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## Two Cultures: Parliament and the Media\*

*Julianne Schultz*

The brief I was given when I was invited to present this speech concluded with a fairly bleak assessment of the relative roles of the Parliament and the Media. The questions posed were these:

We can lament the fact that politicians now see the media as a more important forum than Parliament, but should we blame them for accepting the raw realities and regarding appearances on talkback radio or the *7.30 Report* as more effective means of communication than a speech in the Senate or the House? What share has Parliament had in its own decline as a forum for debate and to what extent is it simply the victim of the proliferation of communications media during the past two centuries?

Now to be fair to those who very kindly invited me to address you today, this rather jaundiced assessment of the relative importance of the Parliament and the Media as forums of debate was prepared at the end of the last session, not long after a gruelling election campaign.

This week of course marks the beginning of a new session, a new Parliament, a renewed government, opposition parties in review mode, and other minor parties and independents contemplating the best way of representing their constituents and exercising their influence. And in the gallery, at the entrances and in the corridors of this building an excited and/or world weary groups of journalists are ready—according to the current routines of political reporting—to catch the grabs as they are

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uttered in the Parliament, on the door steps, or drawn from the voluminous transcripts of other interviews and doorstops, or the whispered backgrounders in corridors and over mobile phones, and craft them into stories that make sense of complex policy or issues or power plays for their various audiences.

And because the relationship between the parliament and the media is not just between politicians and their staffs and the journalists, I should also mention the battalions of media executives who have been discretely knocking on doors since November 11, seeking modifications to a range of media policies that could shape their companies' futures.

Issues of representation and communication are common to all the players on this particular field although there are fundamental differences of outcome and culture, some of which I will come to later.

Those questions in the briefing note I received just before Christmas made me think about whether it was true that members of Parliament would really prefer a possibly caustic five minutes with Kerry O'Brien or Alan Jones than the opportunity to expound on an important matter of policy or public importance in the House or the Senate. No doubt they would reach a bigger audience, but a brief interview couldn't replace the subtlety and complexity of the deliberative process in the Parliament, surely. Then again maybe these questions pointed to the beginning of a new form of direct politics played out in TV and radio studios, rather than on the floor of the House or the Senate, with a worm or internet buzzer ready to pass judgement at every twist and nuance, and talkback hosts prepared to act as intermediaries with clout, for citizens dissatisfied with the traditional processes.

As I considered these questions I knew that they were not new—indeed not long after the press had won its quasi institutional status as the fourth estate, its relative strength *vis a vis* the parliament was being questioned:

from slight beginnings the press has overshadowed and surpassed the other estates ... It has obtained paramount influence and authority partly by assuming them, but still more by deserving them ... it is unquestionably the most grave, noticeable and formidable phenomenon of our times.

Now George Reeves, who wrote this in 1855, was given to a particular style of nineteenth century hyperbole, but there is an interesting echo—indeed it is possibly truer today than it was then. Not everyone shared Reeves' views, just as today the media has both its boosters and its critics, who see its methods corroding other institutions and possibly even the fabric of our society.

So I thought it might be useful to construct a couple of questions about the role of the media in relation to the parliamentary process in the same spirit as those I read a minute ago. They might go something like this:

We can lament the fact that politicians now seek to use the media in a way that avoids serious consideration of complex issues and substitutes it with

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well rehearsed one-liners and emotive phrases, but hasn't the media brought it on itself in its desire for controversy, conflict and simplicity? What part has the media played in its own marginalisation, is it simply a victim of its own success?

There are probably a dozen other questions that could be thrown into this particularly overheated pot—but they all tend to point to a sense of what I want to describe as *institutional disappointment*. I believe that there is a gnawing sense of disappointment that some of our important public institutions do not serve us as well as they might, that maybe they do not adequately meet the changing expectations of the times.

I am not one of those who subscribes to the idea that our public institutions are in crisis, or in need of fundamental reform—at least not in most cases. They are resilient and have served us well. But I do think that there is a need for some refreshment to ensure that they are firmly grounded in the rituals and expectations of the twenty-first century rather than the nineteenth.

So that is what I will do today: look at the principles that led to the establishment of the media as a quasi institution of the parliamentary process, a bastard fourth estate, assess some of the current strengths and weaknesses of the relationship and suggest some alternatives that draw on the past and seek to anticipate the future.

One of the most important insights that comes from the study of institutional creation and policy formation over time is that things which we now take for granted were in many cases just someone's bright idea, which they pursued doggedly, tested in debate, grabbing opportunities as they arose to refine, develop and implement. The Parliament is itself to some extent such a creation, certainly the role of the media as an adjunct to the parliamentary process is.

There is a seeming immutability about the idea of the Fourth Estate: that the media should report and provide scrutiny of the debates in Parliament and the policy outcomes. It has however long been a matter of contest. The notion of the Fourth Estate has changed and developed over the past two centuries. It was briefly just a description of the place where reporters sat, but within a couple of decades had become 'the feedback mechanism of democratic system management'. Nonetheless the words *The Fourth Estate* conjure an image every bit as solid as the Gothic stone of Westminster, the elegant dome of the US Congress or the submerged walls of this beautiful building.

But it was not always thus. I would like therefore to trace briefly the process by which the fourth estate moved from being a place, where reporters sat, to an idea which was integral to the democratic political process.

This idea has never been never cast in stone, or even scribbled in the margins of the Australian Constitution. It was only a decade ago that the High Court affirmed the constitutional importance of freedom of political speech. Justice Brennan wrote at the time, 'It would be a parody of democracy to confer on the people a power to choose their parliament, but deny them the freedom of public discussion from which they

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derive their political judgement.’ That of course depends on access to all the necessary information to make such judgements.

Despite these High Court rulings, no tablets of stone defining an institutional role for the press have been handed down in this country. Indeed while many would welcome a constitutional recognition of freedom of expression, any legislative attempt to define the role and nature of the press would make most nervous. While the role of the media has more often been defined in the negative, by limits, exclusions, caveats and so on, the tension that comes from quasi-institutional status of a commercial agency is fundamentally healthy in a democracy.

There is a little game that is sometimes played by pedants and trivia freaks about the origin of the term fourth estate: who used it first, was it Macaulay, was it Burke, was it Hazlitt? This can be interesting, but like many games of trivial pursuit misses what, to me at least, is the more interesting question. And that is the process by which the idea of the fourth estate came to be accepted in eighteenth century Britain, its colonies and around the world.

As I said before, there was no great handing down of the tablets, although some may point to the decision to include a gallery for reporters in the new Parliament at Westminster as such recognition. That was the moment after years of debate when the fourth estate eventually became a place, more than just a bench where reporters had been allowed to sit and take notes squeezed in between others. It had taken two decades to become an idea, as John Stuart Mill wrote in 1859: ‘No argument can now be needed against permitting a legislature or executive ... to prescribe opinions or determine what doctrines or arguments the people shall be allowed to hear.’ The opinion journals of the eighteenth century had been alive with argument—erudite, articulate, sophisticated debate that fostered the creation of many of the Enlightenment institutions and ways of seeing and thinking that are now more commonplace than the food we eat.

The role of public opinion, the importance of reporting, the need to give people access to information to allow debate to occur and informed opinions to be created, was one of the big debates—an issue for the elites that became in today’s jargon ‘a hot button issue’ for the masses with the publication and suppression of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* in 1792.

Those in positions of power, like their successors and predecessors, were profoundly uneasy with this trend. They preferred printers who were more interested in making money than some higher purpose. They used blunt instruments of exclusion and censorship and then more subtle tools of regulation and tax to try to put the press and the public discussion of ideas in its place. But the resilience of the idea, which had been tested and argued, prevailed. In the colony of New South Wales the administrators gave up the unequal battle and allowed tax-free newspapers to be distributed well before similar decisions were made in Westminster.

The landmarks in the debate that led to the creation of the press as a quasi-institution are probably worth recapping, not least because it gives a sense of how long it can take before an idea really takes root in a society, and becomes a self evident truth.

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- 1644: Milton published his famous anti-censorship tract *Areopagitica*
- 1660: House of Commons resolved no one could report its debates
- 1765: American newspaper refused to pay the British license fees
- 1770: British papers won freedom from prior restraint, after printers were jailed for reporting debates, released by the Mayor of London who was then jailed himself—it was clearly becoming time-consuming and silly
- 1791: American Constitution declared freedom of expression
- 1792: Fox’s libel laws reduced penalties and introduced juries
- 1802: William Cobbett began the weekly *Political Register*
- 1803: A bench set aside for reporters in the House of Commons at direction of the Speaker
- 1824: First Australian newspaper established without prior official approval
- 1826: Censorship abolished in Australian colonies, stamp duty removed
- 1834: Lord Macaulay referred to the reporters as being the fourth estate, more important than the other estates
- 1852: Delane editorialised in *The Times* about the different yet complementary nature of journalism and statecraft
- 1853–61: Stamp duty abolished
- 1855: Reeve declared the press created the wont which it supplied and was more important than the other estates
- 1859: John Stuart Mill declared the need for a free press was self evident.

It was a long slow process. The thing which most interests me about this is that the idea of the press as the fourth estate was not handed down in molten lead letterpress, but was the result of robust argument. More importantly, and this has a couple of key parallels with the situation we face today, the press was able to create the wont which it supplied.

The press was its own best advocate—using every means available to advance the case of its institutional role. Of course it was not an institution, it was not elected, nor appointed by virtue of birth or good works. It derived its success from the marketplace. So it was an institution of the political process, but was not directly a

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part of that process, and measured its success in pounds, shillings and pence. The bastard estate had its feet in commerce and its head in public affairs.

Rather than decrying the commercial nature of the media, its very commercial nature gave it—and continues to give it—its authority, its independence and ultimately its power. The ability of the nineteenth century press to create the wont which it then supplied could be restated in the somewhat less elegant language of the twenty-first century, as an idea whose time had come.

So what are the characteristics of this time more than two centuries later? What are the expectations, values, possibilities? Do we need to rethink the relationship between the media and the Parliament, or at least recast or reinvent it in some way?

The world as we know it is profoundly different to that in which the idea of the fourth estate took root. Let me just run through a few salient differences: suffrage is now universal and mandatory, the population is overwhelmingly literate, almost everyone has had at least ten years of schooling, the society as a whole is much richer, there are fewer unknowns, human rights are widely understood and accepted, people expect to have access to information and for their opinion to count. These days the media reaches into every minute of our lives—eight hours work, eight hours play, eight hours rest, and depending on how much the media influences your dreams, maybe 20 hours of media in print, on TV, in the air, on the computer, in the public places. It is not surprising that the media and communications business chews up 25 billion dollars a year in this country alone.

The prevailing established viewpoint is established, developed and maintained through a complex machinery of information and communication. The capacity of the media to turn the level of civilisation up or down a notch is still important, but the elements involved are more diverse and sophisticated than they were even a few decades ago.

As I said at the beginning, I think that it is necessary to understand the antecedents of our current institutions, and quasi-institutions, if we are to imagine how they may change in the future.

I would now like to propose a solution which may go some small way towards addressing the institutional disappointment I mentioned earlier. In the nineteenth century George Reeves celebrated the process by which the press had developed a voice of its own, and was no longer merely an echo chamber of the other 'estates'. The attempts to ensure that the echo is in place are more sophisticated than ever, as you would expect for the billions spent on public communication.

It seems to me that much of the political reporting that we have today is stripped of complexity. There simply isn't the space or the time to do otherwise. We get at best a layering of different perspectives and assertions, claim and counter claim built over the course of a few days or longer. Who can remember who said what, and what was really right or true. As the ideological underpinnings of political debate have become more blurred, the distinctions are harder to hang on to. So not surprisingly much political reporting focuses on the theatre, the spectacle, the gaffes and nuances. Single

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words and phrases bounce around the airwaves framing the public discussion. Emotion has supplanted logic as the principle tool of debate. A simple, clear exposition of facts and rationale rarely cuts through the one-liners, the rhetoric, the spin, the code words and the masked ideology. It is no wonder that we retreat into our preconceptions.

Cynicism has become the new bedrock of this country over the past decade or so. It has become pretty impenetrable, and to some extent demoralised our political institutions. Suspicion and fear of manipulation has undermined the confidence of many Australians in their ability to think through complex issues. The cynicism that fuelled the One Nation phenomenon has now been supplemented with the most skilful media management ever seen in this country. This all contributes to the sense of *institutional disappointment* I mentioned earlier.

As someone who has worked as journalist and editor, who has taught journalism, and has been involved in the hand to hand combat of media policy formation, I feel that there is a gap between what I consume in the media and what I know is going on in areas of policy formation and development. I don't blame anyone for this—I understand the pressures journalists and editors work under, I know some of the tricks that media managers use to ensure that their take on stories and issues reaches a mass audience and I have a sense of the pressure that policy makers are under, as one state departmental head said recently, 'forget the detail, give me the one liner.'

As I said before the media management at play today is of an order of magnitude more sophisticated than we have ever seen before in this country. It is not the simple control of the old elites; it is slippery, skilful, sometimes abusive and well grounded in the real and imagined fears and expectations of us all. It doesn't leave much space for new ideas.

So I and many others feel a sense of institutional disappointment. At a time when there is more media, why does it seem that there is less detail, less of the fabric of the underpinning rationale, process and outcomes? The media searchlight shines brightly for a few minutes before moving to the next event, that is its job. Sometimes we feel satisfied, sometimes not, sometimes feeling like a child with ADD hoping the next Ritalin will help us make sense of the big picture.

This at a time when technology makes it possible for us to access more detail than ever before—to read the court judgements, to consider the full reports, to examine the data on a thousand and one web sites—making the quick retreat to one liners and snappy phrases is somewhat paradoxical. The ease of access to voluminous information is a challenge to the reductionist inverted pyramid of journalism and its demand for brevity, clarity and simplicity.

So we are reduced to policy one liners, which are deliberately uttered, rarely meaningfully challenged, and endlessly circulated, as highlighted transcripts of previous interviews form the basis of the next.

I understand that the language of politics has now been reduced to the five second grab; the snappy one-liner that pushes the buttons and draws a response is what the

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pollsters—and ultimately the ballot box—can measure. But at a time when the people of this country are better educated than ever before, when they are dealing with increasing complexity in every other aspect of their lives, why is our political discussion reduced to such a thin broth? Emotion and snappy one-liners are no substitute for logic or complexity in policy making and public debate.

It is not my place to advise either the media or the Parliament about how to go about changing this situation—I can simply note what I observe from a somewhat privileged vantage point. I suspect that the pressures on the media will see some swings in the pendulum and innovations which manage to break through the stranglehold of media management, and I note with interest the discussion about the reform of parliamentary practices.

I would however like to add a suggestion, which may be of value to both. It is not a new idea, but it seems to me that it may be one whose time has come. An innovation that may go some way towards providing a framework for public policy discussion would be the televising of Parliament, and related public affairs events—committees, media conferences, speeches, and so on. I know that this is something which has been considered by joint committees in the past, and has never really got beyond a discussion of the technicalities, legal issues and in debate cheap political point scoring. Indeed just as I listed the process of deliberation about the development of the fourth estate, a similar, although not quite so lengthy list can be cited documenting the debate about the televising of Parliament in Australia. The first report was prepared in 1978, there is no record of any response to that, the second was an unfinished report in 1984, then there was another in 1985 also with no response and then a further four, the last in 1995, which also failed to draw a response from the government of the day.

So while the debate about the televising of Parliament has been around for a long time, and has had some advocates, it has never really been taken seriously. I think that it should now be reconsidered. The technology has changed, the spectrum is available, the methods of televising the proceedings are now well established, the need for citizens and audiences to get access to more than the five second grab is greater as the space available for reports has shrunk, the expectation that cameras can relay events any where any time is well established in all other sectors of society; we live in a visual virtual reality. Television can supplement what *Hansard* already does. This could have interesting consequences, as interest in direct democracy via the media is an idea that is likely to recur over the next decade.

It seems to me that that televising of Parliament is no longer just an issue for the elected members and senators, it is essential for the health of the country as a whole. As the eminent American journalism critic Walter Lippmann wrote: ‘The press is no substitute for institutions, at best it shines a search light and clarifies some events.’ Lippmann had learnt the limits of journalism as a public relations officer, managing public opinion and political communication during the First World War. The management of public opinion is now incomparably more sophisticated.



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The media in this country does a good job—but it necessarily operates within limits. A television echo chamber may be an institutional response that complements the practical limitations of the media searchlight.

I don't want to be too overblown in this, but as the pressure on the media increases the space for detail is lost. The heirs and successors to Walter Lippmann, today's media managers know this in their bones. Increasingly what they seek to do is manage the frame through which issues are seen, as well as the particulars of the event itself. This is now done with much greater skill than would have once been possible. Public debate in Australia is robust, at times even bullying; genuine alternatives, complexity and subtlety rarely get an airing. The opportunities to watch extended verbatim coverage would demonstrate the limits of this style and provide an easy point of access to the insights from the parliamentary debate and other significant public speeches.

I can hear the sceptics already: Why bother? Who'd watch? How boring! What a waste of money! Isn't that what the public broadcasters should do? Who would fund it?

It is interesting to look to other countries in this regard. The televising of Parliament is done in many. As the technology of digital broadcasting, cable and satellite television and broadband internet removes scarcity of spectrum as a bottleneck, the technological impediments will disappear. Those of you who work in this building already have this access both to the coverage of the House and Senate, and the committees. Why not make it available to those beyond Capital Hill?

The C-span—cable and satellite public affairs network in the USA—is the best documented, and provides a particularly useful model. It was set up by Barry Lamb in 1979, a year after this, Parliament first considered televising its sittings. Lamb was a former journalist and Republican congressional aide, an assistant director in the office of telecommunications policy in the Nixon White House, who had become increasingly annoyed with the way that partial coverage distorted events. He recognised that the technology of cable and satellite television, the hunger for channels, and the desire by the cable industry to be seen to be exercising its quasi-institutional role in covering public affairs, presented an opportunity. His vision was of a television network that had the time to show the debate, the speech, and the news conference in full—gavel to gavel. It was not flashy, but by making the full debate, the full news conference, and the full speech, available, it provided a base line for access to information about public affairs.

I'm sure that many of you have had the experience of seeing remarks and comments you have made broadcast, but feeling that without their context the meaning was lost or distorted. I am not critical of journalists in this, their difficult task is to reduce and distil, to draw out the most salient points and hopefully arrive at a snapshot that captures the essence of the debate, within tolerable bounds of accuracy. But sometimes the context is lost, and you need the underpinning arguments to make sense of the conclusions. Most often the distortion that occurs is not of the type described by Anthony Trollope in *The Warden* in 1855 'that makes you odious to your dearest friends to be pointed at by finger', but sometimes it is. Televising

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Parliament wouldn't prevent this, but members, senators and speech writers would at least be able to take some comfort from the knowledge that some people saw the whole speech and had at least a chance of understanding what you were really saying.

C-span now operates two television networks covering the Congress and the Senate, committees, media conferences, speeches, and conferences and three radio networks. It is reached by 77 million of the 98 million American TV households, up from 3.5 million in 1979. While 60 percent never or rarely watch the network, 30 percent watch occasionally and ten percent watch regularly several times a week—a committed audience of more than 23 million. This is in a country where only about 45 percent of people still watch the network news shows. These figures, if translated to Australian cable television could mean that eight percent of Australian TV households could be expected to watch the network at least occasionally—more if it was available by free to air television. I haven't seen the ratings for the pay TV channels for a while, but I suspect that this would be in the middle ranking channels. This is not expensive television—the costs of production would be low, programming costs would be negligible, staff numbers small.

For reasons I do not quite understand at the moment, in Australia the debate and discussion of ideas rarely makes it onto the mainstream agenda. The ideologically driven think tanks pump out their analysis with admirable frequency, the talk shows analyse the event, people get a chance to put in their two bob's worth on numerous radio programs, the op ed pages are filled with 800 word perspectives, large numbers of people are going to public lectures—yet the gap between this and the surface layer of political discussion is substantial.

Televising Parliament and significant public events will not be a one-stop solution to closing this gap, but it may be a part of it. If the public had the opportunity to watch a full debate, not just the grabs that appear on the nightly news, some of the complexity of issues—the trade offs and necessary compromises—may become clearer to more people.

I don't think that this is just a minority concern, but even if it were the opinion-leading and informed minority of any society is enormously important, just as the ideas that withstand robust debate are the ones that will form the basis of the institutions of the future. Again, looking briefly at the C-span audience gives some clues to the depth of interest in public affairs. As you would expect, the C-Span audience tends to be made up of people who vote and read newspapers. But interestingly a third of them are under 35, a third also only went to high school and about a third earn less than \$30 000 a year. So it is not just something watched by the wealthy political elites—it may be that televising the Monica hearings helped this along a bit.

Having easy access to important public affairs debates would however put an information floor under the debate. It can give people ready access to more information than they would otherwise have—without the overlay of interpretation by commentators or the selection of editors. There are plenty of opportunities for such interpretation, selection and analysis elsewhere.

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While there are proposals being developed about ways to improve the public standing of the Parliament and better bring it into the twenty-first century the televising of Parliament might also be a useful additional innovation. Concerns have been expressed in the past that the robustness of the debate may be diminished by televising the debate. Some have pointed to changes in the tone and nature of the debates after radio broadcasts began in 1946, and that the deliberative nature of the Australian Parliament could be impeded by such openness. Similar arguments were used to restrict press coverage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It may be that the knowledge that an audience of electors is watching might change the tone and nature of the debates for the better.

Live coverage could also provide an interesting platform for feedback. Again drawing on the C-span figures shows how this might develop: 86 percent of politicians report significant increases in correspondence after they appear on the network, 91 percent consider this to be a good thing, 63 percent believe it has enhanced the reputation of Congress and only 6 percent feel it has been harmed. C-span has also developed sophisticated feedback mechanisms, to provide direct responses. While this sort of talkback television has become well established in America, it has not really taken off in this country. Certainly with the introduction of digital broadcasting the capacity for the audience to respond, answer back, vote or whatever will be alluring and technologically easy. Tying audience response to a direct parliamentary channel is obviously quite a different proposition to the current style of radio talk-back or internet polling based on an often selective or partial description of the issues.

Walter Lippmann anticipated the tyranny of opinion when he wrote that democracy could only work if we 'could escape the intolerable and unworkable fiction that everyone must acquire a competent opinion about every issue' because no society could be effectively 'governed by the episodes, incidents and eruptions elevated by journalism'. If any of you saw the Alain de Botton program on the mismatch between the Socratic Method and the current tyranny of opinion polling and media management, you may have some sympathy for Lippmann's observation, which sounds dangerously elitist to our ears.

Of course today everyone is expected, and feels entitled, to have an opinion, even if they sometimes have precious little information on which to base it. The media tries to address this, but there is a danger of the 'garbage in, garbage out' variety. So when NSW Chief Justice Jim Spigelman indirectly criticised the tyranny of talkback and the pressure ill-informed commentary was placing on the judiciary, leading talk-back hosts were quick to respond. They were providing the feedback, and the judges were there to do the public's bidding and respond to community pressure.

So the tension between 'the mob' and established institutional practice is sharp. There is an expectation that people can have an input, provide feedback. I welcome this development. But for it to be meaningful there is a need for space to be created to allow for greater complexity, for the detail to be fleshed out, for the arguments to be tested. I am not saying that the media can't do this. Of course it can and does. But its ability to do so will always be limited by the space and time available, by the tolerable limits of mass audience interest, by the very episodic nature of journalism. This is

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why I suggest that the televising of Parliament is an idea whose time may at last have arrived.

This could be done in a number of ways. It could use one of the digital broadcasting's data casting content licenses—when this regime is finally resolved in a way that makes sense for the industry and audiences. Pay TV would be another possibility—although this currently only reaches 20 percent of households. The straightened financial times in that industry may make it unlikely immediately, but not impossible, especially given the recent rulings on access, and the lobbying that the industry is engaging in to ensure that the conditions regulating the switch to digital reception are most favourable. Similarly, the current internet streaming could be upgraded and expanded, but this reaches an ever smaller proportion of the community, and the jerkiness of the picture does not make it a particularly compelling experience. I do not think that it would be appropriate to require the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to broadcast Parliament—the ABC is much more than the echo-chamber of the Parliament, it is an independent public broadcaster. It already has well-developed plans for its digital channels, and has a lot on its plate with the new international service. I would also be fearful that if the ABC were required to broadcast Parliament this could be used as a stick to turn the ABC into the government broadcasting corporation.

The proposal to broadcast Parliament and related public affairs events is about extending the Parliament, not just creating another TV channel.

More than forty years ago, the Cambridge academic and writer C.P. Snow delivered a speech which left a legacy at least of a catchy phrase—two cultures. Sir Charles was exploring the gap between the literary and scientific establishments in post-war Britain, when the scientists were on the ascendancy and the writers were somewhat left out. These days the tables have probably turned. He bemoaned the literary ignorance and political radicalism of the scientists, the scientific ignorance of the writers, and system of education which meant that neither group could talk to each other—even at a Cambridge High Tea.

The speech caused uproar in the way that it addressed a very particular British situation. In giving this speech a title I borrowed the phrase today because I think that there are elements of a two cultures in the gap in understanding of politicians and the media in Australia today. The two cultures are flip sides of the same coin—light and shade, relief and impression—but with important differences of role, method and accountability which need to be recognised and a distance maintained—which is why the media regulation debates are so problematic.

There are at least two different cultures at play—politicians are motivated to varying degrees by ideology and a desire to change or maintain institutions; journalists are generally not ideological and are not in most cases seeking to influence change; media companies enjoy the power that their quasi-institutional status gives them, but are resolutely commercial and driven by self-interest. My suggestion of a public affairs television network should not step on any of these toes. Indeed it should add value to each point of the public policy information chain, and provide an institutional

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supplement to what is already done by the Parliament, executive, judiciary and the bastard estate.

The openness and access to information that the media craves and expects is, notwithstanding the consequences of September 11, the trajectory on which we are placed. The internet, for all the negative hype last year, allows a degree of openness and exchange which was inconceivable even ten years ago. The breaking down of information barriers, the synthesising of material and the capacity for direct feedback are on a collision course with those who are seeking to manage, massage and strangle debate. September 11 may have slowed this trend somewhat, but openness and access to information is absolutely the single brilliant idea of the networked information society. It is the twenty-first century manifestation of the Enlightenment's ideals. We need to find means of saving our institutions from themselves, by using the technology and tools we now have at our disposal to build on the legacy of past debates and insights.



**Question** — I work for the Department that supports the House of Representatives. I very much welcome your call for the proceedings of committees to go out to the people unassisted by the interpretive elements. Sometimes I wonder whether the events I'm reading about or see in the electronic media are the same ones I observed with my own eyes. I believe that the Canadian House of Commons last year resolved that it was a contempt of the House for a minister to brief the press outside the Chamber if the members were advised of something inside the Chamber.

I want to mention something that I think was attributed to William Randolph Hearst during the Spanish American War. In response to a reporter who said, 'There's nothing much happening here, boss', I think Hearst said something like: 'Your job is not only to report the news—if there's nothing to report, then get out there and make the news.' That even extends down to the recent twelve months, when we had a demonstration in the House of Representatives Gallery where the demonstrators said to the Serjeant-At-Arms: 'We have to do this because the press has said we would.' Building on your comment that the press is now creating the need that it was meant to supply, is it just paranoia to see the press in fact setting the agenda, and then reporting it?

**Julianne Schultz** — I think the whole process of agenda-setting is really complex. In the old days—talking of Randolph Hearst—it was pretty straightforward. There was a pretty comfortable club between the senior elected politicians, the owners of the media and other members of the elite. It was a cosy sort of environment. I think that has broken down to a large degree. So in the process of setting the agenda, I'm really torn about how it happens. I think that, to a much greater extent than is visible, it happens as a result of advocates of particular positions influencing people to ensure that things get on the agenda.

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When I was doing research for my book a few years ago, *Reviving the Fourth Estate*, I asked journalists whether they felt that they were involved in setting the agenda, or if they felt it was being set by others. And there was a really divided sense of where that lay. So much of the debate is managed and massaged by a whole range of organisations and interest groups, that the notion of a story falling, perfectly formed, is very problematic.

**Question** — I feel as though the media is very unpopular amongst a lot of people at present, and I'm not sure it's always in touch with how society's thinking. A lot of views are being imposed on us. I also feel that it's wielding a big stick, and people don't like it.

**Julianne Schultz** — I think there is a real gap in public feeling toward the media. I think they will be quite critical of it, and yet they will rely on it and use it very extensively. So there's a dichotomy in the way people feel about it to a very great degree. One of my concerns is that there is a lot of stuff happening which is at a degree of complexity and analysis—and tapping into what people are saying and thinking and talking about—which just doesn't reduce down well into the very episodic nature of a lot of reporting. We need to find a number of means that can tap into that so that there is easier access to a wider range of views and discussions than we've got at the moment.

**Question** — In your flyer, the first sentence is: 'Has talkback trashed question time, or, to put it more politely, has the media become more important than the Parliament as a public forum?' When we talk about talkback, we are really talking about the Alan Joneses and the John Lawses of this world who are somewhat directing public opinion and debate in this country. I find this quite extraordinary and damaging. So you'd surely have to say that there is an element of that being trashed. I would suggest that we need to draw a very clear line between journalists and these talkback hosts—who are *not* journalists, are not qualified and who don't have to follow a code of ethics. They have their own code of ethics which can change to suit them at any time. Therefore, their public debate is very damaging and that is something that is not being addressed. We assume and would like to think that the media and most journalists follow a code of ethics, but the Alan Joneses and the John Lawses of this world do not.

**Julianne Schultz** — I was talking on a talkback program this morning about this whole idea. I actually don't have a problem with talkback hosts being explicitly partisan. Part of the problem we have at the moment is that, in reducing everything down to appear to be as neutral as possible, you lose the energy that comes from that partisan debate. So I actually don't mind that Alan Jones is openly a partisan advocate.

The problem which a lot of the talkback hosts themselves are trying to deal with is how they, in their format, get beyond the 'grab' or the key phrase which they know will bounce around, to something which is a bit more rigorously tested. I think you can do that testing irrespective of what your particular ideological position might be. But I don't think there has been any will to do that, and that's where the problem of the 'mob' thing develops.

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I agree that those big stars of talkback aren't constrained in the same ways as journalists may be in terms of their professional practice and so on. But there is a sense that, if they are taken for a ride—if the weakness of their method is exposed—they will have to come back to some sort of middle ground. Which is why I think that in areas where really quite sophisticated media management taps into various different ways of getting messages out, you'll start to see over the next little while some quite interesting innovations in the way that media goes about testing the veracity of statements as they are made, rather than just taking them and letting them run.

**Question** — You mentioned that some of us are disappointed in our institutions, and I am one of them. Your discussion, very rightly, concentrated on the media. With respect to the Clerk of the Senate, and not defending the media, I would have liked to have heard you speak more about the institutions of parliament and government in this conflict that we live amongst. Governments, particularly, have a very important and powerful role in what we finish up getting on the receiving end of the media. Taxpayer-paid spin-doctors are rampant in both those institutions, but more particularly the government. I welcome your ideas for more public television, but I think something has to be done about those doctors of spin.

**Julianne Schultz** — I'm more an expert on media than I am on parliamentary process, so that's why my focus was on the media end of the relationship, rather than on the parliamentary process. I think you are right about the process of managing the debate and the discussion. In my suggestion for televising, what I'm trying to suggest is that you can at least begin to see some of the complexity of the debate and the argument and so on, because they are easily available. And that means, while it won't cut across what's done in reducing things down to one-liners, at least at the highest level of public debate, which is what should be happening in the House of Representatives and the Senate, we should be able to get access to that in its unadulterated fashion. It won't solve the problem, but it is one of a number of means that might help to address it.

**Question** — I am a journalist with the press gallery. Televising of Parliament would end up arriving at somewhat of a paradox, and there would be big challenges for the audience. For example, there is evidence to suggest that a lot of the bureaux now film quite large amounts of activity around Parliament every day. And yet, inevitably, through the editorial process, it only ends up at about a minute or so on air. That can be quite disappointing for some professional cameramen who in fact try to editorialise on the run, and try and get the best slant on what is, ostensibly, a news-making event at a press conference or a doorstep. So that creates challenges along the way as well.

The seven thousand hours of free-to-air sport that's televised in this country gives you an idea of the demographics and what people are actually watching, and that would create challenges of trying to replicate a sea-span model in Australia.

Another interesting point is that we're one of the few western democracies with the media inside the parliamentary space. That creates pluses rather than minuses, but that hasn't been picked up much in terms of the way the executive interacts with the press gallery, and how they in fact can work together.

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How do we empower the media to increase their respect for the current institutions—whether they be the judiciary or the Parliament—given the way they operate and, as you pointed out extensively in your speech, the way that everything is shrunk down? In our modern lives, people’s attention spans are reduced. As I said earlier, the paradox is that people want more but their capacity to handle more has in fact been diminished.

**Julianne Schultz** — It is a paradox. Part of the reason that I’m suggesting the televising of Parliament is precisely to go to the heart of the issue that you’ve identified, which is that there are a lot of reporters here trying to get more material up than they are able to. Televising Parliament doesn’t actually solve that, because what you get is gavel-to-gavel coverage of issues, some of which will be interesting, and some not.

What I’m most interested in at the moment, as an ordinary citizen, is looking for more complexity in the media that I consume and in the debate that I get access to. I know the pressures that anyone working for a newspaper, radio or television station face, which are that you’re not always going to win. So I think this is one of a number of different mechanisms which may help to add that complexity and give people the opportunity to expand. I talk to journalists who say:

I’ve got to do this story, because every other paper is doing it. I actually don’t think it’s much of a story, but my paper can’t be without it because then we’d look bad. What I really want is to go off and do ‘x’, but because nobody else is doing that I’m not going to get a run on it.

What I’m exercised by is trying to find ways of creating the space for some of that other stuff to get out. I don’t think televising Parliament solves it, but it might be one of a number of different tools that could go some way towards it.

**Question** — The biggest problem with the media these days seems to be the conflicts of interest. Our main media barons are fighting for telecommunications power, and we have a situation with the law firms involved with the likes of Telstra—some 45 law firms on retainers—which creates conflicts of interest right through to the judiciary. The problem we have is that, with the size of the annual advertising budgets of these corporations, the media will not publish the facts that the people need to have exposed for the politicians to deal with. Is that something that you’ve been investigating in your research?

**Julianne Schultz** — Not recently. I actually tend to shy away from those sorts of issues. There are certainly subjects which don’t get published or broadcast or discussed in as much detail as people who are advocates or are concerned about them would like to see. I don’t, however, tend to subscribe to simple analyses which say that because so much money is spent in advertising that therefore those subjects don’t get published and broadcast. I don’t think that’s true. It’s an area I’ve looked at, and I’ve looked at the way which journalists feel pressured or not, in terms of self-censorship, on those issues when I was doing research a few years ago. Journalists are



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quite resilient in their ability to separate the commercial interests of their organisation from what they regard as the public interest and the areas they report.

**Question** — Have you looked at the multiple directorships? The former chairman of Telstra, at the time of the T1 and T2 share dumping, was also the chairman of Mallesons Stephen Jacques, the legal advisory firm. The in-house counsel of Telstra was also a partner in Mallesons Stephen Jacques, which concealed potential liabilities of Telstra and therefore the shares were sold at a much inflated price to what they would have been had all the systemic faults been exposed. That's the type of conflict of interest that is being withheld from the media, and therefore the public are being ripped off.

**Julianne Schultz** — I don't really feel qualified to comment on that in detail.

**Question** — Do you perceive that public opinion—and not the rule of law—is the new authority in Australia? And do you feel that the media has aided this position?

**Julianne Schultz** — No, I think we're still ruled by law, rather than public opinion. And that is a desirable way to be. Public opinion is very powerful, and it presents real challenges for politicians, and it's at that level of the political challenge that public opinion may seem to nibble at the edges of the law. I suppose that was the point that Jim Spigelman was making in his address to the NSW Law Society a few weeks ago at the opening of the legal year. There is much greater access, and people expect to have opinions and to have those opinions taken seriously. And I think that we will see over the next decade many moves towards greater direct democracy and ways of people's opinion being translated in the public space. But we are still ruled by law.

I think that what you've seen over the last few days (regarding the 'children overboard' affair) is the failure of public opinion. Yes, public opinion was massaged by the release of unsubstantiated information during the election campaign, but what you have now seen is the inquiry process of the departmental review and the inquiry process in Parliament.

What you see today about that issue in the papers is formal apologies, with papers saying they were misinformed. That tyranny of public opinion does create travesties. There's no question about it. All I'm saying is that we are not ruled by public opinion. A few months on from that incident, we now have the processes of our institutions kicking in, in such a way that the failure of that public opinion process is being blatantly revealed. Which is why I think you will see in the media a number of different methods and techniques being developed which will challenge assertions much more rigorously than you've seen in the past.

The best example that immediately springs to mind—and I don't say this in any pejorative, political sense, it's just interesting historically—was what happened when the McCarthy period began to be seen to be an abuse of power. You started to find that newspapers and television stations, when reporting McCarthy statements, would say: 'McCarthy said Joe Blow was a Communist', and the next paragraph would say 'There is no evidence to substantiate this. If they reported that 'McCarthy then said blah blah.' they would then say, 'We have been unable to verify this claim.' Because

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within the limits of the techniques of journalism there were very few ways of getting around that.

If someone in authority makes a statement, we have every right to expect that statement to be truthful. And if they're found to be less than truthful in that context, it throws a challenge back to the media process of how to address that disquiet in the processes and norms of reporting.