partisan is the Press? Multiple Measures of Media Slant*, is available at [www.andrewleigh.org](http://www.andrewleigh.org)

FUNNY HOW IT'S ONLY THE PEOPLE  
I DISAGREE WITH WHO ARE BIASED

