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ABC NEWS short-changes Voters on Democracy

Election campaigns underscore our democratic parliamentary system. Hence, the expectation that publicly-owned media, such as the ABC, will during elections facilitate debate of diverse policies and visions of parties and candidates. In fact, the ABC's broadcast of the 2013 federal election was dictated by a policy to maintain focus on the Liberal/National Coalition-Labor-Green matrix with only oblique reference to the Minor Parties. Exceptions related to highlighting internal Minor Party fractures and preference deals that could impact on the Major Parties. This brings into question whether or not the news arm of the ABC is an impediment to voter discernment.

The ABC contrasts its culture with its commercial competitors, but it is not the objective facilitator of democratic engagement that it proclaims to be. More recently, the ABC has failed to give any substantive coverage of the current debate over the Federal Government's proposed amendments to **Section 18(C)** of the *Racial Discrimination Act* that will restore rights of free speech back to the community.

Insiders host **Barrie Cassidy** wrote on the ABC's website during the last federal election campaign, "*In a campaign so lacking in substance, it's easy to be swept up by the trivia of suppositories, sex appeal and candidates who think Islam is a country. Nothing, it seems, is cutting through in this federal election campaign but the trivia.*" (The Drum webpage, 16/8/2013, This election is rich in trivia but not much else). The thing that was lacking in substance was, in fact, the ABC's own lazy and negative coverage of the election, despite its vast resources.

ABC's Vote Compass:

Evidence of the ABC's political partiality is its interactive election website *Vote Compass*, which received 1.4 million responses from the public during the federal election. The site states, "Its objective is to promote democratic engagement during election campaigns." It provided coverage of the Major Parties, and through voter interaction would generate an analysis of how a respondent voter's views compared to the positions of the 3 Major Parties - Liberal-National, Labor, Greens.

Other than via a link to candidates running for the Senate, the site failed to provide an easily accessible comprehensive list of the Minor Parties, their policy highlights, and news and analysis of their campaigns.

The Vote Compass website justified this stance under “*Why aren't the Minor Parties included in Vote Compass?*” The answer given on its website was that for inclusion, parties needed to have at least one sitting member in the parliament and would be likely to field candidates in a majority of constituencies, or if it did not have a sitting member it needed to have recorded at least 5% nationwide support in a recent poll.

These criteria align with the ABC’s policy for allocating ‘free time broadcast’ during elections. Free time election broadcasts basically comprise of Major Parties’ policy announcements, with some Minor Parties being also eligible under certain conditions. The free time broadcasts are quite separate from the ABC’s news and current affairs coverage of elections. Conflating free airtime policies with its election news coverage policies indicates a bias by the media conglomerate towards maintaining the hegemony of the Major Parties at the expense of the Minors.

ABC NEWS’ Policy:

The writer, in a letter emailed to the ABC on 30/8/2013, advised that the ABC was acting in breach of its *Code of Practice 2013* that requires it to broadcast: with impartiality; and, a diversity of perspectives. **Alan Sunderland, ABC Head of Policy & Staff Development** replied to the writer by email that included the following:

“Let me deal with Vote Compass first.

Vote Compass is not a vehicle that was set up to contain within it all of our rich and varied political reporting. It was set up to do one key thing – provide an engaging and useful mechanism to allow Australians to see where they sit on a range of policy issues, and to see where the Major Parties sit on those same issues so they can compare and contrast.

.... You may consider that it is not appropriate for ANY application exploring policy to focus only on the Major Parties, but I do not agree. In any event, there is certainly not – as you seem to suggest – any policy or charter requirement that such an application include every single candidate and/or party.

The sensible, reasonable and entirely defensible approach taken with Vote Compass (and with all such applications around the world) is to focus on key parties and in particular on the two rival groupings likely to become the next Government.

Turning to the ABC’s overall election coverage, we do have a responsibility to cover the news in an appropriate way. Election campaigns are no different to any other news story. It is not the role of a news organisation to exhaustively cover every single issue, but rather to exercise news judgement and news values.”

On this basis, **Vote Compass projected to the electorate that the only policies of news value were Liberal-National, Labor and Green, a form of opinion manipulation.** As it turned out, the Senate count disclosed 23% of voters (3,157,622 ballots) did not give their first vote to any of the 3 Major Parties, and for the House of Representatives 12.4% of voters (1,603,826 ballots).

The same partiality applied by Vote Compass was evidently applied by the ABC across its news trench, including on **The Drum**, **Q&A**, **Insiders** and **News 24**, and on **ABC Radio**. ABC 774 presenter **Jon Faine** did have a token 30 minute “whip around” of interviews of several minor candidates on his 5/9/2013 show, as well as on some regional panels, but otherwise justified on talkback that he could not interview individual Minor Party candidates on policies as he would then have to interview all candidates to avoid breaching the ABC’s policy of politically balanced reporting.

Curiously, a not so balanced Jon Faine several times on air condescendingly referred to some of the Minor Parties as being full of “nutters”, without identifying which Minor Parties. Faine also clashed with Clive Palmer after attempting to cast doubt on the integrity of two Palmer United Party candidates whom he claimed had been to court “a long time ago” in relation to intervention order applications. After rejecting Faine’s aspersions as unwarranted, a frustrated **Palmer appealed, ‘Why don’t you talk about policies?’**

ABC News spin:

A pattern of cynical *journalistic spin* consequently manifested within the ABC during the federal election with several *journos*, including Barry Cassidy, and **Annabel Crabb** on **The Drum** and many others, scoffing about the jargon and insipidness of the Major Parties’ campaigns. Still, **faithful to their blinkered news coverage stance, they consciously resisted giving oxygen to the campaigns of the Minor Parties.**

Topical policies of the so called ‘nutters’ included immigration and population growth, surveillance and shield laws, trade protectionism and foreign land acquisition, nuclear family and procreation, efficacy of multiculturalism, impact Sharia Law, climate change scepticism, legitimacy of gay marriage, food production and labelling, ... and yes, sports and motoring!

With its diversity of sources, including content created by its staff, generated by audiences and acquired from external content-makers, the ABC had the logistical capacity to give the Minors reasonable coverage. Threshold criteria could have included range and depth of policy statements, number and expertise of party candidates, dynamics of their electorates, and candidates’ work ethic. **Audiences desperate for substantive debate would have welcomed contributions from many of these candidates.**

In contravention of its charter, ABC News neglects to explore the full range and diversity of political views and values that in fact dominate and inform political debate in Australia. It is timely that the ABC’s operations are now being scrutinised by the Federal Government, the Treasurer, the Taxpayers, and the Voters.

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