Political discourse in a media saturated environment: the Howard Government’s approach to communicating with the Australian electorate

David Marshall

Faculty of Arts & Design
University of Canberra
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# Table of Contents

Certificate of Authorship of Thesis .................................................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements............................................................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................................ vii
Abstract........................................................................................................................................................ xi

Chapter 1: Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1
  Chapter Overview ........................................................................................................................................ 1
  Aims of the Study ....................................................................................................................................... 1
  The Thesis Rationale ................................................................................................................................. 2
  The Evolution of Political Communication ............................................................................................... 5
  The Evolution of the Prime Minister’s Office ............................................................................................ 7
  The Howard Years: 1996–2007 .............................................................................................................. 12
  The Research Questions ........................................................................................................................... 16
  The Thesis Structure ............................................................................................................................... 19

Chapter 2: Literature Review: Academic Literature Focused on Political Communication .................. 23
  Chapter Overview ..................................................................................................................................... 23
  Traditions in Political Communication Research .................................................................................... 23
  Political Communication and Howard’s Leadership Qualities .............................................................. 25
  The Importance of Imagery and Symbolism to a Leader ........................................................................ 28
  The Packaging of Political News in Mainstream Media ......................................................................... 30
  New Media Platforms and their Impact on Political Discourse ................................................................. 31
  Political Leaks and Free Speech ........................................................................................................... 32
  Can the Government Set the Media Agenda? ......................................................................................... 34
  Media Management and Media Power ..................................................................................................... 36
  The Prime Minister’s Press Office ........................................................................................................ 36
  The Power of the Media: Its Impact on the Political Elite ...................................................................... 38
  Media Logic and Mediatisation Theory in the Mass Media Society ...................................................... 39
  Crafting and Managing the Message: Is it Spin Over Substance? ......................................................... 46
  Howard’s Engagement with the Media and Communication Attributes ............................................... 48
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................................................. 54
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Overview ................................................................. 57
The Changing Media Landscape .................................................. 57
  Talkback Radio ........................................................................ 58
  Newspaper Readership ............................................................ 61
  The Impact on Newspapers of the Emergence of the Internet .......... 64
  Television .............................................................................. 65
The Development of new Technology and Platforms ......................... 68
  The Impact of Sky News .......................................................... 68
  The Emergence of New Technology ......................................... 70
  How Members of Federal Parliament Adopted the New Media ........ 75
Conclusion .............................................................................. 78

Chapter 4: The Research Methodology ........................................... 79
Chapter Overview ..................................................................... 79
The Methods Adopted ............................................................... 80
  Selecting Interview Candidates .............................................. 81
  Interview Timing .................................................................... 82
  One-on-One Semi-structured Interview Methodology ............... 82
Access to Political Actors .......................................................... 85
  Access to the Public Service and Informants ............................ 85
  Access Issues Faced by Academic Researchers ......................... 86
Analysis of Material .................................................................. 88
Conclusion .............................................................................. 89

Chapter 5: John Howard’s Approach to Communications and the Media ......................... 91
Chapter Overview ..................................................................... 91
Howard’s “Media Life” Routines: Living with the Media ................ 91
Mindsets and Messages .............................................................. 101
  Howard’s Communication Mindset and Skills ............................ 101
  The Prime Minister’s Skills in Communicating Government Policy ........................................... 102
  Delivering the Government’s Key Messages ................................ 105
  Howard’s Focus on Staying on Message ...................................... 107
  The Consistency of Language and Stance on Contentious Issues ............................................. 108
  The Supposed use of Plausible Deniability .................................. 111
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Media Relations with Media Proprietors and Journalists</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard’s Strategic Approach to Media Interviews</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard’s Relationship with the Parliamentary Press Gallery</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard’s Love of Radio and his Focus on his Media Image</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6: The Howard Government’s Coordination of their Political Messaging</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Overview</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Operation and Coordination Role Played by the Prime Minister’s Press Office</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Press Office Staffing Structure and Administrative Functions</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Press Office’s Co-ordination Roles</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Press Office’s Strategy in Controlling and Disseminating Political Messaging</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication Challenges Politicians Face</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 7: Changing Technologies and the Impact on Political Discourse</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Overview</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology: Its Impact on Politicians and Political Communication</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The 24-Hour News Cycle and the Changing Dynamic of Political Reporting</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard’s Approach to Emerging Technologies</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Growth of New Media Platforms</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard as the First Multimedia Prime Minister</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard’s Venture onto YouTube</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology and the Impact on Election Campaigns</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 8: The Howard Government’s Approach to Political Crises and the Challenges of 2007</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Overview</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communications Breakdowns and Cover-Ups</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specific Case Studies</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mick Keelty on Terrorism and Australia’s Involvement in Iraq</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Private Kovco Case</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Children Overboard Affair</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Crisis of 2007</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflections on What Went Wrong in 2007</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Overview</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard’s Personal Communication Style</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard’s Communication Strategies</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Interviews Conducted</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Appendix 1</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews Conducted</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Appendix 2</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annual Staff List of Prime Minister Howard’s Press Office 1996–2007</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Appendix 3</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Questions Asked</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Appendix 4</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chronology: The Howard Years: 1996–2007</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First Howard Term: 1996–1998</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second Howard Term: 1998–2001</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third Howard Term: 2001–2004</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fourth Howard Term: 2004–2007</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Appendix 5</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Howard’s Media Interviews: 1997–2007</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Appendix 6</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timeline of Technological Advances and Media Changes</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Appendix 7</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changes in Magazine and Newspaper Readership 1993–2003</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Appendix 8</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Appendix 9</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internet Usage in Australia 1995–2008</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Appendix 10</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Functions of Party Websites and Dates of Establishment</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Appendix 11</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politicians’ Adoption of New Media</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

The focus of this thesis is on the performance of Prime Minister John Howard as a communicator and the impact of technology on his government’s methods of communication during its four terms in office from March 1996 to November 2007. This thesis addresses four research questions:

1. What was Prime Minister Howard’s personal communication style, what strategies did he use to keep the Australian electorate informed, and how did political actors during this period view Howard’s style and performance?
2. How did the prime minister’s office approach the complexity of developing and coordinating its political communication during the Howard government’s tenure?
3. What impact did changing technologies have on the Howard government’s ability to communicate with the wider Australian electorate?
4. How did the Howard government handle communications when faced with “political crises”?

Eighty-six semi-structured one-on-one open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted with many of the key players of this political era, from Prime Minister Howard himself to many of his senior ministers, staffers, advisors, department heads, press gallery journalists, media commentators, lobbyists, and academics in order to obtain original material for this research. The Howard government was in power over a period of unprecedented technological change and the thesis discusses the way the reporting of politics changed as new mobile phone technology emerged; Sky News became a significant vehicle for political news dissemination, and the Internet emerged as a major communications vehicle. Despite his slow uptake of new media Howard can be understood to be Australia’s first multimedia prime minister. He understood the logic of this new medium and the 24/7 expectations of the new technological age; therefore, rather than embracing this new technology he engaged with it in a fashion that matched his traditional approach to media, one he had successfully established since entering politics some three decades earlier.
This research found John Howard arguably endured more intense media scrutiny than any of his predecessors, and he was the most “media active” political leader in Australia’s history. Howard lived in a “media saturated” environment, and was governed by the logic of the media, but worked with the media to drive the political agenda, incorporating his management of media issues into his hectic private and professional life. Howard viewed policy recommendations with a balance of what made sense in policy terms, and whether he would be able to explain it to the Australian people. Howard had a commanding memory, and an ability to articulate complex policy initiatives in simple terms. His use of talkback radio to talk directly to the Australian electorate, avoiding the “filters” of journalistic licence was a strategy Howard adopted throughout his prime ministership. He used this vehicle to ascertain the views of voters on government policies and initiatives, and also sought advice directly from a wide cross-section of people, including his family, advisors, fellow parliamentarians, the bureaucracy and other influential Australians. Howard faced many political challenges and fierce criticism for his stance on a number of social issues and his alleged stifling of free speech. In 2007, one of Howard’s most challenging years, the media and the public felt it was time for a change. Howard lost government on 24 November 2007.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides the rationale behind the development of the thesis and its contribution to the literature on political communication in Australia as it relates to the performance of Prime Minister Howard as the spokesperson for the government he led. The chapter also outlines the structure of the thesis and describes the process used to answer the research questions posed by this research. It introduces the methodologies used to interview the 86 people who contributed data for this research project. It looks at the evolution of political communications and the emergence of new technologies, and how historical processes shaped Howard’s approach to the operation of the prime minister’s office. Finally, it provides a snapshot of the highlights of the Howard government’s eleven and a half years in office.

Aims of the Study

The prime aim of this thesis is to examine how John Howard’s personal communication style shaped his communication with the Australian electorate. It also examines the changing technologies and media landscape of the period under study and the impact these developments had on the way the Prime Minister communicated. The research was aimed at establishing how the prime minister’s personal communication style impacted on his effectiveness in executing the government’s communications strategies. This study highlights Howard’s innovative approach to political communication, and adds another dimension to the broader field of political science and government communication. This is important, as it demonstrates how a prime minister’s own communications style and persona has a direct correlation to their own political success, and often to the success of the government they lead. This research thesis will also provide a base for the study of the political communications skills of future prime ministers, with Rudd, Gillard and Abbott’s communication attributes now being compared to those of John Howard’s.

The thesis also examines the way the prime minister’s office coordinated the communication process during the Howard government’s eleven and a half years in office. How did this
INTRODUCTION

careful control of government communications affect the messages the Australian public were receiving? Did this information reflect the true position as it existed at the time, or was information sanitised for public consumption to fit the government’s own political agenda? In doing so, this thesis highlights the tension between political control of information and accountability to parliament and, ultimately, to the citizens the government serves.

The observations of those 86 participants interviewed for this thesis are illuminating in the way they shine the spotlight on the critical importance of style and presentation as communications tools. John Howard is seen by many commentators, journalists, academics and participants as a highly competent media performer, with a sharp memory and an ability to articulate complex policy initiatives in a language that the wider electorate can understand. His use of radio as a means of speaking directly to the Australian public is well documented. Howard’s ability to sell a policy or his government’s position on an issue to the electorate was one of his strengths as a communicator, and he constantly weighed up the benefits of a policy proposal against his ability to explain it to constituents.

There were times when Howard’s communication strengths failed him, in particular in 2007 during his final year in office. This thesis illustrates the link between the persona of a leader and the way this translates into the ability to not only communicate effectively, but to professionally manage the machinery of government that in turn supports and articulates the Prime Minister’s political messages in a coordinated and disciplined manner.

The Thesis Rationale

There are few comprehensive assessments on how individual Australian prime ministers have developed their communication and media strategies and tailored their personal communication style to better converse with the wider Australian community. This thesis adds to the limited research on this topic by generating original findings from interviews with key political players during the Howard government (1996–2007). Its focus is on the role the press office, within the prime minister’s office, played in the development and implementation of media strategies and in the coordination of the government’s political messaging. These challenges were intensified by rapidly evolving media technologies and the ever-changing media landscape, which had an impact on the Howard government’s
INTRODUCTION

communication with constituents across the country. A study of this nature is critical, as the communication style of a leader has a profound impact on the electoral success of a government. The prime minister’s ability to communicate effectively and deal with the media is pivotal to selling complex policies and winning over Australian voters. Historical studies of this nature are vital for developing the relatively under-explored topic of prime ministerial communication in Australia, and it adds to the study of political communication and the subject of political science generally.

Eighty-six interviews were conducted with many of the major political insiders who shaped the Howard era. I interviewed former Prime Minister John Howard twice, once at the beginning of the project and then towards the end, to verify information I had received from interviewees and to explore his views further on a number of issues arising from the research undertaken. I also spoke to senior ministers in the Howard government, including Treasurer Peter Costello, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer, Defence Minister Brendan Nelson, and many others. Broadcasters interviewed included Neil Mitchell (3AW), Alan Jones (2UE/2GB), John Laws (2UE), Fran Kelly (ABC radio), ABC television hosts Kerry O’Brien, Barrie Cassidy and Chris Uhlmann, and press gallery identities Michelle Grattan and Paul Bongiorno. A full list of interviewees can be found in Appendix 1. The interviews conducted were semi-structured and free ranging. Some questions that were fundamental to the research were woven into most of the normally hour-long discussions; others were specific to particular interviewees. Eighty-two of the 86 interviews were recorded and consent forms signed which allowed full “on-the-record” use of the interview material. The other four interviewees provided valuable background information. The methodology used is outlined in detail in Chapter 4.

The intense media scrutiny of political parties, the microscopic dissection of comments and decisions of key players on the political stage, and the relentless pursuit of those embroiled in any form of scandal or indiscretion has placed immense pressure on those choosing politics as a career. This thesis examines the broader aspects of media management and political communication in Australia over the Howard years through a study of the Prime Minister’s approach to managing the enormous demands placed on him by the media. The expertise of the prime minister’s office staff was evident over the course of this eleven and a half year period; particularly in the way issues of national importance were managed and communicated to the electorate. How is it that particular governments are able to develop a
communications structure that allows information to flow from a variety of sources whilst maintaining a consistent and disciplined message? What role does a prime minister’s own communications style play in the success of a government’s media and communications strategy? These questions are explored in detail.

The growing importance attached to the management of the media is illustrated by the establishment of dedicated media units serving the government of the day, and by the appointment of experienced press secretaries who oversee the establishment of the press office within the prime minister’s office. The trend towards having these media units and press offices gained traction in the Whitlam era (1972–1975) and their sophistication and effectiveness has evolved ever since (see Tiernan, 2004). The importance of media management in the Howard years was evident as it became a highlight of the government’s leadership team meetings each morning of parliamentary sittings, and was an issue in which the Prime Minister would take a personal interest. From the 1980s, the media has become more competitive and political programs and stories more prominent, placing ever-increasing pressure on ministers to master their portfolios and for the necessity to have appropriate coordination of messaging and media appearances. This became crucial through times of political crisis and extremely challenging as technological changes rapidly increased the speed of news dissemination. Howard’s focus during his prime ministership was on understanding the need to: ‘always have a dialogue with the public’. The former prime minister confirmed this in his address to the National Press Club Canberra on 4 June 2014. In that address Howard (2014b) said:

You never presume that you have an elite capacity to say what's good for people. Constant dialogue with people is fundamentally important, and listening to people. I know I was accused of using talkback radio too much when I was prime minister. I did it for a very deliberate reason because it enabled me to get the views of not just the talkback interviewer … but I also got the views of people who rang up and talked to me and talked to them [the on-air interviewer].

Howard’s statement here underpins the basis of this thesis. How critical is a prime minister’s communications and media skills to communicating with the Australian electorate, and what skills are necessary to carry on the dialogue under the difficult circumstances governments face? This thesis is focused on an examination of these issues as they relate to the Howard government’s terms in office, from 2 March 1996 until 24 November 2007.
The Evolution of Political Communication

Ian Ward’s research (Ward, 1995, 2006) in mapping the structures of Australian government communication is a foundation from which to build a thesis that goes to the heart of effective political communication: what are the personal abilities a prime minister requires to articulate the messages that will resonate with the Australian people? The methods employed by Australian governments to disseminate their ‘messages’ to the wider Australian community have changed dramatically since Federation. Firstly, communication technology has changed since the 1980s with the advent of pay television, the rapid growth of the Internet and interactive sites—such as Facebook and Twitter—and the proliferation of news programs and political commentary on mainstream media. Secondly, the discipline exerted by the upper echelons of political parties over the comments politicians make publicly on a myriad of issues would appear to have tightened dramatically during the period of the Hawke, Keating and Howard governments’. During the course of the Howard government’s term in office there were many initiatives introduced by the prime minister’s press office, such as the utilisation of the Internet or enhancements to existing arrangements, such as media monitoring, that ensured the messages flowing from departments, ministers’ offices and MPs across the country were in line with the government’s policy, and correctly reflected the decisions made by Cabinet and subsequent statements made by ministers and the prime minister. The prime minister’s office played a key role in maintaining this discipline as many of the most dramatic and/or sensitive issues unfolded. Taking all of these factors into account, this project examined how the prime minister’s office managed and coordinated the government’s communication processes during the Howard government’s terms in power. The methodology used sought data for assessing what role a prime minister’s own communications style played in the success of the government’s media and communications strategy. A great deal of time was spent interviewing key players who worked under or for the Howard administrations, who could provide first-hand accounts of their experiences and observations. The rapid changes in technology are outlined in Chapter 3. This study entailed an analysis of two critical areas of government communication that are intertwined: how the Howard government was able to develop a communications structure that allowed information to flow to and from a variety of sources, whilst at the same time maintaining a consistent and disciplined message.
INTRODUCTION

The importance of communication skills and a prime minister’s media persona

The relationship between communication performance and electoral outcomes in the Howard years is also addressed in this research. John Howard won four elections, and his communications skills and political experience combined to shape these results. Howard was able to reduce each of the first three elections to a single issue: 1998 tax reform, 2001 border protection, and 2004 interest rates. This study demonstrates how Howard went to the election in 1998 on a platform to introduce a goods and services tax (GST), whilst at the same time providing generous tax cuts as compensation. Proposing the introduction of a GST cost former Liberal Leader John Hewson the 1993 election because he couldn’t explain the concept of a GST in simplistic terms. This is a pivotal example of the importance of well-refined communications skills when endeavouring to have a dialogue with the Australian electorate in order to win their support.

The 2001 election was fought over border protection when the MV Tampa rescued asylum seekers from a sinking Indonesian fishing vessel off Australian waters. Howard launched a strong and well articulated defence of his strict and non-compromising policies on border protection, using the media extensively to sell his view and vision for the security of the country. Labor Leader Kym Beazley was accused of ‘having no ticker’, a damming label that haunted him through until the election, and of “flip flopping” on border protection. It highlighted the importance electors placed on great communication skills and style, as Howard won the election based on his stance and tough approach on this issue.

In 2004 the election theme was “who can you trust to keep interest rates low”, Labor leader Mark Latham made a series of media gaffs, and his aggressive handshake with Prime Minister Howard during the campaign, coupled with his general media persona as an angry and somewhat bullying individual saw the Howard Government returned. This again highlighted the significance body language, media appeal and the correct pitch on political commentary have on voters perceptions. Howard’s demeanour and softer approach were a contrast to Latham’s, and this had a bearing on the election result.

In 2006 Labor leader Beazley had little media cut-through and a series of media blunders rendered him ineffective as a potential prime minister. This highlighted the importance of well honed communication skills as a prerequisite for success as the nation’s leader. Kevin
Rudd’s elevation to the leadership offering fresh ideas and a safe pair of hands provided the Australian electorate with an appealing alternative. Rudd’s impressive media performances and his youthfulness (compared to Howard) and willingness to engage with the electorate on social media and late night television entertainment programs saw Rudd’s communications style and media strategy work very effectively.

Rudd’s personal appeal, interview style, communication skills and age all had a bearing on the electorate’s view of Labor, and it positioned Howard and the Liberal government as tired and out of touch. Howard subsequently lost the 2007 election.

This research has highlighted a prime minister’s personality, oral communications skills and body language, as one of a number of key factors that determine electoral success.

The Evolution of the Prime Minister’s Office

To assess the performance of Howard’s office, and his personal communications style, it is appropriate to briefly examine the evolution of the prime minister’s office itself over previous administrations. Subsequent prime ministerial offices influenced how the Prime Minister engaged with the media, the way political messages were formulated, and often the effectiveness of the Prime Minister’s media appearances. John Howard adopted many of the structures established by his predecessors and he also introduced further enhancements. Thus, the evolution of the prime minister’s office helped shape Howard’s own approach to the media.

Lloyd (1988, p.153) states that ‘since the establishment of the press gallery in 1901, political journalists have used the staff of prime ministers and ministers as major sources’. Tiernan (2007, p.2) provides an analysis of prime ministerial staffing from Whitlam to Howard, suggesting ‘historically, the primary source of advice and support to Australian Prime Ministers was the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet’, however, this changed with the employment of trusted personal staffers in the office of the prime minister itself (see also Tiernan 2001, p. 17). This trend became more pronounced as each newly elected government enhanced their media management structures to meet the increasing level of political scrutiny, and to service a more demanding news media with experienced
INTRODUCTION

journalists and commentators analysing the activities of the government, and in particular, the performance of the Prime Minister. A brief examination of the evolution of the prime minister’s press office and the approach to media follows.

According to Rodgers (1972), Ben Chifley (1945–1949) did not have frequent dealings with Canberra journalists. By 1945, Lloyd (1992, p.115) suggested practices had ‘acquired a certain stability’ and prime ministers accepted the principal responsibility for the presentation of the federal government in the media and for the conduct of formal relations with the media. This tradition laid the foundation upon which much of today’s media control stems, including the way Howard set up his office, and the responsibilities he had as chief government spokesperson.

According to Lloyd (1992, p.118) Robert Menzies (1949–1966) 'exercised total control over the release and presentation of government news'. Lloyd suggested that until 1992 no subsequent prime minister approached Menzies’ command of the media. The role of the press secretary has continued to develop over time in response to changes in the media, notably the development of television, and more recently the proliferation of new media outlets and the demands of a 24-hour news cycle (see also Tiernan, 2004, p.43). Ester (2009) also noted Menzies’ use of radio, a feature of Prime Minister Howard’s term in office. Richardson (2002, p.176) noted that ‘from the opposition benches and to assist in the foundation of the Liberal Party, Menzies made 105 national broadcasts between January 1942 and April 1944’. Despite the increased use of media during the Menzies’ era, Paul Kelly (2006 (b), p.9) points out that compared to the media scrutiny Howard contended with, ‘nothing could be more removed from the distant administration of Howard’s hero, R. G. Menzies, of whom it could be said the people knew he was there but rarely saw him’. Howard (2014a) felt Menzies was ‘the finest political orator I have ever heard. He was blessed with a rich, strong voice; the accent was educated but in no way affected or pretentious. It was distinctively Australian. When speaking, his timing was impeccable’. Howard’s observations are relevant here as they may well have shaped his own approach to political communication.

In the 1960s Gough Whitlam’s presence on the political scene in Australia coincided with the dawn of modern politics: using television to its full potential, professional advertising, detailed market research, and highly professionalised campaigning. According to Bramston (2013), these tools were instrumental to Whitlam’s success as he sought the prime
INTRODUCTION

ministership (1972–1975). Whitlam was a commanding leader and according to Briot and Lloyd (1974) the autonomy and influence of the press secretary declined with the development of the ministerial office during this time, with press secretaries left to focus on journalistic rather than advisory duties. Whitlam held weekly press conferences in Canberra. His willingness to engage more openly with the media was noted by Ester (2009, p.63), suggesting Whitlam’s approach ‘exceeded the freer media environment ushered in by Menzies’ successors Harold Holt and John Gorton’. Whitlam’s loss in 1975 can be partly attributed to issues of communication. Oakes (1976, p.24) said ‘a reform party needs to convince a majority of the people that the reforms it proposes are desirable, and a reform government has to keep them convinced’. John Howard knew this well, and his ability to read the political wind and adjust his rhetoric to reach the “average Australian” was critical to his electoral success, albeit Howard’s instincts deserted him somewhat during his last year in office. Howard's approach to media and communications mirrored components of these earlier prime ministers’ strategies, and as the prime minister’s office evolved so Howard benefited from the experience of his predecessors.

Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (1975–1983) decided, according to Forward (1977, p.164), that ‘Press Secretaries were an important addition to the most senior members of Government, and as such Fraser maintained staffing levels within his office (despite cutbacks in other areas) and Press Secretaries were limited to the Prime Minister’s Office and the top six ministers’. Fraser installed a press office within the prime minister’s office, which was the start of what would become standard practice for all future leaders, certainly one Howard followed. Journalists were reportedly frustrated by the Prime Minister’s efforts to maintain strict control over the government’s media and public relations (see for example (Parker, 1990; Weller, 1989, p.185-194). Buckley (1991, p.188) examined Fraser’s Treasurer Phillip Lynch, noting he had issues with television appearances: ‘television never let him explain. It was always cutting him off. The camera told lies’. This observation about Lynch highlights the importance of political actors mastering the electronic media, in light of Howard’s later discomfort working within the new programming formats that emerged on television. It reflects on the mediatisation of politics where politicians are often driven by the logic of the media: the political elite having to match their media persona and rhetoric to meet the expectations of media programming and audiences, highlighting the growing trend of the mediatisation of politics (covered in detail in Chapter 2). (See Altheide & Snow, 1979; Stromback, 2008).
Bob Hawke (1983–1991) was renowned for his popularity amongst media professionals, so much so that Derek Parker’s (1990) account of the press gallery during the Hawke years is constructed as a love story. Bateman (2004), addressing the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference commented on Hawke's charisma: ‘Once he made the transition to Parliamentary politics, Hawke (with the help of ALP strategists), transformed from a popular larrikin into a more mature and consensus-seeking politician, but the focus remained on his close identification with the ordinary Australian’. This “ordinary bloke” image was a trait Howard would later endeavour to develop. According to Buckley (2003, p.31), ‘the love affair was distorted and elevated beyond proportion by the media, to the annoyance of his political advisors’. Lloyd (1992, p.125) said Hawke ‘used saturation television and radio exposure to exploit major policy announcements’. This is a strategy Howard would continue, particularly through the use of talkback radio. Anson (1991, p.129) noted in relation to Hawke and others: ‘success in the medium comes not from being yourself (ask Bill Hayden or John Howard), but from convincingly faking yourself within its parameters’. This again relates to a political actor having to perform within the logic of the media. A key element of Labor’s media strategy, during Hawke’s prime ministership, according to Parker (1990, p.43), was centralised control of media relations within a small leadership group. Considerable energy was directed towards cultivating relationships with press gallery journalists. According to Terrill (2000, p.175), Labor strategy responded to the pressures on journalists, by providing them with services including transcripts of interviews and other government information. In addition, they developed a searchable database of newspaper clippings, and government and opposition statements. Howard continued these initiatives as prime minister. Ward (2003, p.31) states both Labor and Coalition governments alike have supplemented those media minders appointed to ministers’ offices by establishing ‘media units for gathering or disseminating information’.

INTRODUCTION

Time, only to be found up in the press gallery, going from office to office, making sure his points were understood’. Keating, according to Ester (2009, p.71-72), used the prime minister’s courtyard at Parliament House for media events, a venue that has become very popular with prime ministers ever since. It was common knowledge within the Canberra Press Gallery that if a journalist upset the prime minister he or she would often be on the receiving end of a barrage of abuse. Steketee (2001) reported that Keating engaged in frequent disciplining of the media, reportedly through abusive telephone calls and editorial complaints, something Grattan (1998 (b), p.43) also noted. This thesis will demonstrate that Howard, on the contrary, was not someone with a reputation for being either abusive or rude to journalists; rather, he understood the importance of relationships with the media to a politician and especially to the way the press would treat a prime minister.

When John Howard became prime minister in March 1996 he kept the best structures of the prime minister’s office that had evolved over the past 50 years, including the functional divisions that characterised the prime minister’s office of Fraser and Hawke. According to Tiernan, Howard’s media unit was ‘the largest ever assembled by an Australian Prime Minister’. Tiernan claimed Paul Keating had on average three media staff. Howard had between six and eight press office staff (see Appendix 2). Tiernan (2004, p.30) also states ‘Howard is arguably the most media-active Prime Minister Australia has ever seen’. Perhaps due to Howard's understanding of the importance of the media he surrounded himself with a highly experienced media team including Chief of Staff in Arthur Sinodinos. Another initiative of Howard's, according to Pearson and Patching (2008, p.20), was the Howard government's creation of 'its own version of the party-political propaganda machine by appointing additional media advisors to the staff of most junior ministers in each state’. This new workforce expanded the government’s monitoring mechanisms. Thus, Howard’s office was an integral part of his media relationships and assisted with the coordination of his government’s media activities, and finally Howard’s own media persona. Paul Kelly (2006 (b), p.16) noted ‘winning each 24-hour political cycle demands a flexible yet focused media message and a rapid response. Howard’s office and the apparatus of government are geared to these political demands’.

From this synopsis we find that Howard adopted many of the strategies and structures established by his predecessors. This evolution formed the foundation of what became a very professional and efficient prime ministerial office, enhanced by Howard's selection of qualified and trusted
advisors. From these beginnings the process of then establishing the ground rules for engagement with the media, for the coordination of political messaging, for the development of relationships and the formulation of the approach the government would take to communicating with the Australian electorate began. Further background to the thesis is provided through the following snapshot of the political highlights of Howard's term in office and the issues that often galvanised the nation and dominated media commentary over eleven and a half years.

The Howard Years: 1996–2007

The following is a brief examination of the highlights of the Howard years, covering major events that shaped the government’s political agenda from 1996 to 2007, sourced from *The Howard Years*, ABC television, 2008. From this summary we also see the way the prime minister’s office coordinated government-wide responses to major events that occurred during the Howard government, this role emerging through the evolution of the office itself over the previous 20 years, as discussed in the previous section. The Howard Coalition Government won four successive elections, spanning a period of great change within Australia and amid events that shattered the confidence of the western world, particularly the terrorist attack on the United States World Trade Centre in 2001 and the bombings in Bali that claimed Australian lives in 2002 and 2005. A detailed chronology of Howard’s period in government sourced from *The Howard Years* (2008) is included as Appendix 4.

**The First Term:** On 2 March 1996 the Liberal Coalition, under John Howard, won a decisive 45-seat majority in parliament to take government after 13 years in opposition. In 1996, the year was punctuated with a massacre at Port Arthur, where gunman Martin Bryant shot 35 people, an action that led to the controversial introduction of uniform national gun laws. Also that year, Howard commenced his push to reform the Australian waterfront, and the Wik native title ruling was handed down by the High Court that found the grant of a pastoral lease does not confer exclusive possession, and native title therefore continues to coexist with it. The government’s first term saw a number of ministers sacked under Howard’s strict Ministerial Code of Conduct, and Pauline Hanson launched her One Nation Party in April 1997. The Asian Economic Crisis hit on 23 October 1997 and wiped $10 billion off the Australian share market. In 1998 reform burst onto the Melbourne waterfront on the evening of 7 April when non-unionists were brought in to replace Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members.
INTRODUCTION

The Second Term: John Howard won a second term at the 3 October 1998 election; however, his majority was reduced to 12 seats after it suffered a 4.6 per cent swing against it. In May, Howard secured the safe passage of the government’s Tax Package, including the GST, and on 12 September 1999 Indonesia accepted a multinational peacekeeping force in East Timor where Australia committed 4,500 troops, and entered and occupied Dili on 20 September. On Saturday 6 November 1999 Australians voted in a referendum to alter the Constitution to establish the Commonwealth of Australia as a republic, with the Queen and Governor-General being replaced by a President appointed by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Commonwealth Parliament. This referendum saw a 55 per cent vote against, and a 45 per cent vote for a republic: thus the status quo remained. In 2000, the ‘Peoples Walk For (Indigenous) Reconciliation’ across the Sydney Harbour Bridge attracted 250,000 people.

During this second term Howard also raised the issue of his retirement, suggesting he could consider retiring when he was 63 or 64 causing leadership speculation to again become a major media issue for the party. In 2001, the Tampa issue erupted on 24 August, when 438 Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers were rescued from a sinking Indonesian fishing vessel by a Norwegian container ship, MV Tampa, in international waters 140 km north of Christmas Island. John Howard announced Australia would not accept these asylum seekers. The controversial Operation Relex then began on 3 September 2001 with Royal Australian Naval vessels able to intercept and force asylum seeker boats back to their port of origin and the Pacific Solution then came into force. John Howard met US President George W Bush for the first time in Washington on 10 September 2001, the following day Al-Qaeda attacked New York’s twin towers, and the Pentagon in Washington. Later that week Australia's second biggest carrier, Ansett Airlines, collapsed on 14 September. The “Children Overboard” controversy began on 7 October 2001, with a dispute arising over the existence of photographs showing children of asylum seekers being thrown overboard after an Australian navy vessel intercepted it 190 km north of Christmas Island the day before. Howard committed Australian troops to Afghanistan in October 2001, and on 10 November 2001 John Howard won an historic third term with a 14-seat majority and a 2.01 per cent two party preferred swing to the government.
The Third Term: In February 2002 it was revealed there was no evidence that children had been thrown overboard from a vessel in waters off Christmas Island on 6 October 2001. Australians David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib were both suspected of al-Qaeda links, with Habib accused of being an "enemy combatant" and Hicks charged with "providing material support for terrorism", both being detained by the United States in Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Terror struck Australians when 88 of their countrymen were killed after bombs were detonated in Bali nightclubs on 12 October 2002. On 17 March 2003 Cabinet authorised Australian military action as part of the International Coalition in Iraq, and on 19 March 2003 the war in Iraq began, with 2,000 Australian naval, air and ground fighters sent to war. Governor-General Peter Hollingworth resigned on 26 May 2003 after months of attacks and scandal regarding his knowledge of sexual abuse in the Anglican Church, and in July Australia sent a 2,000 strong military and police contingent to take control of the Solomon Islands after years of violence and lawlessness.

The first quarter of 2004 saw Labor, under new leader Mark Latham, increase in popularity and the 9 March Newspoll put Latham in front as preferred leader over John Howard. In July the government was exonerated of political interference in intelligence assessments regarding the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), particularly relating to the Iraq war. On 9 October the Howard government was returned with an increased majority in the House of Representatives, and the first working majority for a government in the Senate for 24 years.

The Fourth Term: In February 2005 Kim Beazley took over as Opposition Labor Leader and in the same month it was revealed Australian citizen Cornelia Rau had been held unlawfully in an immigration detention centre for almost 11 months. Some Liberal backbenchers succeeded in forcing changes to the government’s mandatory detention policy for asylum seekers on 17 June, guaranteeing parents and children would be released from immigration detention and temporary protection visas would be fast-tracked. WorkChoices was introduced into parliament on 26 May, a major initiative to reform Australia’s industrial relations system, and in July John Howard still refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. Terror hit Bali again on 1 October when 20 people were killed, including four Australians, following a coordinated terrorist attack on tourist restaurants on the island which sparked the introduction of wide-ranging anti-terrorism measures, the Anti-terrorism Bill 2005 was introduced to parliament on 3 November. Also that month, the Cole Inquiry
revealed the Australian Wheat Board was accused of paying $300 million in kickbacks to Saddam Hussein’s government in order to sell Australian wheat to Iraq through the UN Oil-for-Food Programme.

On 2 March 2006 John Howard celebrated the tenth anniversary of his prime ministership and on 27 March, WorkChoices laws came into effect across Australia. The first Australian defence personnel casualty in Iraq occurred on 27 April when Private Jacob Kovco died after accidentally discharging his gun, but this reason was later changed to skylarking with his pistol. Leadership issues emerged in July after Minister Ian McLachlan declared Howard had committed to handover the leadership to Peter Costello after serving two terms as prime minister. Kevin Rudd was elected Leader of the Labor Opposition on 4 December.

2007 commenced with John Howard announcing a ministerial reshuffle on 23 January and two days later Howard unveiled a $10 billion water plan to take control of Australia’s water resources. On 2 March Howard celebrated 11 years in power, and became the second-longest serving Australian Prime Minister after Sir Robert Menzies. On 26 March David Hicks pleaded guilty in the US to a charge of providing material support for terrorism, and the following month he was returned to Australia to serve the remaining nine months of a suspended seven-year sentence in Adelaide’s Yatala jail, to be released after the 2007 federal election. On 21 June the Prime Minister declared child abuse and domestic violence in Indigenous communities a “national emergency” and announced a Northern Territory Intervention Package to deal with the crisis. In a further national security incident Doctor Mohamed Haneef was arrested at Brisbane airport on 2 July 2007 on suspicion of being involved in the Glasgow International Airport attack. Haneef's treatment at the hands of authorities caused controversy for the Howard government for the remainder of its term.

On 14 October the Prime Minister called a federal election for 24 November 2007 where Howard was defeated by Kevin Rudd with a swing against the Coalition of 5.7 per cent. John Howard became only the second prime minister in Australia’s history to lose his seat in an election.
The Research Questions

This thesis examines the communication styles and strategies of Prime Minister John Howard, a critical factor in the government’s success in managing so many of the critical issues and events highlighted above.

This thesis addresses the following questions:

1. What was Prime Minister Howard’s personal communication style, what strategies did he use to keep the Australian electorate informed, and how did political actors during this period view Howard’s style and performance?
2. How did the prime minister’s office approach the complexity of developing and coordinating its political communication during the Howard government’s tenure?
3. What impact did changing technologies have on the Howard government’s ability to communicate with the wider Australian electorate?
4. How did the Howard government handle communications when faced with “political crises”?

This thesis sits within a political communication research paradigm. In an interview for this thesis, author, media commentator and academic Peter Van Onselen, said the lack of information on this subject did not surprise him as ‘one of the strengths of Howard’s media approach was that they didn’t hire people who really talked about it or wrote about it’. However, a great many informants were willing to discuss Howard’s communication style and strategies for the purpose of this thesis. The interviews conducted concentrated on Prime Minister Howard’s media and communications skills, the attributes he brought to the role, the relationship between the interviewee and the press office, and how the press office’s operation impacted on the interviewee or their department or organisation.

Tiernan's (2004) thesis traces the development of the ministerial staffing system in the Australian Commonwealth Government from 1972 to 2004. Tiernan’s efforts to enlist the support of the government were mostly unsuccessful. Her request for cooperation and access to data was rejected by the Special Minister of State, none of the interviews conducted for the study were with a current minister or member of the current staff, and letters and follow-up emails seeking cooperation received neither acknowledgement nor reply. Despite this lack of direct access, Tiernan's observations on the Howard government's handling of the media and the operation of the press office within the prime minister's office were helpful in providing valuable background material for this thesis. Tiernan's research on Howard's administration of government has added considerable weight to the body of research undertaken as part of my PhD.

Also of particular value was Helen Ester’s thesis (2009) that examines the impact of the Howard government’s media management strategies on the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery (FPPG) and its capacity to fulfil the quasi-institutional fourth estate role of independent oversight of the parliament and the executive government. Ester looked at the Howard government’s media strategies, its relationship with the FPPG, the impact of technology on the reporting of political news, and how previous prime ministers had developed relationships with the media. While both Tiernan and Ester examined the impact the communication style of a prime minister has on the effectiveness of a government to communicate its messages to Australian voters, this thesis adds significantly to their work through the use of original material from the 86 interviews conducted. Where other studies have examined the mechanisms used by political actors to reach their constituents, few have focused attention on the importance of the ability to articulate complex issues in a simple fashion, or the importance of connecting with voters through a particular communications style and approach, that will resonate with the wider Australian community. This ability is undersold and misunderstood, and this research thesis makes a unique contribution by revealing its importance. Communication effectiveness has an impact on a government’s credibility and the public’s perception of its competency. A prime minister’s skills at communicating his or her own party’s political agenda also have an impact ultimately on the government’s electoral success.

The research undertaken for this thesis also builds on the body of academic works by political studies academics, including Ward (1995) and Craig (2004). Craig (2004, p.79) makes the point that ‘the [physical] remoteness of politicians from the public has grown to such an extent that management of the communication process is now an integral part of everyday politics’. This
thesis examines how the Howard government handled the challenge Craig mentions. Ward (1995, p.20) notes ‘the practice of politics is always fraught with potential danger because the mediated nature of the public realm opens up such political behaviour to scrutiny’. Ward’s observation is highly relevant to this thesis, and the research outlines the intense scrutiny the Howard government faced by an increasingly invasive media, and the communication strategies the Prime Minister used to handle the multitude of complex issues he faced.

This thesis draws on the emerging theory of mediatisation to understand the relationships between changes in media on one hand, and changes in politics on the other. Mediatisation may be one way of explaining that media expertise is more important than ever to political success. According to Mazzoleni and Shultz (1999, p.247) “mediatisation” refers to ‘political institutions [being] increasingly … dependent on and shaped by mass media but nevertheless remain in control of political processes and functions’. Hajer (2009, p.9) suggests political leaders ‘must be performers in order to be persuasive in our mediatised environment’. He also states the mediatised age has ‘reordered the political landscape’. Moreover, in the age of mediatisation, ‘new actors get easy access to the stage’. Mediatisation theory is relevant to the work undertaken in this thesis and to the findings from the interviews conducted with key political players of the Howard era. Politicians are required to be increasingly mindful of the importance of their communication style and their media persona in order to engage effectively with voters. The mediatisation of politics is explored more fully in Chapter 2, but it is noteworthy that the research confirmed Prime Minister Howard’s awareness of his role as an actor on the political stage, and his understanding of the media’s expectations of politicians in an increasingly media saturated environment. Chapter 3 explores the changing technologies and media platforms emerging during the Howard years. Social media only began to impact on political communication as the Howard prime ministership came to an end.

Journalism studies provide another important foundation for the thesis. Pearson and Patching (2008, p.2) identified and mapped key themes within the research to date in the field of government media relations (sometimes pejoratively known as ‘spin’) for the benefit of fellow researchers. They looked at major studies of government media relations, the role of government media relations, media relations and communications theory, definitional material, government policy in controlling media, politicians’ techniques and examples, techniques for elections and for television, and the use of new media.
The Thesis Structure

In addition to this introduction this thesis includes the following chapters:

Chapter 2: Literature Review: Academic Literature Focused on the Communication of Political Dialogue
The study of political communication is used to establish the framework upon which John Howard’s performance as a communicator can be analysed. The literature highlights research identifying the increasing speed of the news cycle, and the emergence of new media technologies, and examines how the prime minister, and politicians generally, dealt with these emerging social media platforms. It also defines the role of media advisors, the issues of free speech and the implications of speaking out for the public service. The logic of the media and the mediatisation of politics are explored, and how politicians, as actors on the political stage, endeavour to set the political agenda. The literature allows a greater understanding of the importance of communication with the electorate to the success of a political party and ultimately to the image and success of a prime minister.

The changes in technology over the eleven and a half years of the Howard government were dramatic, and fundamentally changed the conduct of politics. The way politics was reported as new online platforms emerged, including the launch of Sky News, is the focus of this chapter. The emergence of the Internet and its impact on mainstream media and consumer viewing, reading and listening habits is highlighted. It also explores how the electorate began to use the Internet to source political information, how politicians used this new technology to their advantage to reach their constituents, and the role the new online websites played during election campaigns.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology
This chapter explains how research for this thesis was undertaken. Eighty-six interviews were conducted with leading Australian political and government figures, ministerial staffers and advisors, journalists and media commentators, public servants and academics. It details the approach to these semi-structured interviews and how this material was analysed. Interview analysis was supported by documentary sources from the Parliament House Library, Hansard,
INTRODUCTION

Senate Inquiries, academic studies, and other books, journals and academic literature that explored the relationship between government and the media. The challenges faced by researchers gaining access to public servants are also examined.

Chapter 5: John Howard’s Approach to Communications and the Media
This chapter examines the first of four chapters analysing the material from the 86 interviews undertaken. This chapter examines the first question related to the focus of this thesis: what was Prime Minister Howard’s personal communication style and the skills he used to keep Australian constituents informed, and how did political actors during this period view Howard’s style and performance? The mindset of John Howard as a communicator is examined, and how he saw communication with the electorate as pivotal to his government’s success in selling his policies and reform agenda. Its looks at the way Howard’s media messages were crafted and how he coped living in a “media saturated” environment. The Prime Minister’s relationship with journalists, commentators and the proprietors of Australia’s leading media entities is also covered. It looks at Howard’s views on various media platforms and the challenges of adapting to the changes in the media environment over the Coalition’s eleven and a half years in government.

Chapter 6: The Howard Government’s Coordination of their Political Messaging
This chapter concentrates on the second of the four thesis questions: how did the Howard government approach the complexity of coordinating their political messages across every level of their administration during their term in office? The staffing of the press office and the logistics of how the office ran is canvassed, as is the role Press Secretary Tony O’Leary played in coordinating the communication between press secretaries across government along with the coordination role played by ministerial staff. This coordination encompassed not only the scheduling of media appearances, but the messages the government wished to impart on a daily basis. The development of the government’s media strategies is also explored, along with the development of key messages and the position the Coalition’s spokespeople would take in handling the media “interrogation” they faced on a daily basis, with these matters often driven by the leadership group. Finally, the question of who sets the media agenda, politicians or the media, is canvassed.
Chapter 7: Changing Technologies and the Impact on Political Discourse
This chapter’s focus is on the third question posed as part of this thesis: what impact did changing technologies have on John Howard’s ability to communicate with the wider Australian electorate? It explores the emergence of new technologies that changed the face and pace of political discourse. It examines the new technological platforms that changed the media landscape, the increasing speed of the 24-hour news cycle, and how Howard ventured into YouTube to announce new policy initiatives. The very nature of political reporting has been influenced by these technological developments and it explains how this in turn has changed the way election campaigning has been conducted and reported.

Chapter 8: The Howard Government’s Approach to Political Crises and the Challenges of 2007
This chapter focuses on the final question this thesis poses: how did the Howard government handle communications when faced with political crises? It examines a number of contentious issues that tested the government’s media and communications skills. Three specific case studies are explored: Police Commissioner Mick Keelty’s comments on Australia’s involvement in Iraq, the death of Private Kovco in Iraq, the Children Overboard Affair, and how communication surrounding these issues was handled. The final section is devoted to “the crisis” of 2007, the year the Howard government’s reign in office ended, and the observations of many of the key political players on the government’s communications strategy and what went wrong.

Chapter 9: Conclusions
This draws together the main findings of previous academic research and “on-the-record” observations from the extensive interviews conducted for this thesis. It provides a synopsis of the conclusions flowing from the research into the Coalition government’s media performance and Prime Minister Howard’s communications skills. It canvasses the findings on John Howard’s approach to media management across government, the role of media advisors and the impact of new technology on government communication. It concludes with comments on 2007, the final year in the life of the Howard government.
Chapter 2: Literature Review: Academic Literature
Focused on Political Communication

Chapter Overview

Previous research and commentary on political communication establishes the framework upon which John Howard’s performance as a communicator can be analysed. The review of relevant literature is structured around the bodies of literature that inform the analysis of the interview material. It first reviews relevant traditions in the field of political communication research. The chapter then identifies literature from leadership studies, the importance of imagery and symbolism, political marketing, the impact of changing technologies and new media platforms. This section highlights the increasing speed of the news cycle, the emergence of new media technologies and examines how political leaders dealt with emerging social media platforms. It identifies and synthesises pertinent literature concerning the role of media advisors and issues of freedom of speech in Australia’s public service. The chapter explores the tensions between politicians’ aims to set the political agenda and the increasingly mediatised nature of politics, whereby politicians have lost their autonomy and follow the logic of the media. It explores the significance of crafting and managing messages, and the background literature informing subsequent chapters’ analysis of Howard’s communication attributes and engagement with the media. The literature underlines the importance of communication with the electorate to the success of a political party and ultimately to the image and success of a prime minister.

Traditions in Political Communication Research

There has been a plethora of literature produced on political communication over the last century. Lippmann (1922) recognised ‘that public opinion was a constructed, manufactured thing, which could be shaped and manipulated by those with an interest in doing so’. To that end he noted the rise of a new professional class of “publicists”, or “press agents”, standing between political organisations and media institutions, whose job it was to ‘influence press coverage of their clients, and thus, they hoped, public opinion’. Political communication studies have developed in the United States, Britain and Europe to research the relationship
LITERATURE REVIEW: ACADEMIC LITERATURE FOCUSED ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

between the media and politics (Cook, 1998; McNair, 2011). The key tradition that informs this study relates to the relationship between the news media and political leaders. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995, p.3) suggested ‘over the past quarter century, the media have gradually moved from the role of reporting on and about politics, “from the outside” as it were, to that of being an active participant in, shaping influence upon, indeed an integral part of, the political process’. The research for this thesis explains the way in which journalists and the media were in fact active participants in the political process during the Howard years.

In the Australian context, historical political studies research has critiqued the relations between politicians and the media. Henry Mayer’s (1964) seminal text looked briefly at the relationship between the media and members of parliament, while Tiffen’s (1989) News and Power, focussed on how news is produced and the strategies politicians used in an endeavour to influence this process. Philip Bell, Kathe Boehringer and Stephen Crofts (1982) “Programmed Politics” examined the relationships between television news content and Australian politics. Academic papers by Ester (2009) and Tiernan (2004), examined the functioning of the parliamentary press gallery, ministerial staffing, the news cycle and the relationship between the news media and politicians. The Australian prime minister’s relationship with the fourth estate is covered by (Lloyd, 1980; Van Onselen & Senior, 2008; Ward, 1995; Young, 2007). Schultz (1998) wrote of the growing sophistication of information management through the use of public relations companies that had the potential to distort and corrupt the accuracy of government information. Ward (2003) reviews the use of press and public relations professionals by governments to promote their policies and outmanoeuvre their opponents. Beyond academic studies, this thesis is informed by the insights and commentary of books by a number of high profile journalists including Kingston (1999); Savva (2010); Simons (1999).

Chapter One reviewed the development of Australian prime ministerial communication. Lloyd (1980, p.104) addressed the wartime prime ministership of John Curtin and his attention to detail and tight control over the messages he imparted to the media. He said ‘Curtin filtered an immense amount of confidential information about the conduct of the war to these journalists, and this in turn was conveyed to newspaper officers, not for publication but so that senior management and editors could interpret the war in an accurate context’. Lloyd (1992, p115) provided a useful summary of practices that by 1945 had ‘acquired a certain stability’, including the fact that prime ministers accepted the principal responsibility
for the presentation of the federal government in the media, and for the conduct of formal
relations with the media. This was certainly a tradition that Howard followed, particularly
when deploying Australian troops overseas, and following the terror attacks in Bali in 2002
and 2005. Howard took total responsibility for the government’s public response to these
issues and calamities, providing strong leadership and distilling in the wider community a
sense of calm and control during these turbulent times.

In his examination of the Menzies era, Richardson (2002, p.176) noted that ‘from the
opposition benches and to assist in the foundation of the Liberal Party, Menzies made 105
national broadcasts between January 1942 and April 1944, and in 1943 published a book
based on transcripts from those broadcasts’ (see Menzies 1943). He noted that Menzies was
‘an infamously prolific home movie-maker and honed a suite of audio-visual skills from
cinema news broadcasts’. Richardson identified an important issue in political
communication – the capacity for political leaders to adapt to changing media technologies -
when he noted that Menzies was therefore more than ready for the onset of television in 1956.
Davis and Weller (1992) also cover this period in Australia’s political history.

This thesis demonstrates the strong correlation between the communication skills and public
persona of the Prime Minister and electoral success. Howard, a great admirer of Menzies,
would make it a priority in his early political life, to court the media and develop personal
relationships with journalists and media operators. Howard knew, as Menzies did, of the
importance of the media in shaping public opinion, and ultimately the role the media plays in
the success of a politician’s career.

**Political Communication and Howard’s Leadership Qualities**

Leadership is one critically important factor in the success of a prime minister’s
communication. Hackman and Johnson states (2009, p.2) ‘followers prosper under effective
leaders and suffer under ineffective leaders whatever the context: government, corporation,
church or synagogue.’ Hackman and Johnson (2009, p.2) also noted that ‘leadership is best
understood from a communications standpoint’. Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) felt ‘effective
leaders use language as their most tangible tool for achieving desired outcomes’. We have
seen Australian prime ministers use articulate and eloquent language to communicate with the
wider electorate (Glover (2011). Memorable speeches have stirred the nation, such as Prime
Minister Keating’s eulogy delivered on 11 November 1993 at the entombing of the Unknown Australian Soldier at the Australian War Memorial. However Bennett and Iyengar (2008, p.712) noted, in day-to-day political dialogue ‘the growing distrust of official communication, declining confidence in the political leaders who rely on managed public performances, and the widening disconnect between citizens and government’. Howard’s strategy of utilising talkback radio to speak directly to the Australian electorate broke down the perception of a Prime Minister hiding behind “official communication” channels, and helped bridge any disconnect between voters and the Howard government.

In parliamentary systems, according to McAllister (2007, p.3), ‘… leaders are more likely to be evaluated on their non-political, personal qualities’. McAllister refers to the impact of televised leaders’ election debates and the way television concentrates on the persona and style of the political leaders and the way in which it uses those images to frame political issues and events. Howard did not perform well in those election debates, and he was very conscious of television’s ability to shape a politician’s image. Dryenfurth (2007, p.212) suggested ‘Howard’s decade long electoral success owes as much to his rhetorical hegemony upon “Australian values”, national identity and engagement with popular culture, as to political strategy and luck’. According to Johnson (2007, p197) ‘Howard’s views on national identity have long included an attempt to restore the central role of the Anglo-Celtic heritage in Australian identity’.

McAllister (2007, p. 8) refers to “political priming”, the process by which leaders are evaluated by voters, based on a leader’s performance on the issues that are considered to be of importance to voters. He also states that ‘there is little doubt that the presence of the visual images and non-verbal cues conveyed by television has significant effects on how voters evaluate candidates … and voters will rely more heavily on the appeal of the personalities of the leaders in order to decide their vote’.

Warhurst (2007a) compiled a comprehensive collection of papers, focusing on domestic politics examining ‘a decade of Australian Government and politics from 1996–2006 under the Prime Ministership of John Howard’. The articles on the Howard years summed up ‘in the eyes of a number of contributors to this volume, although certainly not all, the personal and corporate style of the Howard government’. Howard, as Australia’s leader and the
government’s chief spokesperson, dominated the political landscape for eleven and a half years, with his views on issues impacting on the country as well known as were his conservative values. Dyrenfurth (2007, p.217) noted:

Holding values … that seemingly guaranteed the future promise of upward social mobility in Howard’s schema … followed the liberal tradition encapsulated by leaders such as Alfred Deakin and Menzies, which disclaims ongoing divisions, such as class, by shrouding issues of equity in the language of homogenous national values.

A defining moment in Howard’s leadership was his response to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon whilst Howard was in Washington. Debats, McDonald and Williams (2007, p.239) noted that ‘surrounded by acute anxiety and uncertainty, Howard’s modest, concerned, but focused attitude impressed observers’. Leadership attributes come to the fore in crisis situations and Howard’s handling of this tragic situation whilst in the United States and on his return to Australia highlighted Howard’s qualities as a leader. According to Debats, McDonald and Williams (2007, p.240):

Howard’s words were well chosen and that his obvious feelings “shaped the whole character of Australia’s official response to those events. It set the tone, much of which has followed in policy terms” … Howard acted decisively to advance a longstanding policy; this is, reinvigorating the relationship with the United States. New light, we also believe, is shed on Howard’s leadership attributes… Howard was able to act on his convictions and values, thus revealing aspects of his political personality.

Howard’s convictions, according to Debats, McDonald and Williams (2007, p.249), his policies and style have inspired deep divisions but he has become widely regarded as one of Australia’s most successful prime ministers:

It seems to us to be more than coincidental that the attributes that Howard displayed in the chaos and confusion of 11–12 September 2001 illustrate the characteristic that Greenstein convincingly argues is most vital in eliciting executive success; that is, emotional intelligence.

A prime minister’s success in office can be attributed to many things, however leadership abilities are judged not only by actions, but by how a leader communicates their feelings and intentions. Howard had the ability to persuade and motivate, and to console and calm the nation, and show passion and empathy in times when Australia and the world faced enormous calamities and almost unbearable atrocities.
The Importance of Imagery and Symbolism to a Leader

Communication, according to Hackman and Johnson (2009, p. 6), ‘is based on the transfer of symbols, which allows individuals to create meaning. Leaders make conscious use of symbols to reach their goals’. Stromback (2008, p. 228) contends there are ‘perceptions that the authenticity and realities of politics and public life are sacrificed increasingly for the demands of the media: Politicians construct an image for the media that hides some underlying reality, while celebrations of national culture are staged spectacles divorced from popular sentiment’. These observations suggest politicians follow the logic of the media to the point where authenticity is lost. I would contend that with constant media scrutiny it is now virtually impossible for a politician to portray a manufactured image. What you saw with Howard as prime minister is what you got.

Ward (2012) examined the way prime ministers set up their media appearances: Bob Hawke (1983–1991) addressed media conferences from a stylised podium, Keating (1991–1996) moved the podium to the executive wing courtyard, imitating the White House Rose Garden setting, and Howard adopted Keating’s practice and added a pair of Australian flags. Ward (2012, p.78) concluded however, that ‘the presence or absence of the Australian flag in news pictures made very little if any difference at all to the judgments voters will make about the likeability, powerfulness (or strength) and trustworthiness of political leaders’. Payne (2006, p. 11) looks further at the symbol of a nation’s leader, suggesting the prime ministerial courtyard is used by Howard for ‘presidential styled communiqués’, with press gallery journalists summoned to the courtyard to stand at his feet, ‘in itself a symbolic gesture, he is not only communicating his message, he is communicating the image of leader of the nation’. Here we see the evolution of media conferences and the staging of media events to portray a sense of power, and nationalism, through the use of the Australian flag. Part of Howard’s image was shaped by his appearance with Australian troops. McKenna (2003) noted that between 1999, from Australia’s intervention in East Timor (Australia committed 4,500 troops, and entered and occupied Dili on 20 September), and the end of 2003, Howard had been either photographed and/or was officiating at a number of functions involving Australia’s military forces. Howard felt it essential that he attend, where possible, overseas troop deployment ceremonies, and visit locations where Australian troops were stationed, as his government was responsible for the decision to send these defence personnel to war. Howard’s relationship with the military forces and their role in his communications strategy will be taken up in this thesis.
Sanders (2009, p42) noted ‘a frequent criticism levelled at twenty-first century politicians is that image-making appears to trump the making and execution of policy: how stories play and how politicians appear to the public matters above all else’. However it can be suggested that the media’s intense interest in political leaders forces politicians to consider their public image, as every move made and word spoken by a prime minister is recorded, dissected and analysed, and even more so if there is a mishap or mistake made. These are important points, and are reflected in John Howard’s approach to the management of his media appearances, and are explored in this research.

Another area of significant importance is the role cartoonists play in shaping the image of the political elite. This is important to this research, as cartoonists impact on how the Australian community perceive politicians as communicators, how their style and personal mannerisms are highlighted, and often exaggerated, such as Howard depicted as “Mr Magoo” and Joe Hockey as “Shrek”. According to Manning and Phiddian (2004, p.38) ‘readers recognise cartoons as part of newspapers that give a range of views, and are highly unlikely to mistake them for distillations of a unified editorial message’. Their study concludes by suggesting ‘cartoons mainly reinforce views held strongly rather than sway opinion immediately; they may also influence the climate of opinion among newspaper readers over time. Their constant effect is to maintain public scepticism about the motivations and spin of politicians’ (p. 41).

Cater (2006) also examines this issue, as does Warhurst (2002) who provides a glimpse into how cartoonists characterised the dramas leading up to and over the 2001 election. Knox (2013) raised the subject of “satire” in another form that also shapes the image of politicians, referring to John Clarke and Bryan Dawe’s season which aired from 1987 on ABC television Thursday evenings at 7.55pm as part of The 7.30 Report. According to Adams (2001, p.23), ‘like newspaper cartoonists, Clarke and Dawe were able to skewer the foibles of the leaders while raising a smile – something needed in a dour campaign’.
The Packaging of Political News in Mainstream Media

As Howard came to power in 1996 the pace of the news cycle was quickening, as the financial pressure on commercial media increased. McNair (2000, p.7) stated ‘the substantive information content of political journalism is said to be diluted not only by market-driven commercialisation … but the negative impact of new technologies on news-gathering and presentation’. McNair states (p.7) that ‘news is faster, more immediate, more “live” than ever before … but not necessarily more informative’. McNair quotes a journalist as saying:

…the technology (of news production) enables us to package, graphicise and meld five minutes of old TV information into sixty seconds of new TV time … the content reduction is so acute that normal debate is in danger of being reduced to the absurd.

McNair suggests there is now a crisis caused ‘by the demands of televisual form itself, arising from the constraints which ever-faster, ever-more “real-time” newsgathering possibilities place on the ability of journalists to analyse and explain complex political reality’. The Howard government faced this dilemma: how to articulate complex policy initiatives within the timeframes demanded by a media obsessed with short snappy media grabs, a critical skill needed by a prime minister charged with communicating his government’s initiatives to a time poor and often sceptical audience. Politicians however need the media. Putnis outlined the power of the press and the influence it can have over a government’s media policy formulation. Putnis (2001, p.105) states:

Governments and political parties … are prime users of the media; they crave media support; and their political fortunes are influenced by media reporting. Individual politicians are dependent on the media to promote their status as public figures. At the same time, they can suffer at the hands of the media via encroachments on their privacy.

Emerging from this observation is the issue of how a prime minister captures the attention of the Australian electorate in a media saturated environment to a mostly disengaged voter population. Howard was a competent media performer who could encapsulate a policy initiative and articulate its benefits to the voting public, within the timeframes expected by radio and television. However the mediatisation of politics, forcing spokespeople to distil political debate into a 15 second news bite, or a 60 second answer to a interviewer’s question on a Sunday morning political television program, devalues the importance of political commentary and the analysis of proposed legislative changes.
An observation on the public’s interest in political debates was highlighted by Ward (2006, p.377): ‘during the 2004 federal election, 1.4 million viewers watched the debate between the leaders televised by Nine as a *Sixty Minutes* episode. But a further 2.3 million viewers tuned instead to *Australian Idol* on a rival channel’. Ward thus suggests ‘many viewers are uninterested in political news’. What does this say about political communication and the engagement of the public in political discourse? For the research focus of this thesis it highlights two points: the difficulty politicians and Prime Minister John Howard had in particular, in encouraging the Australian electorate to participate in a continual political conversation, no matter how proficient a communicator the Prime Minister may have been. Secondly, television networks, particularly commercial entities willing to cover serious political events, risk an erosion of audience and subsequently advertising revenue, as viewers tune into more popular “entertainment” programs.

**New Media Platforms and their Impact on Political Discourse**

An important political communication context for this thesis was the rapid development of new media technologies in the latter part of the Howard government. Paul Kelly (2009a, p255) noted that ‘Howard was a 24/7 leader who ran a permanent political campaign … and adapted to the technological revolution that created the 24 hour news cycle’. Howard was totally engaged with the 24 hour media cycle, however as this research shows, the emergence of social media and online technology was an area the Prime Minister, and the Liberal party itself, were slow to embrace.

Dahlgren (2005, p.160) suggested, ‘the Internet is allowing engaged citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics’. The explosion in political dialogue using ever increasing media platforms has raised the issue of the quality of political analysis, with Gunther and Mughan (2000, p.15) suggesting ‘at the same time that political coverage in the media has experienced some “dumbing down”, there have been developments at the level of individual citizens and politicians that potentially leave voters more open to persuasion, perhaps manipulation, than used to be the case’ (see also Tanner, 2011; Turner, 2001a). What is becoming apparent is the expansion of media platforms, the growing number of political commentators and managers, and an increasing propensity of the general public interested in politics to engage in the political communication process. This development and its implications for Howard, and his ability to control and manage his political agenda, is explored in this thesis.
Political Leaks and Free Speech

The media pressure on elected Members of Parliament has implications for public servants working on government policy. McCallum and Waller (2013) identified the way public servants had become more closely attuned to media agendas in line with their Minister’s preoccupation with media. Despite this close attention to media, issues of privacy and secrecy became increasingly sensitive in recent decades. Where journalists were once able to secure comments from senior members of the bureaucracy, Hamilton and Maddison (2007, p.104) suggests that ‘off-the-record briefings were no longer a standard way of cross-checking facts or following up information’.

Public servants are required to adhere to the Public Service Act 1999, within which the Public Service Regulations (1999) outline the responsibility of public servants as they relate to the disclosure of information. A number of papers and books deal with the issue of bureaucratic leaks and the use of Freedom of Information refusals to stem the flow of government information becoming publicly available. Ester (2009) covers this area quite extensively, and Schultz (1998) wrote of the Fraser government's injunction stopping the publication of defence and foreign policy documents. Howard (2010) noted that when he became the Liberal Party leader in 1985, the party’s ‘torrent of leaks’ undermined his leadership, almost on a daily basis. In an unusual twist Grattan (1998 (b), p.42) observed that ‘John Howard and Peter Costello and their offices have over the last few years, in opposition and government, periodically leaked material to a certain Canberra-based columnist’.

Politicians have used intimidation to stop public servants leaking, a strategy Howard used to control the agenda by calling in the Australian Federal Police to investigate media leaks. Oakes (2010, p.295) also dealt with leaks suggesting ‘leaks have been behind just about every exposure of political or bureaucratic wrongdoing you can think of, from Watergate in the US to the travel rorts saga that cost three ministers and the prime minister’s top advisor their jobs in the first year of the Howard government’.

Howard knew the importance of managing his own media communications, and the impact media stories had on the electorate’s perceptions of his government. In his desire to shape the political agenda Howard was accused of silencing dissenters. One example was an issue arising in the lead up to the 1998 federal election, where Warhurst (2000, p.170) noted the Howard government was uneasy about the Catholic church’s reaction to its tax plans in 1998.
The government ‘set out to convince church leaders that, whatever its social welfare and social justice leaders might advise, they should not campaign against tax reform. Meetings were arranged between leading Catholics in the Coalition and senior bishops, but with little meeting of minds’. Warhurst (2007b, p.28) also wrote of the testy relationship between religion and politics during the Howard administration, quoting Howard saying ‘some of the church leaders have been particularly critical of our side of politics (and) they end up offending a large number of their patrons’ (Herald Sun, 16 February 2004). Warhurst (2007b, p.29) also noted ‘Government ministers have attempted to bypass church leaders in favour of direct communication with church members, a style which echoes the prime minister’s own preference for talk-back media and the tabloid press’.

The frustration at the Howard government’s management of their political messaging led to the formation of Australia’s “Right to Know”, a coalition of 12 major media companies, who in May 2007 commissioned Irene Moss (2007) to produce a Report of the Independent Audit into the State of Free Speech in Australia. The coalition refers to the campaign against the multitude of Acts of Parliament and legislation designed to prohibit access to government documents by the media and general public, with many of these laws being introduced by the Howard government. The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA, 2007) issued a report into the state of press freedom in Australia in 2007. In the report’s introduction Christopher Warren, Federal Secretary of the MEAA, stated:

…over the past 12 months Australian journalism has shone light in some dark corners; exposing the suffering of indigenous communities in Australia’s north; bringing pressure to bear over the death of Private Jake Kovco and Australia’s continued commitment in Iraqi; asking just how much the Howard government knew about the shameful corporate scandal of Australian Wheat Board.

This thesis contributes to an understanding of the changing nature of political communication since the election of the Howard government in 1996, reflecting a growing trend for the government to tightly control its media messages and public utterances, and to ensure public servants didn’t breach their responsibilities by engaging with journalists and media commentators (see also Tiffen 1989)) There has, however, been little research revealing the personal understandings of key players in the Howard government about its communications strategies. This thesis aims to highlight this important component of a government’s overarching political objectives of staying in power, winning elections and also the hearts and minds of the electorate.
Can the Government Set the Media Agenda?

Bernard Cohen (1963, p.81) said, ‘the news media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling their audiences what to think about’. This statement reflects Cohen’s understanding of the power the media possesses, and sets in train a major body of political communication research that became known as “agenda-setting”. Does the media agenda really represent what the public needs to know?

Agenda-setting proponent, McCombs (2004, p.1) says, ‘For nearly all of the concerns on the public agenda, citizens deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists reports about these events and situations’. McCombs (2004, p.2) also suggested ‘the agenda of the news media becomes, to a considerable degree, the agenda of the public … In other words, the news media set the public agenda’. Ward (1995, p.50) stated that:

… the essential claim which agenda setting theorists make is that the news media’s own agenda will signal to audiences who read and watch the news that some policy issues are far more important than others. Thus, over time, the news media will have the public’s own agenda.

McNair (2011, p. 67) noted that the media and journalists ‘provide platforms for politicians to make their views known to the public, but also in judging and critiquing the variety of political viewpoints in circulation’, thus they are reflecting what the groundswell of public opinion is and the publics’ own political agendas. This thesis casts doubt on who can actually set the agenda. Could the Howard government control its political communication to the extent that it felt it set the agenda? Possibly media savvy politicians can indeed shape the political agenda through powerful media performances and heightened oratory skills. Cook (1998, p. 5) suggested ‘ powerful officials are best positioned to create news events, certify issues as newsworthy, and make news on their own terms’. McCombs (2004, p.xiv) said:

… for journalists this phenomenon that we now talk about as the agenda setting role of the news media is an awesome, overarching ethical question about what agenda the media are advancing. What the public need to know is a recurring phase in the rhetoric repertoire of professional journalism. Does the media agenda really represent what the public needs to know?
The media may feel they can set an agenda, and newspaper front pages, story headlines and editorials can be intended to influence the political debate. ABC radio and television programs in Australia have been criticised for their perceived bias against the Liberal government. However discerning voters will make up their own minds about the merits of policy initiatives and the way they will cast their election vote.

Van Aelst and Walgrave (2011, p. 302) surveyed European political elites, and surprisingly ‘the surveyed elites seem convinced that the media set the agenda on their own, without interference of politicians’. Beyond agenda setting, news framing research says the media has the ability to shape the angle of political stories and to also impact on the image of political actors by the way they portray them in their political coverage or general news features. Altheide and Snow (1985, p.292) compared local and national news sources, work routines, and presentations, to argue that ‘events become news because of the news perspectives, not due to any objective characteristic’. This is a critical point, as the portrayal of news is in the hands of news directors and editors who decide what to them is newsworthy for their audience on the day, not by any predetermined inflexible framework. However, what is important to the Howard government is what the public will actually believe after digesting the news stories produced by journalists, and edited by directors who potentially have their own motives and agendas.

While agenda-setting research traditionally focussed on the relationship between news media and citizens, an important dimension is the capacity for political elites to set media agendas. Davis (2007, p.57) refers to ‘elite sources’ and their communication employees benefiting from a number of cultural and organisational advantages that enable them to have routine access to journalists. Hjarvard (2007) suggested ‘the media becomes integrated into the daily practices of political organisations and serve both internal and external communication tasks for political actors’. Davis suggests these ‘primary definers …get to set news agendas and reporting frameworks’. This highlights a dilemma: a powerful media entity needing access to influential political actors in order for the media entity to remain influential and powerful, and in turn political actors needing to be active players in the media arena that is perceived to be powerful and influential.
Washbourne (2010, p.141) noted a new dimension emerging in political communication with the Internet allowing ‘local community groups to create new materials in blog form and with contents especially relevant for them … and supporting the activities of alternative politics. This new technology allows citizens to also set an agenda and actively participate in political discourse’. Ultimately the public can choose what media they consume and what they believe. This reflects Gamson’s earlier (1992, p.179) suggestion that people ‘control their own media dependence, in part, through their willingness and ability to draw on popular wisdom and experiential knowledge to supplement what they are offered’.

This thesis explores the methods used by the Howard government to manage their media communications and to set their own political agenda, and how the Prime Minister’s style and media persona impacted on the political conservation he had with the Australian electorate.

**Media Management and Media Power**

**The Prime Minister’s Press Office**

Ward is one of the most prolific writers on the relationship between government and the media in Australia over many years (Ward, 1991, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2007; Ward, Owen, Davis, & Taras, 2008). He has analysed the operations of government media units and the ministerial management of the media. Tiffen (1989) also notes the strategic importance of such units and how they have become so critical to government. Walter’s (1986) book The Minister's Minders remains one of the most significant historical studies on the ministerial staffing system in Australia, (see also Tiernan 2004, p.9). Walter’s examination of the prime ministership’s of Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke, and their staffing arrangements is illuminating, particularly during the Hawke era with the move to new Parliament House in the National Capital and during the introduction of the Members of Parliament Staff (MOPS) ACT 1983 (23 May). According to Ward (2006, p.371) ‘… as of 2001, the Howard government had almost three dozen media advisors working for Ministers. The Prime Minister’s own staff of 18 included a Senior Communications Advisor, a Senior Media Advisor and a Press Secretary’. 
Grattan (1998 (b), p.35) refers to media advisors as “gatekeepers”. Ward (1995, p.50) suggested ‘journalists, editors and producers routinely make “gate keeping” judgments about which issues to report (and which not to) as well as about the placement and prominence to be given to those issues selected for inclusion in newspapers and bulletins’. Grattan (1998 (b), p.35) observed that it would be impossible for ministers of the government to ‘satisfy individually all the demands made for comments, interviews, and grabs’. Oakes (2008, p.205) noted ‘one reason politicians are more boring than they used to be is that they are increasingly afraid to take risks. Even in election campaigns, parties rarely chance their arm. Everything is calculated and researched to within an inch of its life’. This mediatisation of politics, where political actors are so conscious of their media image, and the ramifications if they make a mistake, that they have become captive to the logic of the media. Spontaneity has been replaced with scripted lines and predictable and practised behaviour, often overseen by political media minders.

Of particular support to John Howard was the prime minister’s press office, established and operated within the prime minister’s office. This media and communications unit was at the forefront of the logistics surrounding media management and political communication during the Howard years, providing support to the prime minister, members of Cabinet, and MPs generally if required. Much has been written about the press office. Tiernan (2004, p.159-166) provides a close examination of the prime minister's press office, and in particular the degree of control exerted by the prime minister’s staff over other ministerial offices. Tiernan (2004, p.156) noted that ‘as long as ministers were getting on with the job of implementing the government's agenda, they could expect little interference from the Prime Minister’s Office’. There appears to be contradictory statements here to Tiernan’s proposition on the “control” the prime minister’s office had over government ministers and the operation of their individual media and communications advisors. These contradictions may arise from the perceived view of the power Howard himself exerted over the party in some people’s eyes; such as Barns (2003, p.123) who suggested ‘there is no room in the Howard Liberal Party for anything other than reverence and obedience to Howard’s policies and political strategies’. However in reality, Tiernan’s interviews discounted this theory with those she spoke to.

The operation of Howard’s press office within the prime minister’s office is also at the core of how the Prime Minister engaged with the wider Australian electorate. The office’s management of Howard’s media appearances, the strategies developed to handle politically sensitive issues, the key messages prepared by experienced staff and the overarching strategic
direction of the government’s communications were coordinated from the press office. Another view on the role of the press office could relate to the observation of Davis (2007, p.61) who suggests ‘a substantial proportion of corporate communication time is indeed taken up with blocking journalists and stifling negative coverage’. An examination of the press office’s role is a core component of this thesis.

The Power of the Media: Its Impact on the Political Elite

It is important to consider how the power of the media operates in the contemporary political world. The intensive media focus on politicians, and the approach taken by journalists and political commentators, to forensically examine a Member of Parliament’s every word and action puts immense personal pressure on the political elite. However their relationship is somewhat intertwined, and according to Davis (2007, p. 100) ‘politicians and political journalists move in over-lapping spheres. Journalists and politicians, whether in conflict, regular dialogue or working in “coalitions”, contribute to issue agendas and policy debates’.

Politicians appear to be in constant campaign mode, and as Paul Kelly (2006 (b), p. 16) suggested:

‘Howard was fighting the 24-hour political cycle for the 1000 days in each three year term’.

Paul Kelly felt this brand of politics was transforming governance. This suggests how critical it is for political actors to consider their words and actions very carefully, and to remain above reproach when it comes to the way they manage their responsibilities as elected representatives. Howard’s constant attention to media commentators’ views, talkback callers’ opinions, and newspaper editorial stances, are evidence of his desire to gauge public sentiment and win public approval for his government’s political decisions.

An interesting perspective on this theme is one taken by Couldry, who examines how people react to becoming the focus of media attention themselves, and those who actually observe the media in action. Cook (1998, p. 4) said ‘one reason we don’t think of journalists as political actors is because journalists themselves are reluctant to think of themselves in those terms’. Couldry (2000, p.4) touches on the media’s role as ‘storytellers and presenters of facts’. He poses the question ‘why do we place any value, or credence, in media outputs at
all’. One challenge Couldry (2000, p.20) raises is: ‘how to acknowledge the sheer complexity of the media's colonisation of everyday life without losing a grip on the crucial question of power and inequality to which the media give rise?’ These questions and observations relate to the power of the media in a media saturated environment and whether the media are believable, a point certainly relevant to political communicators. Bennett and Entman (2001, p.1) suggest that ‘many of the political changes that ushered in the 21st century are typically linked to media processes, either as causes or as adaptive mechanisms’. They suggest access to communication is one of the key measures of power and equality in modern democracies. The Howard government were aware of the importance and influence of the media and spent considerable time and resources managing their media relationships and appearances. In the 21 century political discourse and public debate shape voters thinking on political issues, and now nothing in politics of importance to citizens is not reported and analysed by the media. This is both an opportunity for political parties to espouse good policy, within the logic of the media, and also a threat to their hold on power.

**Media Logic and Mediatisation Theory in the Mass Media Society**

Mediatisation of politics is a growing body of theory and research in the study of political communication. Mediatisation research embraces everything that is politics: political institutions, political parties, bureaucracies, political campaigns and advertising, through to political journalists and commentators. Are these entities becoming dependent on the media and the media’s logic? With such a complex web of communication outlets, according to Mazzoleni and Shultz (1999, p.247), 'the best description of the current situation is "mediatisation" where political institutions increasingly are dependent on and shaped by mass media but nevertheless remain in control of political processes and functions’. Hjarvard (2013, p.44) suggests:

Interest groups seeking to achieve political influence must accommodate the logic of the media … political institutions not only accommodate the logic of the media, but also internalise the media logic to such an extent that media considerations become part and parcel of everyday political thinking and action, including the development of political ideas and priorities … the content of political news becomes governed more by media logic than by political logic.
This concept was explored in the research for this thesis. This trend will only grow as the diversification of media outlets in all their forms play a growing role in the dissemination of political information. These observations are at the heart of public discourse on politics and how political leaders relate to the media. They also assist in explaining the power and influence the media has in the reporting and coverage of politics in Australia today.

Politicians face considerable challenges when endeavouring to fit within the logic of the media. This was graphically illustrated by Young (2008 (a), p.1-2) who stated that:

> The average election-news story is only two minutes long and during the story, the reporter and the host speak for more than half the time while politicians speak only in seven second sound bites. The average news story about the 2007 election devoted less than 30 seconds to letting politicians speak in their own words. For example, on 12 November, the day of the Coalition's campaign launch, John Howard delivered a speech for 42 minutes but that night on the evening news, voters heard only 10.4 seconds of it.

Politicians must be able to be succinct, however, whatever is ultimately aired and printed is a decision made by the news editor/producer/director who will decide what fits their programming format and their “logic”. This is why Howard used live talkback radio as his preferred communications tool, to avoid the potential biases and prejudices of media outlets.

According to Hepp (2012), mediatisation:

> Has become more and more a core concept to describe present and historical media and communicative change: if media become part of “everything”, we can no longer see them as a separate sphere but must develop an understanding of how the increasing spread of media communication changes our construction of culture and society.

This in essence means understanding what drives the media and also the thinking of journalists. Newton (2006, p.109) argues ‘the variables that mediate the media may also magnify its effects so that what appears to be a large media effect is, in fact, the result of an interaction between the media and other forces’ (see also Hayes, Preacher, & Myers, 2011; McQuail, 2001, p.90-91; Schultz, 2004). Newton appears to be suggesting the media are driven by an array of external forces, and those most vocal mediate the media, often securing more coverage and exerting more influence than they may deserve or warrant. This fact is
highlighted by political actors who are considered to be good “media talent” or outspoken enough to generate media coverage because of their views. Examples would include One Nation’s Pauline Hanson, and in more recent times Palmer United Party members Clive Palmer and Jacqui Lambie.

With the rapid expansion of media platforms and the dilution of mainstream media audience shares, politicians are beginning to use other forms of media and communication outlets to disseminate their political messages. Chaffee and Metzger (2001, p.365-369) raises the concept of new media increasingly demassifying communication with a move to individualised communication, which in turn offers their users a high degree of self selection and self-determination, a trend that sees the use of new media platforms as being very much an individual and personal experience. Social media and the use of blogs, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other technologies could potentially see a tectonic shift in the manner in which political communication is unleashed on the Australian electorate. In many respects this may complicate the management of political dialogue, as the multitude of new media channels will make it very challenging for the political elite to control and manage the political conversation.

**Political actors and their place in a mediatised environment**

Grattan (1998 (b), p.38) suggests that through the medium of television:

> Politics is pushed more to theatre and the journalists to theatre critics (or more precisely, television critics). Of course parliament has always been theatre, but there was more non-theatre politics. Television has extended the politics of theatre and indeed made parliament the side-stage on which the actors are briefly seen during the nightly news bulletins.

Political actors must give consideration to media deadlines, the newsworthiness of stories, the relationships they have with media outlets, and the audience the media reaches. Howard’s press office was charged with the management of these issues, and played a pivotal role in the coordination of the government’s media management.

Hjarvard (2013, p.44) suggests therefore that ‘political actors may chiefly be governed by a political logic, or mainly governed by a media logic. Each of these dimensions represents a scale on which politics may become more or less mediatised’. Esser (2013, p.162) notes
‘actors in the political system have in recent years professionalised their self-presentation skills. They did so by setting up and upgrading “media relations” units and staffing them with experts whose task it is to tailor all political output to media logic’. This is exactly what Howard did, with the process itself beginning with previous prime minister’s (see Chapter 1).

Sanders (2009, p.38) outlined ‘the tense tango of contrasting yet related political and media logics between politicians and the media’. This is an interesting comparison of how each player thinks, and the contrasting mindsets of both. The key here is politicians endeavouring to articulate political messages in a form that not only appeals to the public but also is delivered in a way the media feel appropriate for broadcast. This, for the Howard government, became a test of the communications skills of government spokespeople as actors expected to meet the expectations of their audience and the medium that carried their message. Lundby (2009, p.2) states:

> High modern societies are media-saturated societies … the contemporary complex conditions could not be handled without mediated communication … what would politics be without the media … people’s lives are shaped as they relate to their media environments and include a variety of media in their daily practices.

Hjarvard (2013, p.43) suggests political institutions such as ‘parliaments, parties and election campaigns … have become increasingly dependent on the media, and have had to adapt to the logic of the media’. This suggests where politicians believe they can shape the media agenda, the functioning of the media and the power it wields can override the priorities a particular party may have, thus forcing political agents to adapt to the media’s own logic.

Ultimately, the driving force to gain media attention is to fit within the logic of the media, or politicians will not receive the coverage they covet, an important manifestation of media power. According to Stromback (2008, p.233) ‘media logic can be taken to mean the dominance in societal processes of the news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use of to take advantage of their own medium and its format, and to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people’s attention’. Stromback (p.238) then states ‘as the media logic has become so important, political and social actors adapt to the media logic’. Schultz (2004, p.89-90) notes that political actors ‘adapt to the rules of the media system trying to increase their publicity and at the same time accepting a loss of autonomy’. On the other hand, ‘the media also benefit from such transactions since they make politics more newsworthy and conveniently formatted’.
What then was the impact of mediatisation on genuine political discourse during the Howard years? According to Sanders (2009, p.51) ‘partly because of a defensive response by political actors to pressures from the media and partly as a result of taking a political marketing path, the politics is being sucked out of politics to be replaced by spectacle and performance’. This statement highlights the dilemma for political communication: is it now about spectacle over substance? Many would agree it is.

Kellner (2003, p. 160) blames the media itself for this trend, stating ‘the media are complicit in the generation of spectacle politics, reducing politics to image, display, and story in the forms of entertainment and drama’. Mazzoleni and Scultz (1999, p.249) suggested politicians who wish to address the public must negotiate with the media’s preferred timing, formats, language and even the content of the politicians’ communication’. Dayan and Katz (1992) also explore this issue.

Grattan (1998 (b), p.40) takes it a step further by suggesting ‘now the (election) campaign days are staged like musicals, with plenty of sound, pictures and distractions’. As election campaigns are the most intensive time for political coverage Jamison (1992, p.208) suggests ‘campaign speeches have now become sound bite-filled ads strung together with transitions’. During election campaigns, Bell, Boehringer and Crofts (1982, p. 142) suggested that television restricted discussion of electoral politics in two ways: the choice between two political parties, … and to the manifestation of this choice in the persons of their leaders’.

Smith (1981) in a wide ranging commentary suggested ‘television has disconnected parties from candidates and liberated candidates from party platforms, which blurred the “issue” differences between the candidates themselves’. These remarks reflect on the focus of television as an “entertainment” vehicle, packaging their content to entice viewers to watch, and if political coverage is not deemed to be enticing enough the networks’ political coverage will change focus to reflect what the audience demands. But television’s impact on the political elite can be devastating. In 2007, according to Bateman (2010, p.7), the media played a key role in shaping Howard’s image, ‘projecting Howard as tired with out-dated views’. Ultimately Howard was seen ‘as out of touch and irrelevant by a significant proportion of the Australian public, and … Howard in this final term saw his leadership lose the support of the electorate to a politically fatal degree’.

Language and behaviour in the age of mediatisation

Dyrenfurth (2005, p.183) stated after Howard’s fourth election win in 2004: ‘John Howard’s greatest legacy for the position of Australian Prime Minister is unlikely to be viewed in terms of policy development but, rather, the language with which he addressed and sought to influence Australian society’. This observation of Dryenfurth underpins this research into the examination of Howard’s communications style and media strategy. Hajer (2009) in his introduction to his publication Policy Making in the Age of Mediatisation suggests ‘politics is about who can make his/her claim authoritative in the scenes and at the stages that matter in the age of mediatisation’. This highlights the media’s obsession with ‘media talent’ and who is considered to be outspoken and newsworthy, rather than the quality and elegance of the political language they use. Craig (2004, p.14) suggests there is a ‘sense that the media have an undue influence in politics and public life’.

In relation to political communication, is the public seeing a “sideshow performance” or “staged” media appearances, and what are the public supposed to believe (see Tanner (2011). This is a challenge for politicians as they are media-trained to the point of sometimes being robotic, losing their spontaneity and natural personality (see Goodwin, 2006). Thus Prime Minister Howard’s media strategy and his ability to constantly handle the relentless and intense media scrutiny are key issues this thesis explores. Many academics and authors have commented on Howard’s clever use of phraseology in a political context. Gordon (1996, p.294) and Van Onselen and Errington (2006, p.7) noted the impact of Howard’s “five minutes of economic sunshine” line had in parliament against Keating on 2 February 1996. The importance of effective communication for governments was highlighted in Liberal Leader John Hewson’s interview with Mike Willesee on 3 March 1993 on Channel Nine. Reoch (2013, p.6) said ‘Hewson found himself unable to clearly articulate the distinction between “food” and “confectionary” after being questioned if a birthday cake would be taxed or not’, as part of Hewson’s tax package initiative. Ten days later Hewson lost the “unlosable election”, many suggesting this interview was the catalyst, demonstrating the importance of clear and effective communication. See also Kelly (2009a, p.84). In regard to effective political communication, McNair (2011, p.34) refers to:
‘The cut of a suit, a hairstyle, a camera angle or the colour of a stage-set, are examples of formal aspects of the message which might, all other things being equal, positively influence audience perceptions of the communicator and his or her message’. Thus there is an aesthetic criterion politicians are judged by. McNair also states that ‘the political communicator is a performer, and will be judged by the audience, at least partly, on the quality of a performance’.

In Day’s biography of former Prime Minister Paul Keating (2015), reviewed by Mark Kenny (2015), Day refers to Keating’s fearsome reputation as the Federal Parliament’s most devastating wordsmith, and on occasions, its most soaring orator. Kenny quoted Day as saying ‘Keating’s verbal dexterity (was) one of his greatest assets as a politician’. The biography praised Keating’s mastery of spoken language, and his success as a political communicator. Day noted Keating ‘could convince sceptical voters with his explanations of complex ideas … he could hold audiences in his thrall … yet he could only read with difficulty’.

When looking at great political communicators, McNair (2011, p. 36) suggested that ‘Ronald Regan … was not a great American president because of his powerful intellect, but because of how, with the assistance of his actor’s training, he articulated his simple, homely messages’. McNair also noted that ‘Tony Blair, leader of the British Labor Party from 1994 to 2007, was an excellent communicator, leading his party to three consecutive general election victories’. McNair appears to draw the relationship between electoral success and effective communication, a factor that would apply equally to the longevity of John Howard as Prime Minister.

On asylum seekers, Saxton (2003) noted in her analysis of Howard and the language and descriptors he used in the media such as “illegal”, “non-genuine” and “threatening” to describe genuine refugees seeking asylum, suggesting Howard used these to legitimise the government’s actions. According to Kuhn (2009, p. 59) ‘as his second term ended, he (Howard) was pursuing voters who feared their country was being invaded by Muslim boat people’. Clyne (2005) also wrote of this fear. Tiernan and Weller (2010, p. 50) said ‘during the 2007 election campaign Howard focused on Labor frontbenchers’ backgrounds as “union organisers”, captive to union interests, lacking the necessary skills and experience to manage the Australian economy responsibly’. Younane (2008) examined John Howard and Kevin
Rudd’s phraseology during the 2007 election campaign (14 October–24 November). Howard’s focus was on the “opportunity society”, and Howard mentioned “small business” explicitly in 37.3 per cent of his communication compared to Rudd’s 15.2 per cent. Another observation was Rudd’s focus on “working families”, a term used 11.5 times more than “unions” and Howard used “jobs” 18.8 times more than “Iraq”. De Castella, McGarty and Musgrove (2009) examined 27 speeches Howard delivered focusing on the “War on Terror”, from September 2001 until November 2007. The conclusion was that the Prime Minister on 24 occasions used ‘fear arousing content’, doubting Australia’s preparedness to cope with terrorism being mostly confined to his speeches prior to the Iraq invasion and when government support was declining. The conclusion, after reviewing other speeches, was that Howard did not consistently use fear-inducing rhetoric in his speeches about terrorism, but it ‘was used selectively to support his political purposes at those times’.

Crafting and Managing the Message: Is it Spin Over Substance?

Prime ministers and political parties have devoted substantial time and resources to managing their political communication in a mediatised political environment. This topic is at the heart of this thesis. Pearson and Patching (2008) Government Media Relations: a spin through the literature provides a comprehensive examination of the literature surrounding respective Australian and overseas governments’ management of the media and their endeavours to ‘control the message’.

Andrews (2006) suggested ‘the word spin had come to define both the process of political communication, and the practice of public relations itself’ (see also Hjarvard, 2013; Sanders, 2009). McNair (2000) expressed a more positive view of spin doctors who, he said, have ‘contributed to the increasing quantity of political information in mass circulation and political journalism has become more adept in handling spin, subjecting it to more rigorous and effective criticism to produce better coverage of the political process’.

Burton’s (2007) account of the relationship between the PR industry and journalists provides an incisive analysis of how politicians use PR to “spin” unpalatable news. Through a multitude of case studies, he looks at the influence of government ministers and others on media communication. Burton also comments on journalists’ lack of enquiry, citing their
reliance on media releases and other events initiated by public relations and media practitioners. This theme is also taken up by Young (2007) and Stockwell (2007). Tiffen (2006), in a paper presented to a symposium titled The Geoffrey Boycott of Australian Politics suggests ‘Howard has been masterful in framing the perception of electoral choices and influencing the political agenda, and that an underestimated source of his political success has been his skill at defensive spin control’. Stockwell (2007, p. 136) noted that ‘the third member of Howard’s spin team, Tony O’Leary (Howard’s Press Secretary 1996–2007), is the one who best fits the definition of government spin doctor’. Kitney (2004) is critical of the media, suggesting in a Sydney Morning Herald article:

Political spin is insidiously instinctive to politics. It is the media’s primary role to beat the spin, to hold politicians accountable for their words, their promises and their actions. The Howard government is the most masterful spin machine that has ever been cranked up in Canberra. It is virtually leak-proof and has established political control of the federal bureaucracy, which is as tight as a drum. Public servants have never been so compliant and afraid to speak out of turn.

According to Kitney ‘the decision-making process of the Howard government is the least transparent of modern times’. These are all very pertinent comments and observations on the Howard government’s management of their political communication at the time Kitney penned these comments. These views and opinions highlight the complexity of political communication and the polarising nature of political dialogue in Australia.

Political leaders often employ “spin-doctors”, and as an example UK Prime Minister Tony Blair had Peter Mandelson, and according to Grattan (1998 (b), p. 32) ‘Mandelson was head of the publicity machine that was a key in the highly successful Blair campaign’ of 1997, and American President Bill Clinton had Mike McCurry, described as ‘a spinmeister extraordinaire’. Grattan states (p33): ‘in Australia, our spin merchants look tame beside the likes of the Mandelsons and McCurrys. Tony O’Leary, John Howard’s chief media man … is not a public figure in his own right as was McCurry … and there is no Mandelson equivalent on the scene’.

Another element of control of political communication by politicians is the use of the technique of “plausible deniability”. Stewart (2008, p. 11) wrote that advisors were used to muddy lines of communication between ministers and the public services, so that ministers could claim they had not been formally advised of certain facts – the tactic of “plausible
deniability” (see also Walter & Strangio, 2007; Weller, 2002, p6). The Report of the Senate Select Committee on a Certain Maritime Incident (Commonwealth, 2002) noted particularly what it called ‘a serious accountability vacuum at the level of ministers’ offices’ (see also Costello, 2008; Hamilton & Maddison, 2007, p133-136; Marr & Wilkinson, 2003). Walter (2004) went one step further to suggest ‘Mike Scrafton, defence liaison staffer in Reith’s office in late 2001, asserts that he told the Prime Minister directly that the children overboard story was untrue prior to the 2001 election, an account Howard contests, underscoring the possibility of intentional deceit’.

Brent, in an address to the NSW Fabian Forum, suggested ‘tight control over public servants, plausible deniability, rapid shifts in agenda are all means developed during Howard’s period of government to maintain his dominance of the media’ (2006a). These authors have raised pertinent issues on Prime Minister Howard’s overarching communications strategy, and have suggested “plausible deniability” was used not only by Howard but also by others. Howard’s media strategy and the way messages were crafted is one of the key focuses of this research.

Howard’s Engagement with the Media and Communication Attributes

The existing literature on John Howard as a political communicator lays a foundation for this thesis. Howard (2010, p. 588) in his biography said ‘the media is a critical part of the equation for a senior political figure, particularly a prime minister. He must deal with them, and on a civil basis’. Howard (2010, p. 587) noted that ‘part of keeping in touch is closely following what is said in the media. It is impossible to do your job properly without knowing what the press is saying. It is arrogant beyond belief to completely ignore what is being said in the media’. By being aware of media commentary Howard (2010, p. 587) was not necessarily influenced by it:

Never be deterred by the media from a course you are convinced is right, but don't be so conceited as to think the attitude of the media is irrelevant. It isn't. As prime minister I would frequently say that there were three institutions that truly guarded freedom in Australia: our competitive parliamentary system, an incorruptible judiciary, and a free, robust press.
As a communication tool, Howard used radio as a vehicle to address the wider Australian electorate. Ward (2001) stated that in 1996, talkback radio emerged as an especially important forum for political communication. As prime minister, Howard ‘used talkback radio more than any predecessor’ Gilchrist (2001, p. 6). Steketee (2001) also observed that these radio appearances, together with live television interviews, gave him the ability to talk directly to voters, unedited and unfiltered by journalists’ interpretation. Howard realised the political influence of “shock-jocks” and the need to engage with them, and to listen and take seriously the feedback from radio talkback callers. Howard’s approach to gauging the political climate through public feedback and the positive responses he received on his government’s decisions from talkback callers was highlighted by Paul Kelly (2006 (b), p. 8) who suggested:

Howard’s frame of reference is public sentiment and Australian values, he invokes public approval to legitimise any changes to governance that might diminish accountability or checks and balances. “The people” become the justification of his prime ministership. This point is widely recognised but its full import is not appreciated.

Howard’s initial impression of the press gallery

Howard shaped his opinions on the media and the strategies he was to adopt when prime minister during his time in Opposition. As Liberal leader the first time around, from September 1985 to May 1989, Howard endured news coverage by some Canberra Press Gallery journalists which Gerard Henderson (1999) describes as ‘unfair at best, unprofessional at worst’ (see also Parker 1990, p. 94-96). As a consequence, according to Ward (2001), Howard ‘developed a healthy distrust of the Gallery’ which he regarded as pro-Labor, unable to ‘come to terms with the fact that (there had been) a change of Government in 1996, and as Canberra-centric and out of touch with ordinary Australians’ (see also Ester 2009p. iii).

Howard’s communication attributes

Van Onselen and Errington (2006, p7) noted, despite the enormous variety of issues a prime minister has to deal with, Howard ‘rarely puts a foot wrong in his extensive dealings with the media’. According to Adams (2000, p. 23) Howard’s ‘skill in parliamentary attack and counter-attack appears in nearly all assessments of John Howard’s political persona. He is
LITERATURE REVIEW: ACADEMIC LITERATURE FOCUSED ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

acknowledged as a first-rate parliamentary debater’. Howard however fell short of inspiring
the nation during election debates, with Van Onselen and Errington suggesting Howard, when
prime minister, lost ‘televised (leadership) debates against Beazley and Latham’. Savva
(2010, p257) noted ‘Howard had lost or drawn all the debates in all the previous campaigns.
In 2007, he was worse than he ever had been, and against someone who had been born
without charisma (Kevin Rudd)’. One point Howard continually stressed in the media was
that people knew the values he stood for, and Murray in a thesis on John Howard, a study in
political consistency notes in his abstract that ‘Howard's key policies were consistent
throughout his political career from his entry into the Australian Parliament in 1974 until he
lost his Prime Ministership in 2007’ (Murray, 2010). Savva (2010, p. 172) agreed with this
proposition stating Howard’s ‘great strength was that everybody knew, or had a sense of,
what he stood for’. Howard was a polished media performer. As Savva (2010, p. 54) noted
‘Howard rarely knocked back an interview; he never hid when there was bad news; and he
was well-briefed and well-disciplined’. This was one of the hallmarks of Howard’s
leadership, his ability to handle media interviews in all forms, whether it be a face-to-face
grilling from Kerry O’Brien (ABC’s The 7.30 Report) or doorstop media scrums where he
would often be subjected to a mass of questions from journalists from news bureaus across
the country.

Communication skills: essential for a successful leader

What role do communications skills play in the effectiveness of a prime minister to lead the
nation? According to Sanders (2009, p. 73), the heart of governing in a democracy is ‘finding
the ways and means to communicate effectively government messages and policies, not only
to the elite groups, but also to the mass publics brought into being by the mass media age’.
But Howard was initially not an effective communicator according to Van Onselen and
Errington (2007, p. xi): ‘as Opposition Leader John Howard was indecisive and a poor
communicator. A Quantum research poll in 1988 found that “he is neither liked or
respected”’. Van Onselen and Errington concluded by stating ‘reflections on Howard are
almost entirely negative’. But as prime minister Howard had developed and honed his
communication and debating style. According to Howard’s speechwriter from January 2004 to
November 2007, Kunkel (2008, p11-12) said ‘Howard was a natural parliamentary orator’ and
on examining his speeches from earlier times, Kunkel said Howard had a ‘consistency’ which
‘was a signature of the Howard brand’. As a communicator, Kunkel said Howard ‘had a natural politician’s ability to get to the nub of a topic, a strong compass of right and wrong, and unrivalled experience of dealing with ‘events’. Van Onselen and Errington (2006, p2) suggested:

Modern investigations of rhetoric have consequently come to be represented less by an interest in policy and more by an interest in the manner and means by which a political leader presents their political view to the media and through the media to the electors at large.

Sanders (2009, p. 84) noted that ‘a political party's tendency, even in government, (is) to see itself as having principally a mission to persuade rather than a duty to explain. Politicians are in the business of persuasion and this does not change when they assume power’. Howard (2014b) in an address to the National Press Club Canberra said:

We sometimes lose the capacity to argue the case … we sometimes think it’s sufficient to utter slogans. In truth in politics you need both slogans and arguments. As an example Howard said 'when I was campaigning hard for the goods and services tax I always made a bit of ground when I said the good thing about the goods and services tax is it gives people a choice, you get taxed on what they spend a bit more than what they earn, and that gives them more choice, and that had a bit of resonance. But when I said "it was an idea whose time had come" and "other countries had it", that was never very impressive as it never really touched a lot of people.

Howard was always determined to maintain a positive stance, which was reflected in his communication in regard to his party’s electoral fortunes. As an example, Howard was as determined as ever to win the 2007 election to the very end, saying at the National Press Club lunch on Thursday 22 November, two days before polling day, ‘I’m not going to hypothesise about defeat, OK? And I don’t believe we are going to be defeated’, according to Ramsey (2009, p. 333).

**Honest John: A matter of trust**

Politicians need to be seen not only to have appropriate communications skills, but also to be respected by the electorate. Trust becomes an issue in the performance of a prime minister, and credibility is critical if the messages articulated are to resonate with the Australian public. Newton (2006, p. 216) feels ‘the power and influence of the media are reduced to the extent that trust in them (politicians) is not high, and trust in the mass media is still lower’. Newton’s
findings are backed by research in this Harvard University study (Newton and Norris 2000, p1-12). This also forms part of the complexity of political communication and its impact on constituents. There were many comments made on Howard’s honesty during his prime ministership. Mackay (2006), in *The Age* raised the issue of trust and listed many issues where the Howard government had allegedly misled the Australian people, from children overboard, core and non-core promises, to weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Mackay said however:

> No challenger, on either side of politics, comes close to Howard in terms of the respect he enjoys in the Australian electorate. Even the many disillusioned voters who no longer trust Howard speak of their respect for the man’s dogged persistence, his economic credentials, his political cleverness and his powerful instinct for survival.

Adams (2001) also covers the issue of Howard and trust. These findings reflect on Howard’s ability to communicate effectively and with conviction, with his political messages and media persona outweighing the public’s scepticism of Howard as a politician.

O’Brien (2006) questioned Howard’s honesty in a 2 March *The 7.30 Report* interview: on being asked whether ‘you’re not a good liar’ Howard responded ‘(I’m) a very bad one … I don’t convincingly lie as Hugh (Mackay) says. I really don’t’ (see also Gordon, 2004).

Van Onselen and Errington (2006, p. 9) noted ‘Howard’s body language certainly does signal his discomfort with difficult questioning. He clears his throat and moves his shoulders’. Oakes (2008, p370) said Howard, in 2007, ‘had to suppress a give-away shoulder twitch once before when he was under pressure, Howard had been carefully projecting an image of calmness and confidence’. Charlton (2002, p94) described Howard’s appearance in a media conference addressing the Tampa issue in 2001, Howard said ‘that boat will never land in our waters – never … Howard’s eyes bulged, his face reddened and he shifted restlessly as he spoke’. These traits and idiosyncrasies are all part of the challenges the Prime Minister faced when under intense and relentless media pressure, and despite Howard’s media experience and his conscious awareness of his personal image and public performances, the media’s forensic examination of politically sensitive or controversial issues can solicit physical reactions that an unforgiving television camera will capture and magnify. These examples are relevant when assessing Prime Minister Howard’s skills as a political spokesperson as he engaged with the Australian electorate.
**John Howard: an ordinary bloke**

Another trait Howard exhibited was one that reflected “ordinariness”. Van Onselen and Errington (2006, p. 6) suggested ‘Howard’s political skills heighten his awareness of the electoral value in appearing ordinary’. Van Onselen and Errington went on to say ‘the equanimity with which Howard handles the whinging and moaning callers that talkback radio specialises in is typical of his approach to politics. He seeks to defuse confrontation both through his non-committal responses and his calm manner’. Warhurst (2007a, p. 190) noted ‘many critics have under-rated Howard from the very start and bemoaned his “ordinary man” leadership style’. Howard himself admitted to Kerry O’Brien (2006) on the ABC’s *The 7.30 Report*; ‘I believe in being average and ordinary. One of the reasons I do is that’s who I am’. Howard in an ABC *Four Corners* interview (1996) also described himself as direct, unpretentious, dogged and with a capacity to laugh at himself and not take himself too seriously. Salusinszky (2006, p202) felt Howard has ‘perfected the tone of the cautious, understated, suburban man’. Brett (2005, p32) said ‘The Howards’ are of suburban ordinariness – barbecues, cricket, the annual holiday at the same beachside resort, jogging in a shiny tracksuit festooned with logos’. Van Onselen and Errington (2006, p3) described Howard as:

> An entirely distinctive political communicator, albeit with an ordinariness not common amongst recent Australian Prime Ministers … Howard’s lack of charisma marked an obvious contrast with Bob Hawke during the 1987 electoral campaign.

Tiffen (2006, p1) said ‘Howard does seem a strange fit alongside Menzies and Hawke … he does not have their personal charisma’. Bennister (2012, p. 145) also noted ‘Howard’s lack of charisma marked an obvious contrast with Bob Hawke during the 1987 electoral campaign and the flamboyance of Paul Keating’. The key to Howard’s appeal ‘lies in his very lack of charisma’ according to Hugh Mackay (2006) writing in *The Age*. Mackay contends ‘Howard’s appearance of ordinariness is perhaps his greatest political asset: he looks and sounds like “an ordinary bloke”: he does it so convincingly and appears so sincere, it’s hard not to be seduced’. According Van Onselen and Errington (2006, p. 7) ‘Howard’s image of ordinariness, however masks some of his extraordinary strengths. John Howard’s discipline is arguably his greatest political quality’. In fact, according to Murray (2010), being “ordinary” evolved into a valuable political tool for Howard. Howard’s persona as “an ordinary bloke” was potentially a master stroke for a man who had followed prime ministers over the past 20
years with vastly different personalities and public images: Malcolm Fraser characterised as an upper class aristocrat, Bob Hawke as an Aussie larrikin, womaniser and drinker, and Paul Keating as a wearer of Italian suits and passionate admirer of European architecture and French clocks. So being “ordinary” worked for Howard, and he knew he had to work within the logic of the media: to be succinct and deliver memorable lines that would be picked up by other media outlets, whilst articulating his messages in simple language any “ordinary” Australian would comprehend. Wear (2008, p. 631) suggested ‘John Howard’s government was able to win four successive elections by strategically using popular rhetoric’ also suggesting ‘politicians populism … can contribute to the longevity of a government by creating the impression of a connection with “ordinary” or “mainstream people”’. This is certainly what Howard did, and his ordinariness was a badge of honour for a prime minister who prided himself on his ability to connect with everyday voters across the Australian electorate.

Conclusion

This review of political communication literature identified a wide body of research material and commentary on the relationship between a prime minister and the media in a media saturated environment. A leader’s communication skills, their media persona and ability to articulate their government’s position and stance on matters of importance to the electorate at large are pivotal to the credibility of the government they lead. Howard used symbols, including the Australian flag and photographs with Defence personnel, to consolidate his image as a true “Aussie”, and his speaking style as an “ordinary bloke” to connect with the wider Australian community. With the intense but often superficial coverage of politics, the pressure is on the political elite to perform within the framework dictated by the news networks. The mediatisation of politics highlights the challenge politicians face, having to work within the logic of the media, or be faced with declining opportunities to gain critical media exposure. There is a constant battle between the news media and political actors on who sets the political agenda, with elected Members of Parliament endeavouring to generate coverage to meet their personal objectives, and the media programming political content to fit within their tight formats. The press office within the prime minister’s office was charged with coordinating government communication across ministerial offices, and was responsible for the dissemination of well-crafted political messages on the issues of the day. Some call
these media advisors “spin doctors”; however they drafted communication to best reflect what the government’s decisions or actions were and the implications of these on the voters of Australia. Those messages are delivered by experienced media players, with Prime Minister Howard the chief spokesperson. The media landscape changed significantly as the Howard government’s term in office stretched to a period of eleven and a half years, and political communication in all its forms reached new levels of sophistication. Howard’s electoral success can be linked in part to his approach to communication; using the language of every-day Australian’s and his ability to look and sound like “an ordinary bloke”.

The following chapter deals with the technology changes that emerged during Howard’s prime ministership. It explores how technology changed the conduct of politics, and the way politics was reported using advances in technology. It looks at the challenges the Howard government faced in adapting to new media platforms and the opportunities these presented to the Labor Opposition. It also explores how politicians used this new technology to their advantage to reach their constituents, particularly during election campaigns.

Chapter Overview

The changes in media technology over the eleven and a half years of the Howard government were dramatic. Technology changed the conduct of politics, and the way politics was reported as new media platforms emerged, including the launch of Sky News, is the focus of this chapter. The emergence of the Internet and its impact on mainstream media and consumer viewing, reading and listening habits is highlighted. It also analyses literature on how the electorate used the Internet to source political information, how politicians used this new technology to their advantage to reach their constituents, and the role the new online websites played during election campaigns. This is important background to the understanding of John Howard’s use of the media and his response of new media developments.

The Changing Media Landscape

This thesis focuses on the period 1996–2007, and it is appropriate to look at the rapid changes in communications technology over those years to put into context the challenges politicians and the wider general public had in keeping up with technological changes. There were a number of developments that impacted on the way political news was reported and the way Members of Parliament could communicate with their constituents over the period of the Howard government.

Major developments that changed the dynamics of political news reporting included the establishment of ABC News Radio, which began broadcasting in August 1994 before the Howard government was elected in March 1996. News Radio shares its radio frequency with the broadcasting of federal parliament when it is sitting and which takes precedence over ABC News Radio’s regular scheduled programming of 24-hour continuous news, that is described by the ABC as “all news, all the time”. Two years later saw the launch of Sky News in 1996, which commenced its 24-hour news service on 19 February of that year. In 1999, pay TV provider Foxtel began offering its own satellite service to new customers and
expanded its offering to 45 channels. In 2001, digital terrestrial television was introduced to audiences in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, and ABC television launched its first digital-only multi-channel, the ABC kids channel. In 2002, SBS World News channel was officially launched on 22 June. In 2002, Foxtel completed an agreement with Optus on content supply. Also in that year satellite radio was launched. In 2004, Sky News launched Sky News Active, giving viewers access to news on demand 24/7 and in 2005 ABC2 was officially inaugurated. These changes occurred as traditional newspaper readership began a steady decline. The dynamics of how Australians digested news content through the advent of pay television, mobile phone technology, increased connection speed to the Internet, and the popularity of new social media platforms all had an impact on political communication. These are just some highlights of what was a tumultuous period in the history of technological advances and the way the reporting of politics changed in Australia.

The following is an examination of talkback radio, newspaper, and television consumption and how these media were impacted on by new and emerging technology. With changes in media audience share politicians needed to assess the effectiveness of the media and the reach it gave to the target audiences with which it wished to communicate. Thus, politicians not adapting to new forms of technology were potentially missing an audience as people shifted their allegiances from one media platform to another, or to multiple media outlets. These changes also had implications for the structure of political information, as new technology platforms demanded a different approach, not only to the style of writing and its format and length, but to how political actors would perform on a social media platform as distinct from their accustomed appearance in mainstream commercial news bulletins.

**Talkback Radio**

Talkback radio gained some prominence over the period of the Howard government when the Prime Minister used the medium extensively to speak to the electorate in all mainland Australian capitals. As prime minister, Gilchrist (2001, p. 6) said Howard ‘used talkback radio more than any predecessor’. At the 1996 election Williams (1997, p. 310) stated Howard, on the afternoon of the election, conducted 17 radio interviews ‘going from one to the next in a state of mingled exhaustion and relief’. This research examines how Howard developed and used these techniques and modes of communication during his term as prime minister. News/talk radio has established an ubiquitous presence in Australia. Half of all
metropolitan stations and 38 per cent of large regional stations carried talkback programs in 2000 (ABA, 2000). Thorpe (1997) in *The Australian* wrote ‘Talkback is broadcast into factories, offices, in cars and in the home. The advent of mobile telephones had become another tool in its popularity’. Ward (2002) noted ‘it would also enable him (Howard) to “connect” with an older, more conservative listening audience with whom he felt instinctively comfortable’.

News/talk radio stations operated in all major metropolitan markets and the programs of leading broadcasters such as John Laws and Alan Jones were also syndicated. Laws’ own program was ‘networked to about 80 stations across the country’, and by the late 1990s talkback was no longer an entirely local medium (*The Australian*, 17 April 1997). News/talk or talkback radio was a sizeable, commercially driven business during the 1996-2007 period, a subject covered by Adams and Burton (1997) and confirmed when Southern Cross Broadcasting acquired 2UE in March 2001, with a news report observing the ‘value of 2UE largely rests with its two stars, Jones and Laws, who pull in over $30 million a year … (warranting) the salaries paid to Jones and Laws of between $4 million and $5 million’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 March 2001). Evidence of the high esteem talkback commentators were held in was confirmed by Salter (2006) writing in *The Monthly* quoting comments made by two of Australia’s most influential media proprietors on the Alan Jones program: James Packer said “Alan, I want to thank you, from me, for being the best friend anyone could possibly ever hope for. You’re a proud Australian, a unique Australian, and we need more Australians like you” (James Packer, Chairman of PBL, on the Alan Jones Program 2UE, 2002). Rupert Murdoch told Jones “well, look at the power of radio. Look at your power. You’ve got more power than I have at the moment” (*Alan Jones Program* 2GB, April 2004). Such commentary would suggest this is one reason why Prime Minister John Howard thought highly of Jones and the power he wielded.

Ewart (2010, p. 7) suggested, ‘the increasing popularity of talk radio has been linked to social factors such as growing numbers of unemployed and part-time and shift workers, and the ageing population, who are seen as influencing the main agendas of talk radio programs’. Appleton (1999) provided an analysis of the influence and lure of radio host John Laws. Mickler (2005, p. 29) suggests the cultural power and political influence of populist talkback hosts has grown rapidly since the mid-1980s ‘in response to the disenfranchisement and social insecurity that accompanied the rise of neo-liberal economic policies and globalisation"
in Australia’. Media academic Graeme Turner, interviewed on ABC radio (Radio National, 2003), said from ‘the late 1980s through to the present, you’d have to say one of the key industrial shifts in radio has been the increased commercial power of those individuals’ (talkback hosts, such as John Laws and Alan Jones). Turner (2001b) also reflects on ethical considerations and debate about how the medium should be regulated, raising the subject of the conduct of talkback hosts who are in very powerful and privileged positions, with the ability to influence public opinion. Ewart (2010, p. 6) noted ‘social and cultural changes have also brought about changes in the way people engage with radio’. Another development in the rise in popularity of talkback radio was the mobile phone, a fact highlighted by Gould (2007), which was coupled with increased ownership of these devices and longer commuter times. Ewart (2010, p. 7) suggested ‘the ability to access radio on the Internet means that talkback is available to a much larger audience, thereby widening its participatory scope’. Gillman (2007) stated SMS technology makes talkback radio available to people who would not otherwise have contributed by calling a program. McAllister and Clark (2008, p. 41) noted that in 2007, 76.6 per cent of voters followed the election campaign “a good deal or some” on television. As television stations often take footage of political interviews in radio studios for their news bulletins, it could be concluded that radio talkback has a strong intra-media agenda-setting effect.

Examining the use of talkback radio during the 2004 election campaign, McAllister and Clark (2008, p. 43) found 15.1 per cent of respondents listened to talkback radio either “every day” or “most days”; however, 76.1 per cent listened to it ‘only occasionally’ or ‘not at all’. This is an interesting, but understandable finding, considering the power and influence commentators such as Jones (2UE), Laws (2UE) and Mitchell (3AW) are considered to have. When these talkback identities are interviewing the prime minister, or other senior ministers or Members of Parliament, television stations and newspapers will cover the interview on their news bulletins, or quote from the transcript provided to all media outlets. Often radio stations alert television newsrooms that they are conducting an interview with a prominent political figure and invite them to send a camera crew to the station to cover the event. Howard himself was committed to radio as his main form of communicating with the wider Australian electorate. There were many people, however, who enjoyed going online for their news and general political information. Chen (2006, p. 20) states that:
The evidence from the 2004 election reveals that mainstream news sites were among the most popular destinations for those online. The party sites fare relatively well however, being the third most popular destination among those polled, after the Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) site.

Over the period 1991 to 2010 Commercial Radio Australia (O'Callaghan, 2011, Appendix 8) examined the average time spent listening to radio in the five mainland capitals (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth). This analysis shows an overall decline in average radio listening over this 20-year period by just over four hours, with a drop of 10 per cent in the potential audience listening to commercial radio. Despite this, radio still remains a very powerful communications tool, enabling politicians to talk directly to constituents without the filter of journalists’ opinions or biases, and with talkback radio, the ability to field listener questions and quickly gauge the political mood of the electorate at any given time.

Radio is an example of where the mediatisation of politics becomes a real issue for politicians. Hjarvard (2013, p. 3) suggested that ‘the influence that the media exerts … forces other institutions to … submit to their logic. Unless a political actor can articulate a statement into a 10 to 15 second sound bite for a news bulletin, their comments will be either edited or not used. When being interviewed on radio, politicians must keep their answers succinct or have the radio host interrupt, knowing the audience has a short attention span and the program itself has time constraints. The politician must adhere to these “rules”, or they will not be afforded the opportunity of being invited to comment or be a guest on a talk program. John Howard adapted well to radio, using brief statements and simplifying complex issues that resonated with the listening audience. While people may not have agreed with his rhetoric, Howard’s technique and style were ideal for radio. It is thus the politician who must adopt the radio station’s criteria for political commentary, and not radio that needs to adapt to the communications agenda of the politician.

**Newspaper Readership**

Australian newspaper sales began declining two decades ago according to an examination of data undertaken by the Media Alliance in 2010. It combined Audit Bureau of Circulation data with Australian Bureau of Statistics population numbers, to develop an approximate measure of metropolitan and national newspaper sales per head of the population during the last two decades (refer to the table below). Although there is margin for error as the methodology on
the collection of the circulation data has changed slightly, the trend has been downwards, with sales of nearly 160 newspapers per 1000 population in 1991, falling to less than 110 per 1000 in 2009. The population has grown by about a quarter in that time to more than 22 million, while newspaper sales have fallen slightly.

Figure 1: Figures from September 1991 to September 2009


In February 2004, Gregory Hywood (2004) consulting advisor and William Burlace, Director Media Services for Roy Morgan Research delivered a paper on sectional readership data for newspapers. This research found there was a decline of 5.1 per cent in newspapers’ gross readership at the same times that the population of the five mainland states increased by 14.6 per cent. This highlighted the major problem newspapers faced, and why they were keen to pursue an online presence. This factor, coupled with the diversity of media outlets providing news coverage put enormous pressure on newspapers’ readership figures. Figure 2 below highlights the success enjoyed by magazines, recording a gross increase in readership of 38.7 per cent compared to a population increase over the same period of 14.6 per cent. Net readership increased by 6.1 per cent, but is well short of the population growth.
Another study confirmed the public’s interest in reading newspapers is declining, with Errington and Miragliotta (2007, p. 19) stating:

Only a small percentage of Australians, 16.8 per cent, cite newspapers as the medium they most rely upon for their news and information. Over the last 20 years, newspaper circulation has decreased significantly. Since 1998 the average circulation of Australian metropolitan newspapers has declined a further 4.8 per cent.

Denemark (2005) also had an analysis of newspaper readership.

Flew and Wilson (2008, p. 4) stated:

Newspapers have been hit by a “perfect storm” of threats surrounding their business models, including: declining print circulation (particularly among young people); the shift of classified advertising to the Internet; the rise of low-cost alternative online news outlets; the rise of citizen journalism, blogging and self-publishing; and fundamental shifts in user behaviour toward accessing news content. In countries such as the Untied States and Britain, this has led to leading newspapers either going bankrupt or online-only, and even threatens flagship publications such as the New York Times.
Also noteworthy from a newspaper production perspective, the 1980s and 1990s saw significant changes in newspaper production. In a symposium address in Sydney marking two hundred years of newspapers in the city, Isaacs and Kirkpatrick (2003) noted ‘newspaper journalists could now set their material directly from their computer terminals, removing the need for typesetters, colour printing emerged, including colour ads, and the growth of “lifestyle” sections and supplements commenced’.

Naturally, politicians are extremely responsive, and also sensitive to media commentary, particularly from print media outlets employing journalists and columnists with strong credentials and credibility who cover national politics. Reflecting on the mediatisation of politics, it is the political players who are required to bow to the constraints newspapers place on the space provided for commentary or coverage of political news. Few newspapers delve deeply into policy initiatives, with many using catchy headlines and short, sharp, storylines to capture the essence of a government decision or proposal, but not drilling down into the core or substance of the subject, which can distort the facts. As such politicians, and those interested in politics, see the Internet as an emerging opportunity to provide a wealth of information on government programs and initiatives, uninhibited by space restrictions and media deadlines.

The Impact on Newspapers of the Emergence of the Internet

From slow beginnings in 1995, where just under three per cent of the Australian population accessed the Internet, within 13 years over 70 per cent of Australians were going online (see Appendix 9). Smith (1999, p. 4) noted less than two per cent of respondents nominated reading as one of their main uses of the Internet, and Morgan found about nine per cent of all people aged 14+ had visited a reading site. Thus, people were either finding it difficult to read text on a computer screen, or preferred using the Internet for other purposes such as playing games or interacting on social media sites. Smith went on to say:

…if we consider only those people who have ever accessed the Internet, about 20 per cent of Internet users have read a newspaper or magazine online. The top six newspapers or magazines read online are, in order, the Sydney Morning Herald, The Age Melbourne online, NineMSN (collective site for ACP titles), The Weekly Trading Post, Australian News Network and The Australian Financial Review.
For the Howard government this was good news in one respect: political commentary was now distributed via the online websites of mainstream media outlets as well as through specific sites developed by these media outlets. This targeted the growing number of people accessing news content from alternative media platforms, thus potentially expanding the number of people exposed to political communication who may not be purchasers of daily newspapers nor viewers of television news or political programs.

Smith (1999, p. 5) also reiterated the Internet’s impact on readership highlighted by Morgan’s research that showed people who are heavy users of the Internet are more likely to be heavy newspaper and magazine readers, who have watched pay TV in the past seven days, are light listeners of commercial radio, and light viewers of commercial TV. What this research showed was that the Internet is still booming, with the greatest area of growth based on specific applications rather than the more generic ‘surfing or browsing’. From a political standpoint, one could conclude that those people with a very specific interest in politics, or a specific party or candidate, would be more inclined to access the Internet for the purpose of following news and activities emanating from the Internet sites of those parties or individuals. Thus politicians may well be talking to the converted, to friends, supporters and members of political parties or those highly interested in politics. Another heavy user of political Internet sites are journalists who access these sites to monitor the activities of parties and candidates. For those managing these sites, the “echo-chamber theory” arises. Garrett (2009, p. 279) suggested that ‘people do not seek to completely exclude other perspectives from their political universe, and there is little evidence that they will use the Internet to create echo chambers, devoid of other viewpoints, no matter how much control over their political information environment they are given’. In other words the Internet provides the platform for wide debate and exchange of ideas, and the more non-partisan users who engage the better for political parties.

**Television**

The Australian Government funded ABC radio and television network tended to be where the main analysis of political commentary occurred during the Howard era. *The 7.30 Report* hosted by Kerry O’Brien commenced in 1994, and this program in itself became a flagship for political interviews and an analysis of the political landscape in Australia. Other ABC television programs that carried political content included *Four Corners* that commenced in
August 1961, *Media Watch* on 8 May 1989, *Lateline* first aired on 13 February 1990, *ABC Insiders* commenced on 15 July 2001, and *Q&A* commenced on 22 May 2008 (Source: [http://www.abc.net.au/](http://www.abc.net.au/)). The *7.30 Report* was certainly considered an agenda setter by politicians and politically savvy members of the public. Craig (2004, p. 100-101) makes the point that ‘many television political interviewers are themselves public figures, and their fame (or notoriety) is based on their interviewing “style” … and the ABC’s Kerry O’Brien (is a public figure) with an impact on the political landscape’. Craig also notes these interviewers ‘are adopting the role of the public’s representative. In a mediated society, the interviewer becomes the means by which “our” concerns are posed to public figures, particularly those elected public figures’.

On commercial television very few programs were devoted to politics or had specific political content. Bell, Boehringer and Crofts (1982, p. 2) research concluded that:

> We do not see “television” as the significant cause of political/social change, we do argue that the medium amplifies, extends and consolidates socially significant changes ... For example televisual discourses which focus on elections and party politics effectively displace, or at least fail to take account of, a dynamic, informed and reasoning public. The electronic media … effectively circumscribe rather than facilitate public discussion and debate by diverse, conflicting interests.

Bell, Boehringer and Crofts also conclude (1982, p. 8) ‘the very nature of television news and current affairs programmes reflects the tension between public responsibility (at least insofar as this is compatible with high ratings) and inter-channel competition for viewers and revenue. Even the ABC practices “ambush” programming and seeks to compete for essentially the same audience as the commercial channels’.

The flagship of Channel Nine’s political coverage was *Sunday*, a production that ran for 27 years after first airing in November 1981 and finishing in August 2008. The other commercial politically focused show was *Meet The Press*, which first ran on the Seven Network in 1958. Then the Ten Network launched the program in October 1992. Paul Bonjiorno has hosted the show since 1996. Channel Nine’s *60 Minutes*, a take-off of the United States CBS program *Sixty Minutes America*, commenced in Australia on Sunday 11 February 1979. The weekly program often interviewed political actors, and the approach taken to these stories, according to Bell, Boehringer and Crofts (1982, p. 142) marked:
A qualitative change in that the interview is orientated not so much to going behind-the-scenes (revealing the given politicians capacity for political trustworthiness, leadership, vision) as to going within-the-person. What is at stake is not a revelation of the politician within his or her institutional context by the interviewer, but rather the self-revelation by the individual of his or her personality and motivations.

Bell, Boehringer and Crofts (1982, p. 75) found ‘the bulk of 60 Minutes coverage appears to be generated neither by social/political significance, nor even by currently topical controversy, but rather by a cynical marketing strategy which centres on a judgement of what will pass as “current affairs” and still be a commercial product’.

Roy Morgan’s Chief Executive Michele Levine (2006), and Gary Morgan, Executive Chairman stated: ‘today we see television coming to us through computer screens (New York Times, August 1, 2005). We see advertising through mobile phones, and advertisers being turned into content producers. Then came the Internet, pay TV, DVDs, PlayStations, Palm Pilots, iPods’. The era of the continuous 24-hour news cycle had arrived, and the pressure on journalists, and the media generally, to meet the demands of consumers for constant information delivered on multiple technology platforms, permanently changed the media landscape. Errington and Miragliotta (2007, p. 13) states:

Much of the media content that is produced by the commercial sector is geared to infotainment, and not the disclosure of news and information. Ironically, many Australians in seeking quality current affairs, rely on the government-owned media enterprises, such as the ABC, rather than the privately owned commercial broadcasters.

Like radio, television has time limits and program formats that politicians needed to adhere to. The same parameters exist in the length of statements for news bulletins, around 10 to 15 seconds, and interviews on political programs can run from four to 10 minutes, with some exceptions, and politicians are expected to keep their answers “contained” or viewers will quickly become disengaged. Hosts will interrupt their guest if the answers are not relevant to the question or too long-winded. Thus, in the mediatised world of politics, the media sets the ground rules. If politicians don’t adhere to these “rules”, they will not only receive less air time, but their image will be potentially damaged in the eyes of the electorate; viewers soon turn off verbose, inarticulate or dull and uninspiring spokespeople (see Tanner (2011). Sky News on the other hand, brought a new dimension to the news media landscape.
Viewing televised leadership debates is an example of the public turning to television for a specific political event as television stations commit to airing these forums “in the public interest”. There is a genuine interest in the performance of political leaders in these debates, as McAllister and Clark (2008, p. 3) confirmed. McAllister stated that interest in the 2007 election campaign was highlighted by a surge in the number of people who watched the leadership debate on television, a 12 per cent increase over 2004. This debate in the Great Hall of Parliament House, Canberra, between Prime Minister John Howard and Labor Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd was held on 21 October 2007 and telecast on ABC TV, Nine Network and Sky News Australia. It was moderated by David Speers, Sky News Chief Political Editor. During each campaign from 1993 to 2007 free-to-air television broadcast these events, with more than a third to almost half the population watching the debate. This again confirms the heightened interest in politics around election periods, which then tapers off once a new government has been formed.

The Development of new Technology and Platforms

The Impact of Sky News

Sky News (2013) was launched in Australia at 5.00 pm on 19 February 1996, opened its Press Gallery Bureau in 2000, and in 2004 began broadcasting Sky News Active, an interactive on-demand TV news service. Sky News would also broadcast political press conferences live, and this impacted on the way journalists covered political news, since they needed to take into account the fact that the full details of the conference were already publicly available.

Sky News, in particular, changed the way politics was reported, providing a constant stream of news and information to subscribers. It was possible for a politician to record an interview with Sky News in the morning, and avoid any further media opportunities for the day, as Sky News would distribute these interviews either through a live feed or a pre-recorded interview to media outlets around the country. Also, transcripts of interviews were available. Both Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer used Sky News to set the political agenda for the day, allowing them to avoid further media scrutiny if they wished, as they had already that morning made a public statement about the issue of the moment.
Smith (1999) revealed the Roy Morgan study of pay TV viewership in 1999. Their findings were for the three years they had been reporting pay TV and Internet behaviour, and they found an overall decline in heavy free-to-air TV viewers and an overall increase in light free-to-air TV viewers (as defined by the number of hours viewing). To a limited extent, pay TV could be seen as complementary to free-to-air TV, as non-TV viewers are more likely to subscribe to and watch pay TV. Nevertheless, while the proportion of non-TV viewers watching pay TV continues to grow, it still only represents seven per cent of the total pay TV audience (based on data for the 12 months to March 1999).

Young (2007, p. 73) noted in 2004 that Sky News Active, the news service provided by pay television providers Foxtel and Austar, extended its digital coverage to include dedicated coverage of the House of Representatives, Senate and their committees. Sky News Active now has a dedicated parliamentary channel. The service uses the sound and vision provided by parliament and, during sitting weeks, switches between debates in the House of Representatives, Senate, and key committees, based on editorial judgements about significance and newsworthiness. Bandwidth considerations limit the display of the service to a fraction of the screen, but plans are under way to expand the service over time. When Prime Minister John Howard launched the Sky News Active service (24 March 2004) Young (2007, p. 74) said the innovation was heralded as ‘revolutionising the coverage of the parliament and the way Australians would be informed, and a celebration of the importance of the Commonwealth Parliament’.

Young (2008 (a), p. 1) made the observation that:

Before the 2007 election, Sky promised the most comprehensive coverage Australian viewers had ever “witnessed”, and I think, in terms of TV, it achieved that. Aside from dedicated programs, news bulletins and breaking news headlines, programs were interrupted to broadcast—usually live and in full—media conferences, policy announcements and other key events. They were multiple hours of election—related content every day during the election.

In terms of political content, Young observed, that pay TV has Australia's only locally produced 24-hour news channel. However by international standards, the take-up of pay TV in Australia has been very slow. It is growing, but in 2005, only about 23 per cent of Australian households had pay TV compared to around 88 per cent in the United States and
50 per cent in the UK. Even taking this into account, Sky News viewing figures are small. As an overall percentage of TV viewing, Sky News captures only around .5 per cent of the Australian TV viewing audience (OzTam national subscription TV report Week 29, July 15-21 2007). Young (2008 (a), p. 3) says ‘it’s a fantastic resource for anyone interested in politics, but this is what and who it is for — news junkies and political junkies’. Although Sky News has a small audience, the fact that its coverage of politics is extensive, as is other news for that matter, and it streams coverage of major news conferences and other events to media outlets all around Australia, means its influence is far more extensive than bland ratings statistics would have us believe.

Young also examined the influence Sky News had on political players: ‘Sky News has become a major player in the Australian political/media landscape’. Young said ‘this is not judged by the size of the audience but rather by several other key measures of influence: namely the composition of its audience, its impact on the political reporting of other media outlets and the political behaviour of politicians and parties’. Young (2009, p. 401) also noted ‘in Australia politicians have been increasingly relying upon Sky News not only for news updates but also as a way of communicating with and influencing other elites’. Young’s findings are supported by the comments made by a number of Members of Parliament interviewed for this thesis who valued Sky News’s political coverage and considered it an ‘agenda setter’ (see Chapters 5–7).

The Emergence of New Technology

From 1994 to 1998 existing technologies dominated media consumption (see Figure 3). All figures are for the twelve months ending December. Smith states that ‘whilst pay TV and the Internet have provided a totally new means of expending available leisure hours, the number of people engaged in each of the main media activities each week has hardly changed’. Smith states ‘the proportion of the population who watches commercial television in any given week has been almost constant’.
In examining this research Smith (1999) suggested that for most people, the consumption of media is not a yes/no decision (in the same way that dieting is not a yes/no decision to consume food). It is not whether they are consuming, it is how much! The introduction of new media puts demands on people's time spent with existing media, long before a decision needs to be made to stop/keep consuming existing media (if any such decision needs to be made). In fact, not only do Internet users watch less TV than their non-Internet using counterparts, they also appear less dedicated or involved in the current programme offering, so although a relatively new medium, Internet users (nearly 50 per cent of the population) have very different TV viewing habits to non-users. Smith concluded by suggesting ‘that Internet and pay TV have grown significantly over the last three years and their success may be driving greater discrimination or selectivity among their “users” other media choices’. Whilst television remains a mass media, its future application will be more niche oriented as digital TV and datacasting segment the market even further.

What does this analysis mean for Members of Parliament during the Howard government era? It would reaffirm their strategy of continuing to court mainstream media journalists to secure as much coverage as possible on radio, television and in newspapers. The emergence of the Internet and pay TV was not considered as part of any media strategy at that stage. It is
understandable that politicians would be reluctant to immerse themselves, at a financial cost and some personal risk of eroding their profile, or forgoing their focus on mainstream media to “experiment” with a new technology platform.

Politicians’ caution on quickly embracing these new platforms at the expense of traditional media was born out by Denemark’s (2005, p. 222-223) research in 2003 that highlighted only 11 per cent of people in Australia said they used the Internet daily to get news and information. However, Neilson Research (2007) released their Online 10th Australian Internet and Technology Report that showed Internet use in Australia surpassed television viewing for the first time: 13.7 hours per week versus 13.3 hours. Young (2008 (a), p. 7) observed:

To me, the way newspapers aren't presented online, the changing format of TV news and the decline of commercial current affairs programmes, are symptoms of how traditional media are ditching politics or, at least, consider it a niche rather than a general interest for their audiences.

Another use of the Internet to emerge was its effectiveness as an information distribution channel. So much so that PR companies were using it to bombard journalists with press releases. Pearson (1999, p. 278-280) cites several examples of attempts by public relations practitioners to influence journalists via the Internet. Certainly, by 1999 the distribution of press releases to journalists was becoming more organised, confirming the findings of Quinn (1998, p. 246) in his study of Internet usage by Australian journalists. Websites were being used to store and archive press releases for reference, and journalists could register to have press releases sent automatically to their electronic mail addresses. While this was a voluntary request for such promotional data, some publicists chose to ‘spam’ lists with their material, to the annoyance of discussants, according to Pearson (1999).

Errington and Miragliotta (2007, p18) noted that in 2000 the Productivity Commission estimated that 81 per cent of the population were moderate or heavy users of some form of media, with only 19 per cent claiming to have low involvement with all media forms. At the time, the most popular were newspapers and broadcast media (radio and television) and the Internet. See also Denemark, Ward and Bean (2007) on the television coverage of the 2001 election campaign.
As Figure 4 above illustrates, TV use in 2006 was at 13.8 hours per week, compared with 12.5 hours of Internet use. In 2005 levels were even further apart (13.2 hours versus 8.9 hours). This research highlighted the emergence of the Internet as a major threat to the dominance of mainstream media, and the opportunities the Internet presented to political parties. Where politicians had a mixed relationship with television and newspaper journalists and proprietors, the Internet enabled the dissemination of political messages by parties and their candidates without the filter imposed by the media and their respective bias and opinions.

Neilson (2007) also reported that cross-media consumption was on the rise: more than half (58 per cent) of Australian Internet users said they had watched TV while online and 48 per cent of respondents had used the Internet while listening to the radio. The other revealing statistics from this research was the time people spent with respective mediums. According to Neilson, traditionally Internet use had not displaced other media, according to Tony Marlow, associate research director, Asia Pacific. Nielsen Online said that ‘in recent years Australians have been increasingly consuming more than one medium at a time, commonly resulting in a fragmented span of attention’, continuing with ‘While use of the Internet continued to grow
this year (2007), for the first time ever this was not accompanied by an increase for TV consumption - a possible early warning sign that we are approaching the feared media saturation point. The number of websites expanded rapidly in the mid to late 2000s according to Flew and Wilson (2008, p. 20):

… such as the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, the user-generated video site YouTube, the photography site Flickr, DIY blog software such as Blogger and WordPress, and the various personalised social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, Orkut, and Bebo.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) have also reviewed the use of websites. By 2007 “social media” had emerged as a major player in the communications industry, particularly among younger people. For politicians this enabled them to communicate one-on-one with constituents, through to reaching a large audience through online applications such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, blogs, newsgroups, chat rooms, text messages, wikis and more sophisticated websites.

These new technology platforms have impacted on journalists and the production of news bulletins and general political content. Whereas once journalists could file a story to meet a deadline, the evolving developments in technology and the pace of news reporting and dissemination has forced media outlets to embrace technology and quench the thirst for information demanded by an ever increasing technically savvy public. This has had a major impact on the way journalists work, not only constructing stories for a radio or television news bulletin, or a newspaper edition, but to service the growing demands of their employer’s online presence. This trend also flowed to politicians and their relationships and connection with media outlets. As new opportunities arose for media coverage through an online presence, many politicians seized the chance to utilise these new platforms to reach an emerging and growing online community.

With technology increasing the pace of the media cycle, it is worth noting the comments British Prime Minister Tony Blair (2007) made in a speech on communications and the media. Blair talked of the speed of news and the necessity of having to handle three issues a day. He also reflected on the audience decline for television news bulletins. Blair said
The media world … is becoming more fragmented, more diverse and transformed by technology … there are rolling 24 hour news programmes that cover events as they unfold. In the event of a crisis, things harden within minutes … I mean you can’t let speculation stay out there for longer than an instant.

Rosenberg and Feldman (2008, p. 10) noted this instant news becomes a major problem ‘when there’s no time or inclination to seek a second “good” source’.

**How Members of Federal Parliament Adopted the New Media**

Young (2007, p. 163) made the observation that ‘despite this perception of Australia as a nation of techno-enthusiasts, academic studies of the political uses of new ICTs (information and communication technology) by individuals and institutions have been rather limited’. This was certainly so for the political elite. Early research by Magarey (1999) struck a note of cautious optimism, highlighting a number of pioneering schemes introduced by the federal parliament during the late 1990s that used digital technologies to enhance the transparency and accessibility of representatives. These included formal recognition for e-petitions by the Senate, the provision of websites and email to all MPs, and access to Hansard records via the Internet. However, one of the biggest challenges for politicians was the lack of interest by the media itself in detailed analysis of politics and policies. With the small exception of print, Errington and Miragliotta (2007, p. 13) suggests ‘the media allocates very little of its time to news and current affairs’. As such, many politicians saw emerging technology not only as a challenge but an opportunity. Political parties were developing websites in the early to mid-1990s, a subject also explored by Gibson and Ward (2002). Chen (2006, p. 15) said the ALP were well ahead of their counterparts in setting up a site in 1994, with most parties following two to three years later: the Liberals in 1996, Democrats in 1997, and the Nationals in 1998 along with the Greens. In addition, the ALP also offered more information on their site, scoring in the top third of the information provision scale. Political staffers were noting the benefits of the Internet through political party’s websites. The Web became an excellent vehicle for political parties to post media releases, policy and position statements on key issues, transcripts of media interviews, details on candidates, upcoming party events and general information of interest to members, journalists and the general public.
In fact, Chen (2006, p. 35) reported, ‘Australian political parties were among the earliest adopters of the new technology in the shape of website establishment’. According to the Australian Centre for Public Communication (2008, p. 5) John Howard had become ‘the first Australian Prime Minister to have a personal website’.

Thus the use of new technologies came to the fore in the latter part of the Howard government’s tenure, and was utilised by all parties and candidates to varying levels of effectiveness and success. Despite MPs being mostly technologically savvy, the lack of resources in MPs offices and budget limitations impacted on the utilisation of social media in the early stages of its development. Also Chen (2006, p. 40) noted political parties allocating money for printing and postage as the more traditional forms of communication, with constituents tending to override any consideration of investing precious funds in online marketing that was “untested”, and in fact during the 2004 campaign, emails provided candidates with a better means to manage communications with constituents. Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2004) supported the reasons above on why politicians may not have adopted this new technology at election time. These included personal factors such as skills and attitudes. One obvious factor is the skills and backgrounds of MPs. Those with an interest or understanding of the technology are more likely to use the web. Hence, MPs with IT employment backgrounds or qualifications might be expected to be amongst the leaders or innovators in technology. Additionally, MPs’ staff can be crucial in pushing forward the use of ICTs since they are likely to run and manage emails and websites on a day-to-day basis. A second consideration was socio-demographic characteristics as a predictor of online activity. The majority of survey evidence suggests that the young to middle-aged, middle-class male is the heaviest political user of the Internet. One might expect this to be reflected in parliament, with younger males of recent parliamentary cohorts likely to be the most active online. Gibson and Ward also cover this issue (2002). Where Internet use is higher within a constituency, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that MPs will again have a greater incentive to develop Internet based forms of communication. It was noted by Bishop, Kane and Patapan (2002, p. 56) that ALP leader Mark Latham experimented with direct e-democracy, using his website as early as 2001 as a ‘response to the failure of current parliamentary practice’.
On 12 July 2007, ALP Senator Stephen Conroy launched a MySpace site on the Australian Impact Channel, announcing in a media release that it was ‘to connect with people and share ideas’. The ABC reported in July 2007 that 17 federal politicians in Australia were using MySpace sites for election campaign communication (ABC News Online, 12th July 2007). Macnamara (2008, p. 6) quotes *The Daily Telegraph* of 19 September 2007, that reported the Workplace Relations Minister Joe Hockey was the first Australian Federal Minister to have his own website, and Macnamara (2008, p. 3) also quoted then Opposition Spokesperson on the Environment and the Arts, Peter Garrett, saying ‘the Internet has made politicians more accountable and more accessible’. Macnamara (2008, p. 11) noted:

> John Howard did not make the list of leading new media users as, although he used YouTube videos, a personal web site for a time, and intermittently published a blog, qualitatively his efforts were rated poorly both in traditional media election reporting and in widespread criticism including malicious and obscene comments on YouTube and on other websites. He was also subject to the largest number of anti-videos, spoofs and parodies, a unique element of new social media.

Thus we see MPs becoming more aware of the opportunities new media platforms provided, with the establishment of websites common, but the use of this technology to interact with constituents through multiple channels utilising this new technology was just starting to emerge as the Howard government ended its term in office. There was, however, an increased focus on social media and other technology platforms at election times, as political players were keen to use all available channels to promote their candidature.

So how did the political elite take advantage of these new technological platforms? The Australian Centre for Public Communication Report, (2008, p. 11) notes that, despite the prevalence of new media and its ability to interact directly with constituents, of all Members of Federal Parliament, only 46 of 226 elected federal politicians (20 per cent) allowed direct email contact, with 80 per cent directing “contact me” to their parliamentary or electorate staff. These findings are very revealing in that it highlights the lack of initiative by politicians to fully utilise the technology at their disposal. In fact, the plethora of social media sites gave political parties and candidates plenty of options. The report also found most Internet communication used by politicians did not utilise the interactivity and “conversation” features that distinguish new Web 2.0 media such as blogs, MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube.
Conclusion

To reflect on those technological changes over the Howard government era from 1996 to 2007 is to see how the world changed so much in just over a decade. This period saw the decline in newspaper readership, and the proliferation of television news channels, resulting in the aggregation of media outlets and the disbursement of audiences across a far wider range of media outlets. This multi-media landscape made it even more difficult for politicians to reach a wide cross-section of the Australian population. As the pace of news gathering quickened, media platforms converged and news outlets fed off each other, creating an “intra-media agenda setting” trend. These changes placed greater responsibility on press offices and staffers to develop media and communications strategies that would effectively sell their political messages to an ever-growing time poor and sceptical audience. At the same time, these changes support the academic literature explored in Chapter 2 that suggests Australian politics became increasingly mediatised during this time, with political leaders dependent on existing and new forms of media for the conduct of politics. The move from the dependence on mainstream media, to the new world of online interactive communication, altered the way politicians and the general public expressed their views on political issues and how events of political significance were portrayed online. Australians commenced utilising this new technology as a source of political information, and to interact with political representatives, requiring a different approach to the style and content of political discourse. This required political actors to adapt to this new paradigm of political communication and the format requirements of these new platforms. Although websites were part of the political landscape in the mid to late 1990s, it was social media that emerged as one of the most innovative online technologies. Although social media became popular with the Australian public, particularly those under 40, few politicians took the opportunity to embrace it. Thus, despite the emergence of new technology, most MPs, with notable exceptions, were either reluctant to utilise this form of interaction with their constituents through lack of expertise or confidence, or felt it was not the most effective way to communicate.
Chapter 4: The Research Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter explains how research for this thesis was undertaken. It describes the methods used, and reflects on how best to approach the task of interviewing those people in order to add significantly to the research objectives of the thesis. Eighty-six interviews were undertaken with leading Australian political and government figures, ministerial staffers and advisors, journalists, media commentators, public servants and academics. The chapter details the approach to the selection of interviewees, how the semi-structured interviews were conducted and how this material was analysed. It outlines the documents used from the Parliament House Library, Hansard, Senate Inquiries, academic studies, and other books, journals and literature that explored the relationship between government and the news media. The challenges faced by researchers gaining access to public servants are also examined.

Background

As there is very little source material, in Australia specifically, on how a prime minister manages his or her media and communications within the office of the prime minister itself, it was necessary to obtain this material by interviewing a large number of political players whose roles shaped the political landscape during the Howard government from 1996 to 2007. One significant contribution of this thesis is in the findings that are based on the analysis of this original interview material. This thesis adds to the knowledge of political communication in Australia, delving into the strategic approach a prime minister takes to converse with the wider electorate, and the impact the personal communication style of the country’s leader has on their political fortunes. It also examines the way changing technologies and the media landscape impacted on the government’s communication with constituents across the country.

There were 86 one-on-one interviews conducted. This enabled the collection of a wide cross-section of views. As different perspectives emerged, the interview material provided a well-rounded understanding of how the Howard government actually managed its communications and media responsibilities. Former Prime Minister John Howard was interviewed twice, once at the beginning of the project in 2008 and a second time in late 2012, to verify information.
THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

gathered from other interviewees, and to expand on the themes emerging from the research. The list of interviewees is attached at Appendix 1. As part of this research hundreds of academic papers and literature were also examined to provide a benchmark from which to judge the approach, and the performance of the Howard government, as it related to the thesis objectives.

Building on the review of political communication literature (Chapter 3), the following research questions were developed:

1. What was Prime Minister Howard’s personal communication style, what strategies did he use to keep the Australian electorate informed, and how did political actors during this period view Howard’s style and performance?
2. How did the prime minister’s office approach the complexity of developing and coordinating its political communication during the Howard government’s tenure?
3. What impact did changing technologies have on the Howard government’s ability to communicate with the wider Australian electorate?
4. How did the Howard government handle communications when faced with “political crises”?

The Methods Adopted

The primary research method applied in this research project was qualitative interviews, informed by political communication literature, and documentary analysis of parliamentary papers, polling data, and selected print and broadcast media. Byrman (2012, p. 716) explains the method of one-on-one, semi structured, open-ended qualitative interviews: ‘the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview guide, but is able to vary the sequence of questions’. Those interviewed included people associated with the prime minister’s office, the press office within the prime minister’s office, departmental officers, and others associated with government communication and media relations during the period 1996–2007. The information provided, through the use of open-ended questions, also revealed other areas where further investigation benefited the thesis.

Interviews were supported by five secondary research methods. Firstly, the collation of material from academic papers developed a theoretical understanding of the interdependence of politics and the media via a literature review of key academic work in the area. I conducted an historical analysis of publicly available literature, examining PhD theses, conference
papers, journal articles, position pieces, lectures, and other literature presented by recognised academics in the field of political communication. Secondly, documentary research strategies were used to source information from papers and material from federal government proceedings in the Senate and House of Representatives Committees of Inquiry. Hansard records, information requested from the Federal Parliamentary Library, politicians and public servants’ speeches and position papers provided valuable background information, in addition to books, articles, and opinion pieces, autobiographical and biographical writings published over the period of the Howard government. Thirdly, I accessed research and data published by pollsters and the media, and those commissioned by universities as part of special reports. The fourth supporting method was an examination of newspaper and print articles, electronic media news stories and features, and extracts from news and political Internet sites. Finally there was a “case study” approach: three specific situations were chosen to illustrate how the press office within the prime minister’s office operated during times of crisis or where assistance with media and PR management were essential. This documentary data provided valuable supporting material for the analysis of the qualitative interviews.

Selecting Interview Candidates

Purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012) was used to select candidates for interview. Interviewees were selected who met the criteria of being either associated with, or directly involved in, the prime minister’s press office. These fell into nine clusters:

1. Former staff members of the prime minister’s office
2. Former staff members of the prime minister’s press office
3. Former and current federal government public servants involved in key areas under examination, such as the Australian Wheat Board Scandal, Tampa, the Children Overboard affair, and Private Kovco’s death
4.Politicians, current and retired
5. Government advisors
6. Members of the press gallery
7. Journalists and news editors
8. Commentators/authors
9. Academics
The people chosen for interviews from these clusters were considered to be major actors who were intimately involved in the political scene during the years of the Howard government. Political actors are described by McNair (2011, p. 5) as ‘those individuals who aspire, through organisational and institutional means, to influence the decision-making process’. They were players who could help in the understanding of Howard’s personal communications style, and the techniques he used to craft and control communication within his administration. As an example, many of the ABC’s Insiders panel were interviewed, a number of Howard’s front bench, Howard’s personal staff, high profile media commentators who specialised in political reporting and opinion pieces, Australia’s leading talkback radio hosts and the anchors of politically focused radio and television programs. Virtually every interviewee is featured in the final analysis.

**Interview Timing**

The timing of the interviews was critical. In order to minimise the challenges of memory and recall, it was important for me to seize the opportunity to interview as many informants as possible as quickly as possible following the 2007 election. Interviews therefore commenced upon approval from the University of Canberra’s Ethics Committee in July 2008, and were conducted throughout 2009. However, in some cases it was difficult to set up interviews, or I happened to meet by chance, perspective interviewees at a later date and thus interviews were conducted as late as 2014. The Gallup Organisation’s Tourangeau (1999, p. 31) detailed four major classes of memory problems, including long-term memory failure, as the original event never registered with them in the first place; secondly, errors introduced after the experience that are ‘woven into the representation of the experience and distort our memory’; thirdly, retrieval failure when ‘we may simply be unable to remember it’; and finally, reconstruction where we ‘fill in details missing from the memory … (and) we may introduce inaccuracies’.

**One-on-One Semi-structured Interview Methodology**

The semi-structured interviews I conducted used the ‘conversational approach’ where discussions revolved around experiences and stories, with questions flowing from the interviewees’ responses. My many years of media experience interviewing people was of considerable benefit when using this opened-ended qualitative elite technique, drawing on the experience of Ester who used this technique as a tool for ‘discerning patterns’ and to provide ‘information otherwise unavailable’ as outlined by Manheim (2005, p. 356). I used
questions that were open-ended, probing, encouraging free rein but maintaining the necessary control. Herbst (1998, p. 76) referred to “elite interviewing” that ‘resembles a conversation between equals more than the typical survey situation where the interviewer has a fairly rigid agenda and largely controls the course of the conversation’. Elites are described by Herbst (1998, p. 193) as:

Highly trained and have fascinating insights for the researcher. Informants can also be quite persuasive, drawing the researcher into their conceptual frameworks and distracting the interviewer from the task at hand… It is incumbent upon the researcher to follow the informants to some extent but to also guide them back to the protocol in order to finish the interview.

I found Herbst’s observations here relevant to my own experience (see also Davis, 2007). I had to guide some interviewees back to the purpose of the interview, rather than discuss their own opinions on Howard government policies. On a few occasions interviewees would be keen to comment on the performance of the Rudd government, a few saying to me ‘turn off the tape and let me tell you about Kevin Rudd’. Needless to say I was very keen to hear their views, however the focus of the interviews was on the communications performance of the Howard government. Thus, I also used a ‘general interview guide approach’, where a set of standard questions ensured the information solicited was kept within the scope of this research. I also drew on descriptive-inductive research tradition, using a multi-method approach utilising historical analysis, along with case studies and documentary research strategies to support and guide my elite interviewing techniques. I found thorough research on each informant prior to each interview was essential in order to gain the most productive information from these sources.

I continually encouraged the interviewee to provide reasons for their analysis of the subject matter discussed, and to elaborate and propose theories on why certain actions were taken or decisions made and the hypothesis behind these behaviours. Information obtained from individuals was cross-referenced with material obtained from other sources wherever possible. This included verifying stories, situations, incidents and other verbal comments reportedly made with multiple informants to confirm their authenticity. Information provided, where possible, was based on firm evidence and as such documents were sourced, or at least sighted, to verify the claims made by interviewees. Sensitive and confidential material divulged was authenticated were possible and acknowledged as such. I used the respondent
validation, or member validation, technique where I provided participants with feedback on comments made by other interviewees, and referred to media reports and academic papers, and asked for their views on these issues. General themes began to solidify as more interviews were conducted. Many of these themes were raised by the interviewees themselves and some were prompted by me during the interview so I could explore their thoughts on issues highlighted by others. Another advantage of choosing a wide sample is that the observations made by participants in earlier interviews can be fed into subsequent interviews, thereby lessening the framing of questions by the researcher.

Ten major themes emerged:

- Howard’s approach to communication generally and his media appearances in particular
- Howard’s ability to simplify complex policy messages
- How media strategies and key messages were developed
- The government’s approach to the public service
- The way Howard handled crisis situations in the media
- The coordination of communication across government departments and minister’s offices
- Technology changes and the use of social media
- The effectiveness of the prime minister’s press office, and
- The issues dominating the final year of the Howard government in 2007.

The semi-structured interview technique was far superior to employing a quantitative questionnaire methodology for the purpose of this thesis, as the interviewees were mostly high profile, busy individuals with considerable experience who enjoyed discussing political communication and media management, and who responded well to probing questions and relating their own experiences during the Howard years. Also many would have totally ignored the survey method approach. Often interviews scheduled for 30 minutes went well over time, as these contributors become absorbed in the subject matter and were willing to discuss the key themes I introduced during these interactions. This technique was also useful for the mode of analysis I chose, allowing me to draw on the comments and observations made and compare those to the statements made by other interviewees.
Access to Political Actors

Access to the Public Service and Informants

Gaining access to public servants still working within government is a challenge. I used the snowball sampling technique, asking my interviewees whom I should also see, and many suggested their former political staffers or other senior bureaucrats. On most occasions this paid off for me, even though other researchers have had difficulty securing access to these people. It is thus relevant to note the constraints under which members of the public service operate when faced with disclosing information about government activities.

As my interviews were conducted from 2008, I was fortunate to have had the cooperation of many Members of Parliament who served during the Howard era, including ministers, and staff from Prime Minister Howard’s office who were employed between 1996 and 2007. In addition to MPs and Howard staffers, secretaries of departments, public servants, journalists and commentators, an array of others provided “on-the-record” interviews. I was privileged to have gained this access, despite never having been an ‘insider’ nor held any political affiliations, but I was a professional media consultant with a 25 year media background and was now undertaking a PhD in political communication. I was introduced to former Prime Minister John Howard by the former ACT Chief Minister Kate Carnell at a testimonial dinner held for Howard at Parliament House on 16 July 2008. Ms Carnell mentioned to Howard I was undertaking a PhD on his government and he invited me to call his office to set up an appointment. That evening I also met Grahame Morris, who was in 1996/1997 a political advisor to John Howard and from May to September 1997 Howard’s Chief of Staff, and Arthur Sinodinos, Howard’s Chief of Staff from 1997 to 2006. Having been able to follow up these introductions with formal interviews, I then commenced contacting my list of potential interviewees including former cabinet ministers, journalists and commentators, federal government department heads, senior public servants, researchers and authors. Being able to advise these interviewees of my conversations with Howard, Sinodinos and Morris, they were happy to cooperate with this research project. Having lived in Canberra for over 20 years I also knew a few press gallery journalists and three federal government department heads, and fortuitously met five former Howard government ministers at Canberra or interstate functions I attended whilst on personal (private sector) business, or on flights to and from Canberra. On all of these occasions I took the opportunity to explain the basis of my thesis, and asked if they would be prepared to be interviewed, and all agreed.
The majority of interview recordings were professionally transcribed and a copy of the transcript and recordings were provided to interviewees on request. There were three interviewees who requested to see their quotes prior to the thesis being submitted. Of the 86 interviews conducted, only four interviewees were not willing to be quoted on-the-record, but provided valuable background information, and only two others (public servants) met with me but did not wish to participate. I would put some of this reluctance down to personal experiences with the Howard government, and perhaps nervousness on commenting about anything to do with the operation of the prime minister’s office. In other cases, people may just not have the time or inclination to be involved.

Participants were selected for interview based on their expertise and knowledge arising from their professional activities as they related to the Howard government’s political communication. Most participants were contacted by telephone in the first instance, then provided with details on the research via email or letter, depending on their preference. They were recruited based on their involvement or association with the prime minister’s media unit and through their professional involvement in political communications processes. Interviewees signed the consent form prior to the conducting and recording of the interview. This form outlined this research project’s aims and benefits, details on the ethics committee clearance obtained from the University of Canberra, the policy on confidentiality and storage of information, and a consent form signature block to be signed by the interviewee agreeing to my recording of the interview and the use of material obtained from the interview as on-the-record.

**Access Issues Faced by Academic Researchers**

There have been many instances when public servants have assisted researchers in projects related to the functions of government. Public servants are required to adhere to the Public Service Act 1999, within which the Public Service Regulations (1999) outline the responsibility of a public servant as they relate to the disclosure of information. Also governing the behaviour of public servants is the Australian Public Service Code of Conduct (s13. Public Service Act 1999). The *APS Values and Code of Conduct in practice* document (apsc.gov.au/values/conductguidelines5) is produced by the APSC and under the subsection: *Disclosing and using information* it states ‘there is a legal and regulatory framework that governs the general disclosure and use of official information by APS employees and access
by the public’. Apart from the Public Service Act 1999 (including the Code of Conduct), the framework includes: the Crimes Act 1914, Criminal Code Act 1995, Freedom of Information Act 1982, Archives Act 1983, and the Privacy Act 1988. With this legislation and codes it is not difficult to see why many public servants are reluctant to be interviewed or at least be quoted on-the-record, or acknowledged in any way with research that analyses a government’s performance. This is particularly so if the public servant is still an employee of the government, or now works in a position where they deal with government departments. However, those who have moved to academia or into retirement, or no longer have an association with the government are more inclined to freely express a view. Many former public servants are also likely to actively express views on social media or in the letters-to-the-editor pages of major newspapers.

In relation to this access to public servants and those individuals and organisations reliant on government cooperation to exist, there were two academic works of particular relevance to my research that sought access to the federal bureaucracy and those working within this framework. This information was important to me as a guide to how I could approach the task of seeking access to potential interviewees, the most effective approach to the interviews themselves, understanding the challenges they faced with access and on-the-record comments and, finally, how they analysed their findings. Tiernan (2004) and Helen Ester (2009), both provided good background material on the methodology they used to gain access to those informants that shaped their research. Ester conducted 25 interviews in two rounds, the first in May, June and July 2003, and the second in June 2004. Interviewees were selected from the ranks of senior journalists working in the 33 mainstream media bureaus located inside Parliament House. One respondent requested anonymity, whereas the other 24 were prepared to go “on-the-record” by name and employer. Contrasting Ester’s experience, Tiernan had problems of cooperation with many of those she wished to speak to. Tiernan used two case studies: the 1997 Travel Rorts affair and the 2001 Children Overboard controversy. Significant primary research was required to develop current and descriptively accurate accounts of the development of the staffing system under the Howard government. Tiernan found the government quite resistant to research into ministerial staffing arrangements. Requests for interviews and data provoked suspicion and resentment. She had no support from the government; no response was received from the Prime Minister’s chief of staff, some staffers spoke on condition of anonymity, and are referred to as Liberal Staffer A-B-C, Minister A, Journalist B and so on. Tiernan (2004, p. 21) described what she encountered as
paranoia from some prospective respondents’. Some public servants were concerned about electronic surveillance of email and telephone records. Head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Max Moore-Wilton (1996–2002), a dominating character nicknamed Max-the-Axe, was blamed for this paranoia. She found that in this period even journalists were loath to respond on-the-record, fearful of potential government retribution. Journalists were disciplined by having access to the Prime Minister limited (Grattan, 2003; Steketee, 2001). Tiernan reflected on James Walter, researching for *The Minister’s Minders* in 1983–1984, when he notes in his introduction that research for his book is limited by controlling factors. It is limited by the obsessive internalisation of decision making in Australia and the restraints that policymakers feel obliged to exercise against outside analysis of their work. There remains a secret history to every decision (Walter, 1986). Walter had a 56.5 per cent response rate to a survey questionnaire and he interviewed 23 staff from 21 of the 27 ministers’ offices. Maley (2002) had more success, as she was a former ministerial staffer and it was toward the end of the Keating government’s period in office. Maley interviewed 41 Labor ministerial advisors between April 1995 and April 1996. In addition, 13 ministers and 10 public servants who had worked with the sample of advisors were interviewed. None of Tiernan’s interviews conducted for her PhD were with current ministers or a member of their current staff. Letters and follow-up emails seeking cooperation received neither acknowledgement nor reply. Tiernan stated she would have liked to use survey methods as Forward did (Forward, 1975, 1977; Walter, 1986) to examine staff demographics, career backgrounds etc., but it was not possible.

**Analysis of Material**

Interviews were analysed using the approach of *qualitative thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis is a textual research approach, through which certain themes of information emerge through a close analysis of the interview transcripts, in concert with relevant academic literature. Within the framework of the thesis research questions ‘discerning patterns’ emerged. This was very helpful as much of the content to emerge was consistent, not contradictory, thus strengthening the propositions outlined. This became particularly relevant when informants from disparate backgrounds and differing relationships with the Prime Minister and the press office had similar experiences and observations, thus reinforcing a theme. To analyse the vast quantity of material I had
collected, using a custom-built Excel spreadsheet, I allocated a colour code to each of the ten themes I had identified, and highlighted the themes as they emerged in each transcript. These themes were then collated and form the basis of the analysis of the material in Chapters 5 to 8. I acknowledge that my professional experience and status as a long-term Canberra resident (see above) contributed to both the conduct of the interviews, the analysis of the interview material, and interpretation of the academic literature, but I endeavoured to remain reflexive throughout the interview process.

Conclusion

The research for this thesis was based on qualitative research methodology, using interviews as its primary source of data. After examining the methodology of Tiernan and Ester and the observations and experiences of Maley and Walter it was decided to meet with informants on a one-on-one basis, taking a ‘conversational approach’ to the gathering of material. I discounted using a survey method, as this would be very limiting in the information likely to be forthcoming, and the status of people I interviewed would, in my opinion, have ignored this approach completely. The examination of historical research was necessary to put into context the evolution of communication, and the changing technology platforms, that impacted on political discourse over the period of the Howard government. The methodology adopted allowed for considerable new material to be uncovered and added to the array of material, albeit limited, on this very specific subject. Gaining access to senior public servants did not prove an issue, despite the significant restrictions surrounding their ability to comment on political matters. The volume of interviews conducted provided a wealth of material to add to the literature on this important topic of political communication.

The next four chapters are devoted to the material emanating from the 86 interviews conducted. The chapters each address one of the four questions posed as the foundations of this thesis. The material covers the insights into the communication approach of John Howard, the functions of the press office, the impact of technologies on political communication, how the government handled crisis situations, and their last year in office. Chapter 5 specifically focuses on the question:
What was Prime Minister Howard’s personal communication style, what strategies did he use to keep the Australian electorate informed, and how did political actors during this period view Howard’s style and performance?

It examines the mindset of John Howard as a communicator, and how he viewed communication with the wider Australian electorate as pivotal to his government’s success in selling his policies and reform agenda. It explores the way Howard’s media messages were crafted, how he coped living in a “media saturated” environment, and his focus on building relationships with journalists, commentators and also the proprietors of Australia’s leading media entities. It also looks at Howard’s views on various media platforms, and adapting to the changes in the media environment over his eleven and a half years in government.
Chapter 5: John Howard’s Approach to Communications and the Media

Chapter Overview

The following four chapters detail the findings from the qualitative thematic analysis of interviews from one-on-one meetings and discussions with key players. Each chapter deals with one of the thesis questions. This chapter focuses on the first research question related to the focus of this thesis:

What was Prime Minister Howard’s personal communication style, what strategies did he use to keep the Australian electorate informed, and how did political actors during this period view Howard’s style and performance?

The chapter includes findings from personal interviews with departmental secretaries, Howard staffers, some press gallery journalists, media commentators and hosts, and ministers’ press secretaries. It should be noted the term “actors” in this context refers to all those participating in the political process during Howard’s term as prime minister. These include the 86 interviewees who participated in this project, including many politicians, journalists, radio commentators, newspaper opinion writers, departmental secretaries, lobbyists, authors and academics. This chapter sheds light on the way Howard coped with living in a ‘media saturated’ environment. Howard’s communication style and his media performances are outlined, and his relationship with journalists, commentators and the proprietors of Australia’s leading media entities is also explored. The chapter discusses Howard’s confidants, and examines Howard’s views on various media platforms, and the challenges of adapting to the changes in the media environment over the Coalition’s eleven and a half years in government.

Howard’s “Media Life” Routines: Living with the Media

This study confirmed Howard was an effective political communicator. His desire to understand what ordinary Australians were thinking, his natural plain-speaking style, his calm composure when under pressure, a willingness to face tough questioning, a capability to debate an argument, a consistency in his views and stance on issues, and a skill to articulate a
position with great conviction, were key attributes that led Howard to become a very successful politician and Prime Minister. Howard demonstrated effective political communication skills. Howard kept calm compared to US President George Bush who Kaid & Ragan (1990) suggested his ‘verbal aggressiveness negatively affected Bush’s communicator image’. According to Campbell (2003), ‘Howard's media performances, in terms of frequency, willingness to engage with controversial issues and discuss his values and engagement in social, cultural and political critique’ eclipsed Treasurer Peter Costello's tentative ambiguities’. Van Onselen & Errington (2006) stated ‘Howard’s electoral success almost certainly owes much to the rhetorical style he has employed to avoid a perception of arrogance, particularly for a government over ten years in office, as happened to Paul Keating towards the end of his government’. These are the traits of an effective political communicator, and Howard knew, through his long political career, that such skills were essential to his success as a politician.

Howard was an avid consumer of media, from his early morning walks listening to radio, to scanning the morning papers, to watching television news at night and on weekends. His life was ‘media saturated’. Howard knew the importance of political commentary and the ability to respond quickly to emerging issues. The way he immersed himself in the waves of daily media coverage, became a hallmark of his term in office. Howard said in an interview for this thesis:

The trick I found that seemed to work for a long time was you didn’t want to have too rigid an approach to planning the day, it depended a bit on what the day brought. I would normally look at the papers myself, there's no substitute for, in my opinion, maybe I'm a creature of my generation, but there's still no substitute for having a quick flick at the papers yourself first thing in the morning without relying on anybody else. I’d start with *The Australian* because it gives more national political coverage than any of the other papers, but I always made sure I looked at *The Telegraph* and *The Melbourne Herald-Sun* to see what the punters were really reading.

Howard’s approach to monitoring the media never altered, despite the changes in technology platforms that emerged around him, particularly in the latter stages of his prime ministership. During the day the press office would keep Howard informed on matters of media interest, and provide briefings to ensure the Prime Minister was able to respond to journalists questions if asked. The 24-hour news cycle was relentless, and a prime minister was expected
to be across every issue of importance. According to Van Onselen and Errington (2007, p. 383) ‘media are a major intrusion into Howard’s day, he spends a good deal of time working his way around talkback radio studios, and whether Howard is in the office or back home, he stops to watch the evening news’. Kerry O’Brien, host of ABC television’s The 7.30 Report from 1995–2010, felt it didn’t matter when a story broke, all news followed a media cycle. He also felt Howard used the media very effectively, using ‘morning radio as one outlet and another very useful outlet that I think was probably first really developed in a consistent way by Howard's media team, was morning television’. O’Brien’s view of the media cycle was clear:

So morning radio, morning television, get the news cycle for the day going and then you get evening television coming into play, television news, television current affairs and then you get the next morning’s papers, that's the cycle.

O’Brien observed that the cycle had changed with technology, and that Howard was also aware of these changes: ‘you can start with the morning’s papers and work the cycle that way but to me you've now got this continuous flow … it's irrelevant where the flow begins and ends because it is continuous’. David Luff, Senior Media Advisor to John Howard from 2003–2007, also commented that Howard knew the importance of responding to the media cycle, so ‘if I needed to see him, I could see him even when he was in the middle of a Cabinet meeting’. Howard said ‘it would have to be quite major, and it didn’t happen very often’. This example highlights the appreciation Howard had for managing the media agenda and for quickly responding to issues as they arose. Howard appeared to handle the media with relative ease. Karen Middleton, Chief Political Correspondent for SBS since January 1995 and Parliamentary Press Gallery President from 2004–2008, felt ‘the Howard government probably were the most sophisticated at media management that we’ve had thus far’. Tony Abbott, Minister for Employment Services 1998–2001, Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business 2001–2003, and Minister for Health and Ageing until 2007, said ‘media has to be second nature to an effective modern politician ... but everything in politics has a media component’.

In reflecting on the pressures the prime minister now faces [during the Howard government] compared to his predecessors, Howard made an interesting observation, stating that saturation press coverage limits the shelf life of modern political leaders:
I compare the media coverage that I had with the media coverage that would have been extended to Bob Menzies (Prime Minister 1939–1941 and 1949–1966) or even Gough Whitlam (Prime Minister 1972–1975), it’s much, much greater, and therefore 10 years is an eternity to be in government.

There are enormous demands placed on a prime minister, both in time and decision-making. This is coupled with media scrutiny that has never been greater. The volume of paperwork flowing through the prime minister’s office, according to one senior Howard staffer who asked to remain anonymous, was like a ‘huge conveyor belt going through the office and each day you would have to unload the piles of briefings, media releases, reports and background documentation on sometimes hundreds of issues, and the next day the belt keeps rolling and you do it all over again’. One example cited by Gary Dawson, Senior Advisor in the prime minister's office serving the prime minister's press office, was the week of the September 2001 World Trade Centre attack, one of the world’s biggest peace time events (see Bonner and Wilkinson 2001). Dawson said Howard arrived back in the country on 14 September and invoked Article IV of the ANZUS Treaty for the first time in Australian history, the same day Ansett Airlines collapsed, which was one of the biggest domestic issues to hit Australia in years, a story covered extensively by The 7.30 Report (2001). Dawson described the day as ‘extraordinary, incredible and highlighted Howard’s ability to calmly access issues, make decisions and map out a way forward’. Howard managed both these issues with professionalism and dignity, despite their magnitude and complexity. This example confirms the observations earlier (Chapter 2) on Howard’s leadership qualities that emerged whilst he was in Washington on 11 September 2001, and his handling of the tragic events of that day through his words and actions in the United States and on his return to Australia.

It takes a great deal of time to cope with the intensity of media scrutiny. Howard admitted he grew into the role: ‘I certainly was doing a better job five years after I’d been prime minister than I was in the first year’. Howard adopted a strategic approach to his relationships with the media, with his media relations carefully planned, and he didn’t favour “off-the-record” briefings, regarding them as ‘a bit of a hazard’. Where possible, his media relations were routinised; for example, he had a fortnightly 8.30 am talkback radio slot with Neil Mitchell, Melbourne’s 3AW radio host. He appeared on the ABC’s Insiders program regularly after being the first interview guest on the program in July 2001. Barrie Cassidy, host of ABC television’s Insiders program from 2001 and former national correspondent for the ABC’s
The 7.30 Report, said Howard ‘did interviews with the program twice a year without fail’. As the years went by Howard’s media relationships became far more formal, and this could have been the result of being more tightly managed by Tony O’Leary, Howard’s press secretary from 1996–2007, and the press office team. Tony Wright, a Parliamentary Press Gallery journalist of 20 years standing, said:

When he was interviewing the Prime Minister O’Leary would say, “well, righto, that’s it, you’ve had enough time”, and I’d just ignore him and we’d just continue talking, because you’d know Howard was courteous enough not to order you out, and he also liked a bit of a yak quite often.

Howard’s personal communication skills, combined with his overarching media strategy, were recognised by many interviewed for this thesis as one of the reasons Howard successfully navigated his way through eleven and a half years as the country’s prime minister. Howard did suggest to me during the interview that a major role of a prime minister was to deal with the media:

You’ve got to maintain a civil relationship with the media, difficult though it is, and you can’t really blame the media if you lose. It doesn’t help sometimes but I don’t blame the media for my losing in 2007 any more than the people I defeated along the way should blame the media for their loss.

David Marr, host of ABC television's Media Watch 2002–2004, co-author of Dark Victory and feature writer for The Sydney Morning Herald, suggested ‘Howard is the most professional politician any of us will see in our lifetime, he is a complete professional, and his calm, his demeanour … his capacity to keep his feet on the ground are exceptional. His grasp is exceptional, he is an exceptional politician’.

**Howard’s Morning Walk Routine**

One of Howard's trademarks was his morning walk. Luff, suggested that if he had stopped doing them, that in itself would have been a news story. Howard agreed, but said he walked because ‘I wanted to and I regarded them as an important part of my health and physical fitness regime’. He also used this time to ‘listen to the radio (Radio National and ABC radio’s AM) and think about things that are ahead during the day and I just found it a very good
JOHN HOWARD’S APPROACH TO COMMUNICATIONS AND THE MEDIA

discipline and a way of organising my own mind’. Even on these morning walks the press office was never far from Howard’s side: ‘when I went walking in the morning, there was always somebody from the press office with me, always, whether it was in Sydney or Melbourne or Adelaide or Canberra, always’. Arthur Sinodinos, Howard’s Chief of Staff from 1997–2006, said Howard’s morning ritual was well established and part of the press office’s responsibilities to cover, evidence again that the prime minister’s office was well run, manned by experienced personnel with set routines and procedures in place. Sinodinos said Howard was:

Up and walking at 6.30 am or 6.45 am, he would have heard the ABC early morning news, and then he would have flicked through the papers. While he’s on his walk, or just after his walk the press secretary may have rung, say about 7.30 am, 7.15 am and said look X and Y are happening. Howard would respond by saying okay, give me extra briefing on that, or let me think about that, how do I handle that, then he’d go up and get ready and go. He might also get briefed in the car on the way there if something was breaking.

David Speers, from 2000 Sky News Political Editor, said that as television needs fresh pictures every day ‘at least John Howard was out there walking every morning because the cameras would get shots every day. I mean what else is he going to do, a stunt with a hard hat and a coloured vest every day’. This was not to suggest Howard’s walk was contrived for the media. Howard’s exercise regime had been a regular feature of his day for many years. It was the media that realised this was an opportunity for them to capture new vision of the Prime Minister each morning. Davis (2007, p. 111) raised the point that ‘politicians and journalists do have uneasy relations with each other that revolve around an exchange of political information for news coverage’. These morning walks were of benefit to both the Prime Minister and the media, providing critical video footage for journalists, and also enabling Howard to use the opportunity to issue a statement of public interest to the gathered press corp. Former Canberra Times journalist and current ABC television host Chris Uhlmann, said the reason why these walks were featured on ABC television news constantly was ‘because there was little other vision that the media had of John Howard on that particular day or the day before, so the ABC, which runs well over two minutes with stories, has a bigger challenge than the commercial television stations’. Fran Kelly, Chief Political Correspondent and ABC Bureau Chief to 1997, in 1997 ABC radio National's breakfast political correspondent, in 2001 Political Editor for ABC television’s The 7.30 Report, in 2003 the ABC’s Europe correspondent based in London and from 2005 ABC Radio National breakfast
host, said ‘John Howard used to tell me privately that he always listened to the show (ABC Radio National breakfast) … he would do his shaving to that, do his walk to Alan Jones (2UE), he’d come home and shave to Michelle (Grattan) and me’. So he saw it as an agenda-setting vehicle. Fran Kelly also said Howard would ‘often ring me after my commentary in the mornings when … I was the political correspondent in Canberra, I would have a commentary slot at 6.40 am and another one at 7.30 am, and we gather Howard did this directly after his walk’.

These observations show how the Prime Minister wove his media responsibilities into his lifestyle. Howard was to a certain extend governed by the logic of the media (Hjarvard, 2013), working with the media to drive the political agenda. He was rarely pushed into kneejerk reactions, however, but incorporated his management of media issues into his hectic private and professional life. Early starts, prolific consumption of newspapers and radio news programs, extensive briefings by proficient staff, an outstanding memory, being across the detail of the government’s extensive agenda, and the ability to handle media engagements with relative ease enabled Howard to cope with intense media scrutiny along with the massive workload any prime minister carries.

Howard’s Support Network

Howard drew on a number of resources to maintain a watching brief on the issues dominating the media of the day, and what he referred to as ‘media issues’ were in the forefront of his mind. Following his daily tactics and leadership meeting at 8.30am in his Parliament House office when parliament was sitting, Howard said he would get together with his chief of staff and his press staff and ask ‘are there any media issues we’ve got to particularly deal with, do I need to do any extra interviews this morning?’ Howard commented that he ‘was always conscious that you had to start the day trying to set the media pattern … if you wanted to get a line running you had to get up early to do it’. Howard’s staff monitored the media during the day on a continuous basis, and Howard himself would try to watch the main news bulletins in the evening.

John Howard’s wife, Janette, actively assisted and supported the Prime Minister during his four terms in office. Howard said on a Channel 7 television special (2014) ‘Janette was enormously important to my success … I don’t think I could have succeeded without her … I
will never know’. This was particularly so in relation to media coverage and commentary. This was confirmed by press office staff and others, including Chris Faulks, 1997–2003 advisor to federal government ministers, who said:

Janette would scan the pages of papers in the morning and see what was happening, politically, but she sometimes rang the prime minister’s press office in Canberra and occasionally rang ministerial offices and spoke to media advisors. I've had situations where John Howard’s wife has rung the minister’s office and said, “I'm reading the papers, this story is outrageous, I want your office to put out a media release,” or “I want you to ring the journalist”.

This raised the question of whether this action was overstepping the mark. Faulks contends that ‘it’s a total misunderstanding of your role and the fact that you are not an elected official, so as a partner you shouldn’t interfere in the political process and you don’t have any right to really influence’. Faulks did say Mrs Howard was always ‘very polite on the phone and the office would say, “we’ll have a look at it and see what we think”, if it was justified, you might’. In the minister’s office there would often be ‘a conversation about whether it was appropriate for the Prime Minister’s wife to interfere so directly’.

Howard was reluctant to confirm if Mrs Howard had ever called the press office but said:

Well, if they said so, that’d be right. A prime minister’s wife who takes a sympathetic interest in what’s happening gets to know people on your staff and she became very friendly with people (working in the prime minister’s press office) like Tony O’Leary and Willie Herron and David Luff and Mitchell.

Peter Van Onselen, Associate Professor in politics and government at Edith Cowan University, and briefly advisor to Tony Abbott, Minister for Workplace Relations, said in an interview for this project, ‘Howard’s “brains-trust” was himself, his wife Janette, Grahame Morris and then probably Nutt and Sinodinos’. On Janette Howard, Van Onselen stated:

John Howard’s closest political advisor, including media advisor, was his wife Janette and that was a strength for a long time, however towards the end (of Howard’s fourth term) it became a bit of a negative as both of them were increasingly out of touch with the way the new media was going.
JOHN HOWARD’S APPROACH TO COMMUNICATIONS AND THE MEDIA

Abbott (2008) said Howard would ‘sometimes cite his “one person focus group”, a light-hearted reference to his wife’s political intuition and value as a reality check’. Peter Costello, Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party and Federal Treasurer from 1996–2007, said ‘I’ve even heard Howard say, “my focus group in Sydney” … or sometimes, he would say, “oh they’re saying such and such on Sydney Radio”, and I would joke is that the paper script rag at Kirribilli House report?’[referring to Janette Howard at the Prime Minister’s residence, Kirribilli House in Sydney, monitoring the media]. Howard said ‘Janette wasn’t a public figure, she didn’t make public comments about politics’, however she had an extremely keen interest in politics according to the Prime Minister, suggesting ‘Janette still has a very intelligent interest in politics, yes, very much so’. Prime Minister Hawke’s wife, Hazel, had a similar view to Janette Howard in staying out of the public limelight. Mrs Hawke (1992, p. 128) said ‘any politician … must be assessed on his job performance and whether his wife and family are glamorous and interesting … should be irrelevant’. Mrs Hawke described journalists endeavouring to ‘get a personal slant on the man … by focusing on her life as “just sticky-nose stuff”’.

As a comparison, in the United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair’s wife Cherie also played an active role in supporting her husband. Alastair Campbell (2007, p. 9) noted Cherie tried to convince him to take on the role of Press Secretary in July 1994 following Blair’s election win. Over twelve months later Campbell wrote on 8 September (p83) Cherie’s relationship with Prime Minister Blair’s office in September 1995 had deteriorated: ‘Cherie said we had reached the position where she felt unsupported, and she had a poor relationship with the office because she felt we saw her purely as a problem’. Cherie however played a more high profile public role than Janette Howard but found it difficult to cope with the lack of privacy. Campbell noted (p217) ‘her purchase of a £3,500 bed made the front page of the Sun’, and quotes Cherie Blair (p220) saying she was finding it ‘hard to get her head around the fact that anything they said or did was considered far game’. According to Campbell (2007. p.454) ‘the birth of the Blairs’ baby on 20 May 2000 attracted enormous media coverage’.

This research highlighted that both John and Janette Howard were very comfortable in dealing with, consuming and monitoring mainstream media. They were from an era where politics was reported on the nightly television news, in the press each morning, and on radio during the day. They were a political couple suited to the times. As social media emerged
these new technological platforms demanded a new style of communication, and the way the Australian electorate accessed and interrelated with this technology required its users, including politicians, to take a different approach and develop a new set of communication skills. Although the Howard’s may have been ‘out of touch’ with these social media changes, as were many Australians, this new medium was only starting to have a real impact during the Howard government’s last 12 months in power.

In another example of Janette Howard’s influence, Howard remarked that Janette sat in on the conversation when Foreign Minister Downer went to see Howard at Kirribilli on 7 September 2007 to report on the ministers’ deliberations on retaining Howard as leader, (see also Hartcher 2009, p. 29-30). Howard said:

Yeah, yeah, but she never sat in on any prime ministerial discussion, I mean if I were having a meeting with visiting people or if I was having a meeting with departmental officials, Janette never sat in on them, but something like the Downer (meeting) that was discussing my personal future as leader of the Liberal Party, of course she would sit in on that, and the conversation took place in what was then our home.

Howard also consulted his family about his decision not to resign at this time, as he would be labelled ‘a coward’. According to Paul Kelly (2008b), ‘Howard’s blunder was to reveal publicly that he consulted his family and “they want me to continue”’. Some ministers were in fuming outrage, with one stating ‘he rejects the view of his Cabinet but listens to the view of his family’. Savva (2010, p. 265) detailed an issue that emerged during the election campaign in 2007 where the involvement of the Howard family also caused resentment:

The latest TV ad was called up on a laptop, and Mrs Howard, along with others, offered her opinion about it. This was not unusual. Although the staff had pretty much got used to Janette’s involvement, it still rankled with a few people – even though her opinions and observations were usually sound. Richard’s (Howard’s son) involvement and perceived influence was causing some angst at campaign headquarters.

Loughnane said, however, Howard actually sought advice from many people: ‘John Howard, one of his greatest strengths was that he sought advice from a very broad range of people’. As Howard’s long years in government were coming to an end, the skills that kept him in office for many years began to erode, as this thesis illustrates in Chapter 8.
Howard reflected on the performance of Prime Minister Menzies and his skills as a communicator, perhaps using him as a role model. In an interview in 2014 (Heanue, 2014) Howard expressed his admiration for Menzies by noting:

I have a lot of admiration for his skills as a politician … I respect his oratorical skills, I have not heard of a greater political orator than Menzies, he was a magnificent orator and he never had difficulty finding the right words for the occasion, and there was no such animal as a Menzies speech writer, they were all his own words.

There are some similarities here to Howard’s communication style.

In summary, it was very apparent Howard had developed a routine that matched his ability to keep very informed on the issues that would dominate the day’s news bulletins. His own media consumption, coupled with his wife’s media monitoring and wise counsel, and Howard’s keenness to seek the views of his close advisors, demonstrated his desire to solicit the opinions of those he trusted, who would provide honest advice on the political issues facing the government.

**Mindsets and Messages**

**Howard’s Communication Mindset and Skills**

A politician’s ability to articulate a complex policy issue in simple terms is a rare skill, mainly because much of the policy documentation formulated by government is drafted in legal terms, is very detailed and often challenging for even experienced political minds to grasp. Uhlmann said a great skill Howard possessed was his ‘ability to keep his message simple’. Grahame Morris, Howard’s Political Advisor in 1996 then Chief of Staff in 1997, agreed, suggesting Howard’s real skill in communication was ‘crystallising (his) thoughts into bites of language that others can understand’. Kevin Andrews, Minister for Ageing 2001–2003, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations 2003 to January 2007 and then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship until September 2007, said ‘what also contributed to Howard’s effectiveness as prime minister was his total consistency with his messages, whatever he (Howard) said in the party room, you could switch on the radio an hour later and essentially it was the same message’. There was never any ‘confusion in the minds of the troops’ and according to Andrews this ‘was a major factor in the overall media management’.
Stephen Sedgwick, Secretary to the Commonwealth Departments of Finance, Employment and Education 1992–2002, noted after the election win in 1996 that the Howard government had ‘learnt from Whitlam and they weren't going to be a Whitlam government. Howard had seen what happened when you couldn't explain yourself clearly and he was going to learn from the lessons of his experiences in 1987’. Sedgwick is referring to the Liberal Opposition’s tax policy, released in June 1987 during the election campaign, that contained a double-counting error which meant it was hundreds of millions of dollars out, leaving Howard, according to Savva (2013), ‘faced with the impossible task of trying to explain what had happened’. The Melbourne Sun News Pictorial (now the Herald Sun) front-page headline on 22 June 1987 stated “Howard: my sums wrong”. This was a timely lesson for Howard, and after this experience he rarely made factual mistakes of any kind prior to and during his term as prime minister.

The Prime Minister’s Skills in Communicating Government Policy

Ken Henry, Secretary of the Federal Department of the Treasury from 2001–2011, observed that Howard had the talent of:

Putting yourself in the shoes as… a recipient of policy advice, putting yourself in the shoes of the person who’s going to have to communicate the message publicly. Howard was assimilating the policy advice through a communications framework, very clever, and I was always conscious of that, it’s a great strength.

This was certainly one of Howard’s strategic approaches to political communication. Henry remarked that ‘Keating (former prime minister 1991–1996) had that strength too’. Henry said when you were giving them both advice ‘it was clear that what they were thinking was could I ever stand up and explain this to somebody’.

One of Howard’s greatest strengths according to Henry was ‘he (Howard) saw the separation between the policy thinking, and the communications, but he was always thinking about the two things at the same time, balancing the two things, and understanding the implications that one had with the other’. Howard agreed with Henry’s synopsis:

I did, more that the way it was presented to me was not immediately saleable rather than I’m not the least bit interested in it because it’s too hard to sell. I would say, “well, the policy substance is good but it has to be presented in a fashion that people will be attracted to it eventually”. You’ve got to be able to explain something and often you can explain something well and get it accepted, but the same policy presented the other way round can be a failure.
Sedgwick referred to this point, noting ‘it is often said he (Howard) had a deliberate strategy of appealing to the Howard battlers, and he ended up on talkback radio’. This was a unique tactic Howard employed as a communications channel and also for Howard, Sedgwick said it was ‘not just having a policy but being able to explain it and sell it, to mum and dad, that was his take’.

Thus, Howard’s mindset was very much on communicating what the government’s intentions were, and carefully considering how he could do that most effectively. Howard highlighted the GST, introduced on 1 July 2000, as one example (see Chapter 1 under Howard’s Second Term and the major tax initiative of the introduction of a 10 per cent Goods and Services Tax): ‘I thought the strongest argument we had in favour of a GST was … we enabled people to pay more tax on what they spent rather than what they earned and that, in hand, said freedom of choice’. However, for Howard the clincher was ‘it was accompanied by immediate reductions in personal income tax, and people thought, well I’ll buy that or that seems reasonable’. Howard realised if you simply said other countries have a GST it wouldn’t have been accepted as it was: ‘I was always focused on how you were going to promote something to the public, absolutely’. This was a courageous act according to Henry ‘having gone into the 1996 election campaign promising that there would never ever be a GST and then for him 18 months later to stand up publicly and say, “well, we’re going to have a GST”, that was a pretty amazing thing to do’. This approach can be related to the mediatisation of politics, where, according to Mazzoleni and Scultz (1999, p. 247), ‘politicians and political institutions increasingly are dependent on and shaped by mass media but nevertheless remain in control of political processes and functions’. Howard used the media effectively to win this argument and shaped his dialogue according to the logic of the media.

In relation to the implementation of the GST, Henry related a story he believed had never been told on the development of the GST package, where a group of officials asked themselves whether it wouldn’t make sense to take the opportunity to reform that whole system of payments. Henry said:

> It was really, really complex, and in particular in the family payments area whether it wouldn’t be possible to collapse 12 payments down to something much simpler, more rational. I remember an extraordinary discussion we had with Howard and Costello about this with Howard saying, “you know, I like the elegance of what you’ve described as the future, what the future could look like, but in order to sell that I’m first going to have to explain to people how complex the present system is”, and he said, “it’s so complex I don’t think I could explain it to people”.

103
Henry said he did not let up on this challenge and the discussions and refining of the policy went on for weeks and Henry finally won the day. Eventually Howard conceded saying, “okay, I’ll take it on”. Henry felt this whole process was an eye opener: ‘it was very revealing that he thought the communication challenge of this particular policy was so great that we shouldn’t try the policy change, even though he thought the policy change was a good policy change’. Henry also related an incident when he had prepared a PowerPoint presentation for Cabinet on the implementation of the GST. Henry said he commenced delivering the presentation, but very quickly Howard took command, and even grabbed the mouse, and delivered the presentation, sight unseen, to the gathering. Henry was amazed at Howard’s ability to grasp the detail of information instantly and articulate it without any practice nor forewarning of the complex material contained on the presentation slides. This highlights a skill that confirmed Howard’s ability to rapidly digest complex issues and explain them in a way that was clearly understood by those not familiar with the subject matter, a distinct advantage when handling media interviews.

On communicating policy to the wider Australian electorate Howard suggested:

> You’ve certainly got to have an intuition for public reaction, that’s very, very important. You’ve got to be able to be a good persuader and debater, you’ve got to be able to argue the substance of something.

These comments by Howard were most revealing, as they confirmed he knew the importance of being aware of how the electorate would perceive policies and changes to their own financial positions, through what they heard and read in the media. The important role the media played was never underestimated by Howard, as was how he was going to communicate to the wider Australian community. Accordingly, Howard viewed policy recommendations with ‘a balance of what made sense in policy terms, and … would I ever be able to explain it to people, would I ever be able to get sufficient public support for it?’ Henry said ‘these things were always being balanced in every issue’. Howard’s approach of “it’s not feasible politically because there’s no way you’d ever be able to get support for it” is one of his most impressive attributes. Howard’s political success can arguably be correlated with his skills as a communicator, and his understanding of the importance of “selling” policy initiatives to the Australian electorate. This is one of the important findings of this research.
Mark Sullivan, when Secretary of the Department of Family and Community Services from 2001 to 2004 related a story on Howard’s determination to master the detail of policy issues directly from senior bureaucrats. Sullivan was called to the Prime Minister’s office to explain how Family Tax Benefit Part B worked (this was devised to compensate mothers who chose not to work, see Uren, 2014). Sullivan said:

> It was an amusing exchange because Howard is a bright man but he likes taking an issue from point one through to point two, three, four, five and up to point ten, and by point ten he knows it, but you’ve got to take him through it in increments. Senator Amanda Vanstone (Minister for Family and Community Services) came with me and Amanda goes from point one straight to point ten, and that’s a worry, not too much about the ground in between. So he (Howard) said to me, “Oh Mark, just explain it, just take me through how all this works”, and I started and Amanda suddenly said, “what he’s really saying is this John.” Howard responded, “he didn’t say that, let him talk to me”. I was very flattered because he basically told her to shut up … just let Mike take me through this. When he finally got it he said, “I now understand where you’re coming from, now we can talk, I can understand it”.

This anecdote highlights how Howard would ensure he knew the intimidate details of policy issues and legislation, which aided him when handling media encounters and providing precise and accurate answers on issues right across the government’s complex array of portfolios.

**Delivering the Government’s Key Messages**

The key messages Howard used, Sinodinos said:

> Were being supplied by the press office, and some were his (Howard’s). People in the prime minister’s office were also sent to the press office to work on these and we had researchers who would go through and look at what people had said in the past, and try and pick up patterns and recurring themes and contradictions, with the press office having the principal responsibility for drawing it together.

Wright said ‘Howard knew all the rules and … he chose his words because he knew every word was a bullet, so he would choose his words very, very carefully’. Christopher Pyne, Parliamentary Secretary 2003–2007, Assistant and then Minister for Ageing 2007, saw his role was to ‘provide the Prime Minister with speaking notes, talking notes, on what we would say at the press conference’. George Megalogenis, Parliamentary Press Gallery journalist from 1988–1999 and then one of The Australian newspaper’s senior writers in Melbourne
from 1999, made the observation that ‘the 1998 election campaign, the 2001 election campaign and 2004 election campaigns, he (Howard) was able to reduce to single issues, the 1998 tax reform, 2001 border protection, 2004 interest rates’. These punchy themes, accompanied by snappy messages, were the cornerstone of a disciplined approach to media commentary, developed as part of the overarching communications strategy.

Henry said ‘politicians are first and foremost communications people… and they’ve got to have a good sense of how to communicate a message most effectively … you’ve got to be able to communicate in reasonably short sentences’. Howard was very good at delivering one-liners; some however caused concern in the electorate. One was “core and non-core promises” when Howard used the term “non-core” when he broke a number of his 1996 pre-election promises in higher education, labour market programs, the ABC and a range of other cuts. Howard said at the time ‘these undertakings didn’t really count … because they were non-core promises’, see McMullin (2007), and Barns (2005, p32). Van Onselen and Errington (2006) said ‘his (Howard’s) attempt to divide election promises into “core” and “non-core” was widely ridiculed’.

Another one-liner used in the 2001 election campaign was “we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come”. Sinodinos said ‘that was his line, the Prime Minister’s line’ at the 2001 election campaign policy launch speech on 28 October at the Sydney Recital Hall. Howard said that line ‘came to me on my feet when I was speaking’. Sinodinos said ‘it was only one part of his speech obviously, but it encapsulated his approach to illegal immigration’, and Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock agreed ‘that was a cut-through line’. Mark Textor, pollster and campaign strategist for the Liberal Party of Australia from 1996, said lines such as “we will decide who comes to this country” is a good one but ‘a good line is just a good line unless it provides a point of difference between two political entities’. Another of Howard’s classic lines was “who can you trust?” used as the theme for the Coalition’s 2004 federal election campaign. Another phrase used during this 2004 campaign was “keep interest rates low”, responding to the wider electorate’s concern about the high cost of bank finance. Henry remembers when Howard announced the date of the 2004 election at a media conference on 29 August 2004 in Canberra, ("Howard: Election to be about Trust," 2004), and Howard then used a line that was repeated many times over during the campaign: “who do you trust to keep interest rates low?"
Howard’s Focus on Staying on Message

Michelle Grattan, from 1996 a columnist and senior writer with *The Australian Financial Review*, in 1999 Chief Political Correspondent for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, from 2002 political columnist with *The Age*, and from 2004 Political Editor and Bureau Chief for *The Age*, made the observation that:

John Howard, like other modern prime ministers, followed the rule of getting lines and messages out ... believing the old maxim that when you’re sick of saying it people are starting to listen to it, so you get the same sort of lines coming out all the time and I think Howard was fairly strong into that.

Morris said ‘communication is everything, whether it’s communicating with your colleagues, communicating with the electorate or communicating to journos’. Howard’s media performances were, almost without exception, very professionally handled. Sinodinos said Howard was across the detail of an enormous number of political issues as they ‘were being discussed in the context of Cabinet and other processes, so he was quite often across the issue’. Annabel Crabb, who was with *The Advertiser* Canberra bureau from 1997 to 1999, in 2000 political columnist and correspondent with *The Age* and from 2003–2007 London correspondent for *The Sunday Age* and *Sun-Herald*, felt ‘Howard was greatly aided by his incredible memory and was always very much across his brief’. Sarah Casey, Media Assistant and then Assistant Media Advisor for Howard 2001–2005, said Howard would often be ‘recalling something from years and years ago, he had an amazing memory’. According to O’Brien, Howard:

Demonstrated a great memory in all sorts of ways, with his capacity to stand up in front of a demanding audience or a discerning audience and deliver a 40 minute speech with lots of facts in it, and not miss a beat, was quite remarkable.

Howard’s recall of information served him well during media interviews, as did competent staff and the briefings they provided. As an example Peter Shergold, Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2003–2007, produced a weekly report, *Over the Horizon* that Howard said ‘was very good’. Shergold said ‘I and my deputies were the only people who saw the whole document, and only very senior people contributed to the document and they only saw the bits that they contributed’. This high level briefing was instrumental in ensuring the Prime Minister was across all the issues that could attract media attention and potentially stump a political leader if they were not familiar with the subject material.
JOHN HOWARD’S APPROACH TO COMMUNICATIONS AND THE MEDIA

Kerry-Anne Walsh, Senior Press Gallery journalist and 2003 to 2009 Sun-Herald’s political correspondent in Canberra, noted Howard:

Was extremely good at sticking to his message which actually ultimately led, I think, to a tarnishing of his image in the community because he became so good at batting back or refusing to answer on issues that he didn't want to, and that ultimately became seen in some people's mind as … mean and tricky.

In regard to being open and honest, Fran Kelly said Howard ‘probably didn’t always tell the truth … he spun things or overstated, understated, but was he a liar, no, I don’t think John Howard’s particularly a liar, I wouldn’t say that’. However most politicians, according to Fran Kelly, ‘massage the facts, present the facts in a way that suits them or deflects’. Brian Loughnane, Federal Director of the Liberal Party from 2003 and National Campaign Director 2004–2007, said of Howard’s communication skills: ‘when the demands of good government and the requirements of clear communication were in sync, it was very powerful’.

The Consistency of Language and Stance on Contentious Issues

In his public persona, particularly in his public speeches and television interviews, Howard displayed a remarkable degree of consistency in his language and ideas. His one-time speech-writer Mark Baker, working part-time 1997–2000 as an occasional speech writer and full-time from 2000 to mid-2002, stated Howard:

Used the same quotes today he used 15 years ago, once he got a phrase he kept using it, he kept constant to his ideas and constant to his language, there was a certainty of delivery, it never wavered. Howard’s overall approach, was, “you might not agree with me but you know where I stand”.

Cassidy, who interviewed Howard twice a year from 2002 on the ABC’s Insiders program, noted that there was ‘a consistency with Howard ... he didn’t play games, and so you essentially got pretty straight interviews’. ‘He was always the same person’ according to Crabb. Morris said ‘getting stuff into his (Howard’s) language was very difficult because he would speak off-the-cuff which meant the language you got in 1996 was essentially the same language you got in 2007’. Brett (2006a) said ‘a key reason for Howard’s political success has been his skill at re-working the language and symbols of Australian nationalism to give the Liberal Party a plausible language of unity and social cohesion’. Fran Kelly produced the
ABC television series *The Howard Years* (2008a) and said Howard spent ‘27 hours with me’. One observation Fran Kelly made when she was producing the program was ‘sometimes when I was doing the interviews for *The Howard Years*, it was like I was … back in a press conference I was at 10 years earlier, the lines were almost identical’. Fran Kelly suggests this was ‘a testament to his (Howard’s) steadfastness, he’s not a fly-by-night with his views and that’s one thing you would say about him for sure, steadfast’.

In regard to the language Howard chose to use, Norman Abjorensen, political columnist with *The Canberra Times* and former national editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, referred to the issue of asylum seekers:

> At immigration in the late 1990s asylum seekers were called “illegal” arrivals, and a lot of effort went into the clamping down on the use of “refugee” or “asylum seeker”, (instead) “illegals” and “queue jumpers” (were used) and they repeated and repeated this into the lexicon, and journalists started using these terms in their questions, so it worked.

This is an example of how political elites can drive political discourse. Baum and Potter (2008) looked at the relationship between leaders and the public, and incorporated a third strategic actor, the mass media, ‘which we believe plays a critical role alongside citizens and elites in shaping the public’s attitudes about, and influences on, foreign policy’. In a similar fashion, the hard line rhetoric on the terrorism threat to Australia, according to Siracusa (2006), resonated with the Australian electorate. He said Australia’s handling of refugees and asylum seekers, and the Australian response to the terrorist attacks on the United States, dominated the 2001 election campaign, and resulted in a win for Howard and the biggest swing to a presiding government since Harold Holt’s victory over Arthur Calwell in 1966 (see an analysis of the campaign in Solomon, (2002)). This political rhetoric Howard would construct, linking asylum seekers with the war on terror, was a clever political manoeuvre that was accepted by the majority of Australians.

This consistency could also be construed as stubbornness, such as his stance on refusing to apologise to indigenous people for the removal of their children, by suggesting one generation cannot accept responsibility for the acts of an earlier generation. Howard reflected on the ABC’s ‘criticism of me over Indigenous policy because they felt I should have given an apology’. Perhaps Howard’s inability to communicate his views effectively on this issue,
or to persuade the Australian public of his stance, despite widespread dissention among voters, was not only a communications failure but also a show of defiance on the Prime Minister’s part. Another example was Howard’s refusal to sign the Kyoto protocol on climate change, an agreement adopted in Kyoto Japan in December 1997 and entered into force on 16 February 2005, setting internationally binding emission reduction targets ("Howard Firmly against Kyoto," 2007). Howard insisted he wouldn’t sacrifice economic growth to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Howard’s stance on both issues was quite divisive within the Australian community. Howard said:

Climate change was a bigger issue in my judgment than industrial relations. Climate change was a big issue in 2007 … and the young were carried away with the idea that if you ratified Kyoto and turned out the lights for an hour every fiftieth Saturday night, you'd save the planet and all this gesture politics.

Nick Minchin, Minister for Industry Science and Resources 1998–2001, and Minister for Finance and Administration 2001–2007, said ‘sometimes John (Howard) was, for good reason from his point of view, slow to kill an issue’, referring to Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech as a classic example, ‘where he should have just immediately denounced it’, and Hanson’s attempt to portray One Nation as the defender of a true Australian identity (see Leach, 2000). Laurie Oakes (2008, p. 155) said:

Howard's mishandling of the (Hanson) issue, his refusal for the best part of six weeks even to acknowledge that there was a problem, was the worst leadership lapse I can recall from any prime minister in the 30-plus years I have been reporting politics.

These are examples of Howard’s inability to communicate to convince the electorate on his tough stance, and perhaps a misreading of the political landscape, or just plain stubbornness. According to Crabb, Howard’s consistency could come across as ‘stubbornness and inflexibility’. Crabb ‘related this to Howard’s longevity as prime minister’ suggesting ‘as you go further and further into your prime ministership you become kind of encrusted by your own past decisions, you become increasingly inflexible because you don’t want to contradict yourself’. In Crabb’s view, Howard’s attitude to the apology to the stolen generation was a ‘classic example of that sort of syndrome’.
The Supposed use of Plausible Deniability

One criticism levelled at Howard, which he denied, was the use of the tactic of “plausible deniability”, a term, according to Bremaud-Billand (2013, p. 3), used in America by the CIA during the Kennedy administration, to describe the withholding of information from senior officials in order to protect them from repercussions in the event that illegal or unpopular activities by the CIA became public knowledge. Howard said:

My staff never held back anything and in fact the way we operated was full disclosure internally. If I ever found out that my staff had held something back that reflected poorly on me or poorly on the government and they should have told me, I would get irritated with that.

So, according to Howard plausible deniability ‘was certainly not a policy and I'm not aware that it happened, it may have happened on some occasions but I don’t recall them, and they were certainly not encouraged to do that, quite the reverse’. Dawson confirmed this, suggesting if the Prime Minister wasn’t across an issue it ‘wouldn’t have been a good look’. When examining Howard’s media performances, it was obvious he was across the complete range of government portfolio issues as he was rarely caught out on specific facts and details. In the research for this thesis the evidence is overwhelming that Howard’s knowledge of his government’s policies and agenda was comprehensive.

Building Media Relations with Media Proprietors and Journalists

Howard’s relationships with Australia’s media moguls

Howard also considered it his role to cultivate relationships with media proprietors. This was part of Howard’s media and communications strategy on engaging the media, and in turn, understanding the power the media had in shaping the public’s perceptions of the government. Howard, over the years, had developed relationships with the most powerful media proprietors in Australia, even before he became prime minister. Howard understood the stance certain proprietors took at election time, and the way this editorial positioning could influence voters’ perceptions of the government’s effectiveness. As the public’s interest in politics was often only heightened during election periods Howard saw his relationships with proprietors, journalists and commentators, in general, as particularly important.
Howard had lunches and dinners with various media proprietors during his prime ministership, and found this interaction very valuable. As Howard stated:

Yes valuable in that … when Rupert Murdoch (Chairman and CEO of News Corporation 1979–2013) came to Australia and I was prime minister, I would normally have a meal with him and he had John Hartigan (Chairman and CEO of the company’s Australian arm, News Limited) with him and I’d have Arthur Sinodinos with me or Tony O’Leary, and that was valuable in that we would talk about politics and life because I found Murdoch an interesting person to talk to.

The Murdoch relationship began when Howard was in Opposition. Howard said this relationship with media proprietors and journalists was not designed to court favours, and according to Howard, he never telephoned a proprietor to complain about a story: ‘I wouldn’t have rung Rupert Murdoch once to complain about something’. However, Howard recalled:

Before the 1996 election campaign, I rang Col Allan, who was then the editor of *The Daily Telegraph* and inquired, “Am I wasting my time asking for a favourable editorial?” and Allan said, “well, you are in a way John, because you’d understand that a paper with the background of *The Telegraph* would feel obliged to recommend the re-election of a Labor government, I’ve written an editorial to that effect … I haven’t been critical of you, (and) you’d be interested to know that right beside the editorial is a column from Mike Gibson saying that for the first time in his life he’s going to cast a Liberal vote”.

Allan did admit to Howard that ‘Mike’s column will have more impact than my editorial’. These are interesting observations, and it does confirm that, no matter what relationship the Prime Minister had with Rupert Murdoch or News Limited executives at the time, this had not influenced the *The Daily Telegraph*’s editorial stance and their support for the Labor Party.

The relationship with Murdoch continued throughout Howard’s prime ministership:

If he was in Australia, he’d always get in touch with me. I think right at the end, in 2007, he came to Australia not long before the election and he rang me up just to say hello, and it was obvious then that the tide was running out on us. I think I may have said to him (Murdoch) during that conversation (in 2007), one of the things that your paper’s always been strong on is industrial relations, and I said, “surely you’re not going to support the crowd that are going to abolish our industrial relations reforms, are you?” He said, “I’ll pass it on”.

112
Howard would also have a meal once or twice a year with Kerry Packer (owner of the Nine Television Network and Australian Consolidated Press). Howard thought Kerry Packer ‘very astute’ and the Nine Network fair and balanced in their reporting of Australian politics: ‘I thought his network gave us fair coverage, it wasn’t profoundly biased our way but it gave us fair coverage and that’s all you could ever ask for’. He also met with Kerry Stokes, (Seven Television Network major shareholder and founder of Pacific Magazines): ‘I use to see quite a bit of him (also)’. On the association with Murdoch, Manne (2005, p. 2) said, what was critically important was ‘the almost ludicrous dominance over the metropolitan press that Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation has been allowed to assume … owning 70 per cent of the mainstream press in Australia’. There is no reason why a prime minister should not meet and talk to some of Australia’s most wealthy and influential business people. Media proprietors also influence the editorial stance their media outlets adopt, and it is important they have the benefit of understanding the policy stance of the government directly from the Prime Minister. As long as there is transparency in dealing with these media barons then these meetings are appropriate.

The Prime Minister’s communication with journalists and media commentators

In describing his media strategy, Howard remarked that he endeavoured to ‘not play favourites’ in his dealings with journalists and that he encouraged his press office to also take this approach. His original relationship with the press gallery was one of caution. He expressed the view:

You never want to be in a situation where a journalist should get so close to a politician that it restrains him or her from criticising a politician or that the politician’s in a situation that the journalist knows something about him and his attitudes or whatever that, in the wrong hands, could hurt him.

The press office was mostly across the dealings the Prime Minister had with the media. Howard said:

Most of my dealings with the media were known to my press office because the requests to see me came through to me at the press office. The media didn’t ring me directly, or very few did, so generally speaking they’d ring O’Leary or Luff, so the press office would know on almost every occasion when I was interacting with the media.
Paul Everingham, Senior Advisor within the federal government in the Finance, Industry and Resources portfolios, working with Ministers John Fahey and Nick Minchin between 1997–2002 and between 2003–2005 Executive Director of the Liberal Party in Western Australia, said Howard ‘had a formidable understanding of the gallery well before he became prime minister’, and as such had developed relations and contacts with journalists. Howard acknowledged that ‘inevitably over a period of time some journalists would receive more information than others simply because they adopted a more friendly approach’, however Howard still insisted he ‘didn’t like playing favourites’. Quite a number of journalists saw things differently, such as Andrew Bolt, *Sun Herald* Columnist and radio and television political commentator, who felt ‘Howard operated as politicians often do and wrongly, who’s on my side and who’s on their side principle’.

Some journalists would be given information because of the likelihood that they would produce a positive story. Piers Akerman, from 1993 columnist for *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph* was, for a number of years, given an extended personal interview with Howard at Kirribilli House during the Christmas break, in which they would ‘review the previous year and look at what might come up in the next 12 months’. Akerman also recalled having ‘long conversations with Howard when (Akerman) felt Howard’s press office was not adequately explaining the rationale behind decisions that he had made’. Howard dealt directly with Dennis Shanahan, *The Australian*’s Canberra Bureau Chief, then Political Editor, and Howard said:

> There were people like Paul Kelly for whom I had a lot of respect and he was a high quality writer and commentator. I quite enjoyed talking to a couple of the younger radio people like a fellow, Tom Malone, who’s now ended up Executive Producer of *60 Minutes*.

Senior staffers such as Arthur Sinodinos, Tony O’Leary and Tony Nutt, Howard’s Principal Private Secretary and then Chief of Staff 2006–2007, would also deal directly with the press from time to time. Some journalists, including Akerman, had their mobile numbers. Howard spoke of high profile Sydney breakfast host, Alan Jones (at 2UE to 2002 then to 2GB) as ‘my mate Jonesy’. Howard stated he had Jones’s mobile phone number and Jones had his: ‘Alan certainly did and I had his, he didn’t telephone very often and I never felt Alan took advantage of that, he rang me sparingly when I was prime minister, and since, he respected the privilege completely’. Alan Jones, 2UE breakfast program host, then from 2002 to 2GB,
said ‘I’d ring him (Howard) direct … I would always talk to him at any hour of the night and
day, and he’d often ring me as well on issues and ask me my opinion’. Abbott noted that
while ‘the prime ministerial press office was the main focus of prime ministerial dealings
with the media’, John Howard also allowed selected journalists and broadcasters to contact
him directly: ‘Paul Kelly would call John Howard direct, he wouldn’t necessarily go through
the press office. Paul Kelly, The Australian’s Editor-at-Large, said ‘I found when I wanted to
talk to the Prime Minister I normally could and he was normally accessible given the
pressures that he’s under’.

Did the press office itself favour certain media outlets? Max Suich (2004) noted ‘the Prime
Minister’s Press Secretary, Tony O’Leary, clearly prefers The Australian to any other
newspaper, which is unsurprising given the vociferous support it has given to the
government’s Iraq policies’. In the Suich article, The Australian denied ‘the staff are on the
drip’, although they acknowledged they ‘sometimes have superior access “because we work
harder at going after stories”’. Wright felt Howard’s press office ‘played favourites in a big
way with the print media’. Wright singled out The Australian, as did Kerry-Anne Walsh, who
Wright felt the gallery saw ‘to be a newspaper that was being provided with information by
the prime minister’s office to set agendas, and to set the other papers apart, if you like,
because the other papers, particularly Fairfax, was seen to be more critical of the Howard
government’. However, depending on the particular issue, Sinodinos suggested that with a
policy issue ‘you’d tend to use the newspapers, and get a couple of journos in and brief them,
and you try and give it to a number of journos so you don’t look like you’re favouring one or
two journos the whole time’. Middleton said ‘Howard played favourites in a much more
sophisticated way’ citing The Australian and Channel Nine ‘so a lot of material would get
dropped with one or the other of those two, but that was a pretty deliberate media
management strategy’. Grattan felt ‘clearly a lot of material was dropped to The Australian
and the wider office (press gallery) saw this as agenda setting’. Wright said:

John Howard used to speak about The Daily Telegraph as his favourite newspaper and
I don’t actually believe that. The Sydney Daily Telegraph reached a broad group of
people beyond where The Sydney Morning Herald operated. The Sydney Morning
Herald reached the elite, the inner city, to university educated people whereas The
Daily Telegraph went to inspirational battlers.
Sandi Logan, National Communications Manager Federal Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2005–2013, felt ‘if you wanted to get it out there and you wanted to generally expect a reasonable run, you get it into the Tele’. Logan’s view was to use simple language, to reach ‘potentially battlers … who were Labor, Coalition and swinging voters, as well as everyone else’. The term ‘Howard’s Battlers’ then began to be used in the press (see Hamilton, (see Hamilton, 2007, p. 33). Crabb thought that, ‘Howard had great reservations about the Fairfax Press and the ABC and thought that the forces of political correctness and the media elite had it in for him’. Thus, there was solid confirmation of certain outlets being favoured over others, and particular journalists and commentators gaining easier access to the Prime Minister, however is this an issue of concern? In any political or business environment relationships are established and these associations can benefit both parties. With the proliferation of media outlets and the competitive nature of journalism, government decisions and actions are forensically scrutinised and analysed constantly, with the voting public having a plethora of media choices available and a wide cross-section of commentators’ views to consider, thus no one view or editorial stance would necessarily take precedence nor sway voters one way or another.

In respect to radio, Speers said Howard ‘would certainly give interviews to Alan Jones more than he would Mike Carlton (Sydney radio ABC, then 2UE) for example, when it came to radio interviews … the political leanings of Alan Jones would be more towards John Howard than Mike Carlton’s would be’. Howard was certainly very comfortable talking to journalists and radio commentators, he said ‘I was always happy to do interviews with people like Neil Mitchell and Alan Jones’. Wright claimed Howard also ‘chose favourite radio commentators who he knew would ask him the sort of questions that he wanted to get through, and that became his form of press conference’. Glenn Milne, Chief Political Correspondent for the Seven Network 1993–2003 and Political Editor of The Australian from 2003, also made the observation of Howard’s use of radio to avoid press conferences. Milne felt:

Radio commentators may not believe certain political topics were of much interest to their radio listeners, but they were certainly of interest to us in the press gallery, but of course that was part of the (press office’s) strategy … Howard was less likely to come under sustained pressure in a radio interview than in front of a room full of press gallery journalists.
This observation by Milne ignores the aggressive talkback callers Howard contended with, many holding views strongly at odds with the Prime Minister’s stance on controversial issues. Talkback radio can be an unpredictable and risky communicative space, as these three following examples demonstrate. 2UE’s Alan Jones took Howard to task in an aggressive interview on the government’s stance on tariffs on 11 September 1997. Howard was grilled by 3AW’s Neil Mitchell on the government’s treatment of asylum seekers on 25 January 2002, with talkback callers adding to Mitchell’s probing critical questioning. On 2 March 2007 Charles Wooley interviewed Howard on Wooley’s Macquarie Regional Radioworks program, Across Australia, and the father of Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks, Terry Hicks, phoned in. Howard accepted the call and it made compelling listening. These examples highlight two points: the risks posed by live talkback radio, and Howard’s willingness to debate issues and face detractors head on.

Howard’s passion of hosting journalists at home

Howard also invited journalists to join him for dinner at The Lodge, remarking that he ‘enjoyed having groups of journalists to The Lodge for dinner and occasionally at Kirribilli, to just chew the fat’, with invitees including ‘Col Allan and some of his people from The Telegraph and The Herald-Sun’. Howard said ‘over the years I did quite a bit of that, I think it’s part of the job, and I never found arising out of them there were any breaches of confidences, so you could have a talk and it wasn’t reported, they respected the rules’. Paul Bongiorno, Network Ten's Parliament House Bureau Chief in Canberra and Political Editor from 1991 to 2010, said Howard would invite selected journalists over to The Lodge for dinner fairly regularly at the suggestion of Tony O’Leary. Paul Starick, the Adelaide Advertiser’s Chief Reporter who served in the Parliamentary Press Gallery in 2003–2004 and became the paper’s Chief of Staff, said he was invited to The Lodge about once a year and recalls when a group of journalists arrived Howard ‘was watching The 7.30 Report, then we go and have dinner, then he goes and watches Lateline, and he was talking about how (ABC television’s) Lateline is such a good program’. On another occasion Starick said he had dinner with the Prime Minister and Dennis Shanahan ‘at the Hyatt here (Adelaide) in 2004, and then myself and the editor had a dinner with Howard and O’Leary at the Hilton in mid-2004 … and that was obviously an off-the-record (discussion)’. These dinners were arranged by the prime minister’s press office. Wright confirmed Howard’s preference for dinners with selected journalists: ‘for quite some time he’d have these little informal dinners at The Lodge, just to get an idea of what journalists’ thoughts were’.
Middleton gives an example of a function she attended at The Lodge one Australia Day—as one of 350 invited guests—when the Prime Minister became agitated after discovering she was going to file a report on the event. Middleton said Howard in his address was:

Making jokes about his future and nowhere on the invitation did it say this is a private function and off-the-record and not to be reported. After mentioning to Press Secretary Tony O’Leary that she intended to use some of Howard’s comments in a brief TV item, he had replied “it’s not a media event”. The Prime Minister then bailed me up as I was going and said, “You were here as my guest”, and I said, “well I’m sorry, I wasn’t ever told that this was off-the-record and it seems to me it’s certainly an invitation only event but I didn’t know that we couldn’t report a speech you’ve just given to the entire diplomatic community and a lot of other people besides”.

Middleton said:

I take the view my producer and I will decide whether something is newsworthy or not, I don’t really need to be told by anyone else, but it’s an interesting culture that’s developed about news as a commodity, information as a commodity, and that certainly it’s a political commodity and it became very, very much (so) under the Howard government.

These examples demonstrate the importance the Prime Minister placed on the relationships he had developed with media proprietors, journalists and commentators over many years. His interest in their views on issues the government were facing allowed Howard to keep abreast of the “political wind”, and the general groundswell of political chatter that would help him shape his thinking on the development of policies and the way he was communicating his government’s achievements and new initiatives to the wider Australian electorate through the media.

**Howard’s Strategic Approach to Media Interviews**

**Howard’s preparation for media interviews**

John Howard took interviews with the media very seriously, as he understood the power of the media and its ability to shape people’s views on his performance as the country’s leader. Luff said Howard had ‘done more media than anyone in Australian history’. Over the course of his prime ministership Howard conducted 2,657 media appearances, as listed on the Liberal Party of Australia’s Pandora Archive site. It included over 1,000 radio interviews, 384 television interviews, 787 doorstops, 300 press conferences and 178 joint press conferences.
JOHN HOWARD’S APPROACH TO COMMUNICATIONS AND THE MEDIA

(see Appendix 5). There may well have been additional interviews not listed, however, it provides verifiable evidence of Howard’s commitment to his media obligations. Luff said however ‘he’s still smart enough to realise that he doesn’t know it all and he can use our (the press office) assistance’. Luff was quick to point out that it ‘isn’t that we manipulate his (Howard’s) message, our assistance is if we know he’s doing the interview, he’s focused on that, but there can be other things going on around him, and … you can always improve, you can always learn’.

Howard did not avoid challenging interviews. As he put it, ‘I never walked away from a really difficult interview with somebody like Kerry O’Brien who was hardly my greatest fan, but I appeared on a regular basis’, as Howard felt The 7.30 Report was ‘the one nightly, uniformly serious current affairs program’. Howard appeared 51 times from 1997 to 2007 as listed on the archived Liberal Party of Australia Website (2007) (See Appendix 5). ‘I didn’t appear every time I was asked but I appeared most times when I was asked’. O’Brien stated:

The 7.30 Report presented Howard with a constituency that he felt was important to Howard, as there would be a lot of Liberal voting and potentially swing voting people amongst our audience … we are an A/B demographic broadly although I think that can oversimplify it. We have a pretty big penetration of regional and rural Australia so it's by and large a thinking audience, and also it's a program that I think all politicians regard as an important program and so he would know that the bulk of politicians would watch our program on any night, so, if he (Howard) was also pitching in any way, shape or form to his own colleagues that was a way of doing it too.

Howard enjoyed the challenge of television interviews, for example, Howard said after sparring with Kerry O’Brien, he felt ‘really pumped up’ after such interviews. Howard said:

The 7.30 Report often had a particular political angle that was a mile away from mine, yet I appeared regularly on his program, because it was a serious current affairs presentation, he had usually done his homework, and the show was widely watched by other politicians and journalists.

In my interview with O’Brien, he confirmed that he enjoyed interviewing the Prime Minister. O’Brien also outlined to me the considerable research he himself would undertake in preparation for such an interview.
Howard’s confidence and ability to handle the most gruelling of interviews was partly due to the preparation the Prime Minister put into many of his media appearances. Luff, said Howard would often talk through possible subject matter that may be raised, and practice prior to some media appearances, before being interviewed on television programs such as The 7.30 Report or Lateline. Ahead of these interviews Luff would do the background checking by speaking to appropriate people, including ministers, then craft some key messages for Howard to review. Luff said:

I always found if I could give him something to read, then it’s easier for him to commit it to memory and understand it, and then he’ll talk about it out loud. He did this so those around him would be “engaged in that role play” and often a lot of it’s in the car on the way to an interview.

Luff said Howard was also very keen for feedback on each of his media performances and ‘after every interview, whether it’s in the car or walking back to the office’, Luff said he would ‘provide Howard with my view on how the media would treat the interview he had just given’. Howard said his preparation involved going over the sorts of questions he thought would be asked with his staff. Howard admitted he would mentally prepare for an interview:

I would go through in my own mind and I would have a brainstorming session with senior staff before major news interviews. If I was doing something on The 7.30 Report, I’d get Tony O’Leary, David Luff and Arthur Sinodinos and one of the policy advisors (depending on the issue) and we’d kick things around for a quarter of an hour or so.

Sinodinos said if O’Brien had a ‘bee in his bonnet about a particular thing we would try and go back and check the record so he (Howard) was armed’. Sinodinos said ‘we’d sit down with him (Howard) at 7.00 pm or 7.15 pm, just after the ABC News, make sure he’s got everything, or 6.30 pm if he wants a more extensive briefing, and have time to ‘go through everything … because he enjoyed the thrust of that and that got his adrenaline going’.

Howard said he would also ring ministers himself for background information although ‘I didn’t automatically do it, but if I was going on The 7.30 Report and if I thought there was something particularly difficult, I might ring a minister and say, “Look, I might be asked this and I’m proposing to say that and what do you think?”’ Kerry O’Brien felt that:
When he (Howard) was in a corner on a particular issue that by coming on our program (The 7.30 Report) and submitting himself to rigorous questioning, that if he performed well in that circumstance that might have the effect of taking the heat out of the issue for him, and I think John Howard did back himself.

Howard's attention to detail, and his commitment to preparing for media interviews is a very significant point when assessing his media performances: ‘I always took those interviews seriously (The 730 Report), you should never go on those programs without allowing yourself time to prepare’. Howard said:

Occasionally it's impossible because you've made an announcement and you're just going to be cross-examined about the announcement but, you know, a run-of-the-mill interview with Kerry O'Brien where you know he’s going to ask difficult questions, which is his job, I don’t mind that, and I always spent time preparing.

The testing of the Howard ministry

Howard had a very high regard for O'Brien and The 7.30 Report, so much so that, according to Cassidy, when a serious issue arose within a minister’s portfolio that attracted media attention he would ask the minister what their solution was. He would also suggest they book a spot on The 7.30 Report to test to see whether they were right across the issue. Howard confirmed this story and said ‘it’s true in part because I always expect the minister who was publicly in the gun over something, I expected him to be able to go out and defend himself’. Howard said ‘as I subjected myself to the same discipline … I expected ministers to be able to do so, and if a minister could, whether the interrogation was on a program like The 7.30 Report, then he or she had a reasonable case’.

On Howard’s use of television and visual media, Middleton related a criticism ‘that did continue right to the end of the prime ministership, and that was about the penchant for doing cosy little set piece “interviews” which were almost video news releases’. Middleton said the prime minister’s press office would invite one TV network, often Channel Nine, to record a set piece to camera, although these were not usually political issues, one example being the death of Slim Dusty (19 September 2003). Middleton said:
Where the criticism came in was that often it was on a day that there were other issues that we wanted to ask him about and he wouldn’t make himself available, but he would make himself available to the one TV camera to be distributed to everybody, so there would be that transcript distributed to the newspapers, and the audio would go to the radio and the TV video footage would go to the TV’s and this journalist was only ever allowed to ask about this subject and not anything else, so it was very quick.

You can understand the press gallery’s frustration with this approach, however it was another strategy the press office used to manage the Prime Minister’s media appearances, bearing in mind the incredible workload and commitments a prime minister would have, over and above being constantly available for media interviews.

**Howard’s media interview style and performance**

A prime minister needs to demonstrate strong and forthright leadership and it’s through media appearances and public performances where their character and persona is on display. Television is unforgiving, and Howard realised his media appearances and commentary were carefully studied and analysed. Journalists had mixed feelings about Howard’s style, but most were impressed with his professionalism. The electorate knew exactly where Howard stood on key issues, as David Gazard, Senior Media Advisor to Howard from 1996–1999, Senior Advisor to Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott 2003–2004 and from 2004–2007 Senior Advisor to Federal Treasurer Peter Costello noted, ‘there's a consistency of values positioned to Howard, and like him or loathe him, people respected that about him’.

In general, Howard was always good at providing a story. Dennis Atkins, National Political Editor for Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail*, recalled that ‘If you did a sit down interview with Howard you would always come away with a story, and he knew, as well as you did, what the story was, (he was) very, very good like that ... he knew the journalists were there to get a story’. Atkins contrasted this to Rudd’s approach to interviews where, according to Atkins, he might ‘just talk’ and ‘you’d come away wondering what the story was’. Paul Kelly described Howard as having ‘developed the persona of the benevolent uncle … Howard was an agent of reliability and reassurance’. Marr thought ‘for the most part Howard is a boring speaker, he doesn’t crack jokes, he very, very rarely says anything little, but that does not make him unpersuasive. Marr felt ‘people confuse colour and movement with the capacity to shape our
JOHN HOWARD’S APPROACH TO COMMUNICATIONS AND THE MEDIA

minds, and they are much too ready to dismiss Howard’s capacity because, frankly, he was always pretty grey, but grey is powerful’. Luff’s view of Howard’s media performances were quite clear: he said Howard ‘was totally in control, if he didn't want to say it, he wouldn’t say it, he could knock a whole message on the head and say, “no, we’re not saying that”… you don't spin John Howard’. Walsh said Howard ‘was a master stonewaller, you could ask him a couple of times … but he would not answer, he'd just say we're moving on from that, Kerry’. Luff said although Howard was ‘more experienced than anyone’, he didn’t particularly like to ‘give information out no matter how tricky you are in your questions’, so for that reason Howard, according to Luff, would ‘put a lot of time into preparing for interviews’.

Luff thought Sky News Political Director ‘David Speers is very good because Speers is across everything’. He felt 2UE’s Alan Jones ‘whacked the Prime Minister and other ministers just as hard as anyone else’, and Hadley’s (2UE, then from 2001 2GB) conversational style would have ‘the Prime Minister saying things that he wouldn’t have revealed on other networks’. Neil Mitchell, 3AW morning radio host, said Howard was ‘very, very, very hard to crack’. Speers said he found:

> It was very rare that he (Howard) would be caught out, and as an interviewer, interviewing him I can tell you it was very hard to catch him out on anything. He was really briefed on what sort of questions he would likely face and therefore was rarely rattled or uncomfortable during an interview, and he managed to keep his answers to what he wanted to talk about … even off-the-record he would rarely let his guard down.

In fact, Howard was caught out one day, according to Ken Matthews, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry from 1998–1999, then Secretary of the Department of Transport and Regional Services until 2004, and Chair and Chief Executive of the National Water Commission until 2010. The issue related to fuel excise and the revelation that only 3.1 cents a litre of fuel excise was being spent on roads rather then the 4.45 cents a litre set out in law (see Colvin 2001). Matthews said:

> The Prime Minister was caught completely unaware of it in a radio interview in Melbourne on the morning this was revealed (Friday 9 February 2001), and he knew nothing about the subject. The department had not been transferring fuel excise funds that were meant to be funding roads, into roads funding. The prime minister’s office intervened and then Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Max Moore-Wilton … gave me a call, shall we say … and I spent a day with Max trying to pick up the pieces, but it was a near death experience for me.
Howard said in the media he was ‘seeking answers as to why he was not told of the road funding problem before Friday morning: the question of communication of information to me, well that’s something I’m attending to’ (see an article in the Central Western Daily, 2001).

According to Mitchell ‘Howard could also be very verbose, he could bore you out of something, that was a bit of a strategy, he’d just go on and on’. The ABC’s Fran Kelly supported Mitchell’s observation, noting, ‘Howard was the master of the three minute answer and not taking a breath, you know he’d just perfected this over time … so you couldn’t cut in without appearing rude, that certainly was with me anyway’. O’Brien felt this technique was used by many politicians, as was ‘this sense of politicians constantly being, “on message,” or filibustering in an interview because they want to limit the number of questions you're going to ask, as they know it's a finite amount of time’. Fran Kelly felt Howard ‘often … outwitted me’, suggesting ‘I would have to concede that John Howard had my measure for much of the time, I rarely felt like I got the upper hand with him’. Fran Kelly also said there were ‘times it was fair to say there was probably no love lost in our on-air relationship and nothing to our off-air one because he would literally sometimes get up, straight off the air and then walk out’. However, Fran Kelly also noted ‘when he was in control of the agenda, as he was for much of his time (Howard was) a very personable man … very courteous and … professional’. Jones said ‘the great thing about Howard was he never wanted to know what the question was beforehand because his (Howard’s) encyclopaedic knowledge of the issues was quite extraordinary, he was across everything that went past Cabinet’. Cassidy, who interviewed Howard regularly, thought he was a first class media performer: ‘he had great debating skills and then he was intellectually a match for anybody’. In relation to Howard’s style, Cassidy said Howard came across as a ‘no nonsense kind of guy’. When asked whether he ever provided Howard’s press office with ‘talking points’ prior to interviews, he indicated that ‘they never asked for it’. In some other cases he had provided ministerial press officers with some general indication of issues that might be considered in the interview, but this had not been the case with Howard. O’Brien, when preparing for interviews with Howard said ‘I'll give broad topic headings as a courtesy, as a matter of common sense, and I think on the rare occasion that I'm going to ask something that is so left field that they can't be expected to know it off the top of their heads then you might actually give them an indicator of the thing’.
The expectation that a prime minister will be expert in every facet of government business, considering the volume and complexity of matters under consideration, is perhaps unfair. O’Brien said:

I don't expect them to be encyclopaedias but there are still a lot of things of which you do expect them to have basic knowledge, and I do avoid what I would regard as cheap trick questions, I think that demeans the program and is unfair on the politician, so I do try to bring a measure of fairness to what I think is fair game and what's not.

O’Brien saw an interview with a politician as ‘an opportunity to look at their credibility’. With an interview with the Prime Minister, O’Brien said:

I want those interviews to count in terms of the face to face scrutiny that I’m going to apply, the areas I can explore, so I'm asking the Prime Minister to take that opportunity seriously, to put them on notice that I'm going to be asking serious questions, that I'm going to probe, that I'm going to try to get past obfuscation, I want to shed light on things.

Howard rarely disappointed, he knew the audience wanted to witness serious and meaningful political debate. Media commentators felt Howard was a good media performer, particularly under pressure, and his memory and command of his government’s portfolios enabled him to navigate the most intense barrage of media questioning.

An example of Howard’s ability to handle difficult media conferences was given by Marr when Howard faced a media conference on the Tampa incident. Marr said ‘when pressed at an important all-in press conference (27th of August 2001), Howard could be completely masterful’. Announcing the fact the Tampa had been stopped, ‘it is a masterpiece of mis-statement, obfuscation, sting and one or two small lies. It was extraordinary that in the midst of that crisis he or his staff had the cool power of analysis to do what they did at that press conference, and really set the tone of the whole crisis’. Marr also stated that:

Howard was willing to lie when he needed to lie, but for the most part, he was capable of a phenomenal … grasp of ambiguity, and he’s able to … produce statements which appear to mean one thing, but under pressure later on he can say, “Look, I never said that”. One lie of his, which is a completely frontal lie, is that the Siev-X, the boat in which 459 people drowned (revealed on 23 October 2001), went down in Indonesian waters. Now that’s not true, it went down in international waters, in the zone that was being patrolled by Australian air and sea craft, and there’s no dispute about that (see also Kingston, 2003).
Van Onselen made the observation that:

I don’t believe Howard lies, however … Howard would never tell you more than the question asked and he avoids putting himself in a position where he has to lie. If you ask Howard a question, if you haven’t … covered your angles, if there’s any grounds under which he can say no, he’ll say no, even if the answer might be yes as long as you have given him an out so he’s not lying.

Also Van Onselen felt many people have an opinion about what is a lie: ‘Children overboard, weapons of mass destruction, GST never ever, they are not lies, they are changes of opinion or … (Howard) receiving false information’.

**Howard’s slips of the tongue or calculated commentary**

While Howard was regarded as a masterful media performer, there were occasions when “off the cuff” comments were thought to be ill considered. Three examples are detailed here, the first incident occurred on his 61st birthday on 26 July 2000. In an interview with Philip Clarke (2000) on ABC’s 2BL Sydney, Howard said:

If the party wants me to lead it to another election, which will be at the end of next year, I am happy to do so, after that obviously one has to recognise I'll then be in my 63rd or 64th year, and you start to ask yourself and that's fair enough, nothing is forever.

Howard described this interview as ‘ill-disciplined, I said that … it was’. Morris suggested Howard use the line “nothing is forever” to kill off leadership speculation before the 2001 election, ‘so that line didn’t just come to Howard in the middle of the interview’. Morris conceded he gave Howard bad advice. (See also Costello, 2008; Van Onselen & Errington, 2007, p. 296).

Secondly, on Friday 29 April 2005 John Howard was interviewed in Athens by two News Limited journalists Steve Lewis and Malcolm Farr and stated: ‘he (Howard) had beaten Beazley twice in the past’, and when asked if he could beat him a third time, he (Howard) shot back: ‘yes, I would hope to try’.
Thus, Howard’s statement implied he clearly planned to stay in office and contest the next election due in 2007. Costello (2008, p. 233) said his supporters branded the comments “The Athens Declaration” (see also Eastley, 2005). Luff said at the time ‘straight away I knew there was a problem’.

The third example of Howard’s lapse of discipline occurred when he was discussing the forthcoming United States Presidential election on the Nine Network in February 2007: ‘if I was running Al Qaeda in Iraq, I would put a circle around March 2008, and pray, as many times as possible, for a victory not only for Obama, but also for the Democrats’ (O'Malley, 2007).

For someone who was always very careful with his words, these last two comments in particular were either genuine mistakes, or premeditated statements designed to send a very clear message. Costello said those Al Qaeda comments ‘made Obama very angry incidentally: extremely angry’.

This lack of discipline was perceived as a particular problem during the 2007 election campaign when Howard made a number of key statements at the campaign launch, Van Onselen and Senior (2008, p. 116) noting one: ‘Love me or loath me, at least you know what I stand for’, which had not been developed in consultation with his campaign team.

**The Prime Minister’s performances at press conferences**

The courtyard in Parliament House outside the prime minister’s office was used frequently to hold media conferences. Wright said ‘Keating used to rope off the journalists in the courtyard, however Howard realised you didn’t actually need that rope, if you were in the courtyard ‘the Prime Minister had his own door right behind him, so he would give press conferences in that courtyard, just the same as Keating did, and when he felt that he wanted to get out of there, he’d just turn around and go straight through his door, and there was nothing you could do about it’. The setup for press conferences where the Prime Minister had a way of concluding and then exiting when he wished was quite deliberate, and one distinct advantage of holding these events in the Prime Minister’s own courtyard. O’Brien suggested a politician subjecting themselves to a media conference has its own challenges:
In a room where everyone’s sitting ... it's harder to extract yourself from that if the media is after you, if they’ve got a lot of questions they want to ask and particularly if they're a bit excited about the issue, it's hard for you to beat your retreat from a formal media conference without looking like you're running away.

These media conferences became more stage managed over the years. Wright noted ‘one flag would turn into two flags behind him and because he wasn’t a tall man, he’d make absolutely sure the lectern wasn’t too tall for him’.

For Howard, the press conference format had in-built limitations as a vehicle for communicating with the public. It unduly (in Howard’s view) empowered journalists who were in a position to control the messages that ultimately went to the public. Howard felt ‘the problem with news conferences is that journalists publish only what they choose to publish out of what you say’. The frustration with this selective reporting was felt by Morris, who noted ‘there are some fantastic journalists around Australia, in fact I think we have some of the best journalists around the world, we also have some of the biggest idiots’. Howard was often criticised for not making himself available for news conferences. However, Paul Kelly said:

Howard as prime minister held full-scale press conferences much more frequently than Bob Hawke and much more frequently than Malcolm Fraser, now having been there all through the Fraser and Hawke years, I would be very confident of that judgment and it’s a point that’s often overlooked.

Howard agreed, stating:

I used to do plenty of stand-up news conferences, I didn’t replace them with talkback radio appearances although a couple of journalists, cranky journalists, tried to allege that. They talked about “it’s a long time since Howard has had a sit-down news conference”, well, what is the difference between a sit-down news conference and a stand-up one? I used to do stand-up ones in the courtyard, the prime minister’s courtyard, and I would often go on for three-quarters of an hour if I’m standing up, I could stand up but they couldn’t.

Andrews made the observation that Howard would ‘stand there in the courtyard answering questions for an hour, until the media didn’t have any questions left to ask him, that was quite clever and effective, and they couldn’t ever say that he didn’t answer their questions, or he
wasn’t available’. Shergold felt Howard was sometimes overgenerous with his time and forthcoming with his answers: ‘I was amazed at the number of times he would just keep answering questions, when you think, gee, you’ve given them enough now’.

Loughnane observed that ‘these guys (prime ministers) are flat out. Journos love press conferences but … Howard would have done at least one or two things a day if not more’. Loughnane said ‘these days the prime minister is expected to be across the detail of every issue’, and this is where Howard’s extraordinary memory and recall came to the fore. Howard did attempt to answer every question journalists posed, however as all politicians do, he could be evasive at times and not as forthcoming as journalists would have wished. Loughnane said ‘I had the transcripts of every Howard press conference for 12 years, I doubt, I’d be amazed if you found any examples, there might be one or two, where he said “Look I’ll take that on notice”, so one of the things about John Howard is his absolute incredible command of the detail where we were very lucky’.

Howard’s Relationship with the Parliamentary Press Gallery

The strategy in dealing with the press gallery

In general, Howard initially had little regard for the gallery, which he thought was left-leaning. Middleton confirmed this observation in regard to Howard’s view of Fairfax: ‘he assumed that we were all rabid lefties, so he wasn’t going to let you finish a question because he was hearing a Fairfax question and making an assumption about what you were asking and why you were asking it’. This was particularly the case with older journalists who, Howard thought, still harked back to the Whitlam years and were part of the “Vietnam generation” and he thought that younger journalists were less likely carry such political “baggage”. According to Abjoreson, Howard’s press office thought in 1996 ‘the new government came into a hostile media environment’ and that ‘as the press gallery was against them the media needed to be neutralised’. Grattan felt Howard ‘was very affected by what happened to him in the eighties when he came under a lot of criticism from parts of the gallery ... he became quite embittered over that and therefore he would find ways to bypass the gallery where he could’. Minchin said ‘there is a kind of soft left culture in our press gallery, with the sort of people who want to come to Canberra and live in Canberra and stay in Canberra and stay in this gallery for a long time tend to be of a soft left nature’. Minchin nominated the ABC crew and the Fairfax bureau as being ‘soft left’.
While Howard sought to by-pass the press gallery in his own media appearances, he recognised the need to support the day-to-day work of gallery journalists in other ways. One function of his press office was to ‘provide bread and butter support to them’. Howard recalled that ‘if they wanted a transcript we would try to give it to them, if they wanted a bit of information we would try to get back to them as soon as possible. We endeavoured to establish a cordial relationship with the gallery’. On one level, this operated well with Wright and Bongiorno suggesting they had good access, but on another level, the terms of the relationship set by Howard disempowered gallery journalists. Wright said the contrast with access to the Prime Minister from earlier days was stark:

In 1999, it was Christmas and it was just an end of year interview and I sat down and ended up talking (to Howard) for two hours or something, but towards the end (of his prime ministership) you would have to be absolutely specific, the economy for example, to be granted an interview.

Wright noted a change after 2001 but ‘it changed absolutely in the years since 2004 when Howard then provided journalists with an allocated time, and this was sometimes as little as a quarter of an hour’.

Sometimes the prime minister’s office took steps to hose down excessive speculations about government actions by speaking directly to journalists in the press gallery. Howard himself rarely visited the press gallery, but Wright remembers:

The last time I saw that happen was 2001 during the Tampa matter. He didn’t know which way it was going to go, and he came up and did an interview at The Australian office and he was basically red in the face and stamping around and saying, “these people will never touch Australian soil”, just to show everyone that he was terribly serious.

Starick also remembers when Howard called the 2004 election, Starick was in his Canberra press gallery office:

Looking out the window talking (on the phone) and all of a sudden I hear this, mmm hmm (coughing noise) and in my office is Tony O’Leary and the Prime Minister, and he wanted to make a direct comment on a particular (South Australian) issue … it was the most bizarre thing.
Starick said ‘Howard often, or regularly said, I believe The Advertiser sets the agenda in South Australian politics, so I want to be in The Advertiser, and then Luffy (David Luff) would reinforce that at well’. Journalists would, however, normally interview Howard in the prime minister’s office. Middleton said Howard also bypassed the press gallery because he ‘felt that we would edit and package up what he said’. Middleton said Howard:

Developed this extraordinary schedule of radio interviews … he was incredibly accessible to radio commentators but not to the rest of us and … you ended up having to rely on transcripts of radio … and we press gallery journalists became very dependent on radio transcripts.

Once they allowed TV cameras into the radio studio Middleton said ‘they didn’t need to do separate interviews and press conferences’.

According to Abjoreson, Howard ‘would rarely brief the press gallery, and didn’t like close questioning’. Howard stated ‘you can make an announcement and you can answer 20 questions and because a journalist takes a shine to a particular answer you’ve given and that becomes the hook for a television story, the rest of it can be lost’. The downside for public accountability of a deliberate policy of bypassing the press gallery was the lack of scrutiny and detailed questioning by experienced journalists that would normally accompany a fully blown media conference. Wright said ‘he (Howard) didn’t give press conferences, he gave radio interviews to Alan Jones in particular, who was his favourite, but he had them in all the capital cities’.

Sinodinos thought ‘the press are inherently sceptical, it’s their job, in many ways they can be the real opposition, but politicians adjust to the fact that that’s the way the media will go, therefore they develop their own techniques in dealing with the media’. These observations relate directly to the “mediatisation of politics”, where politicians may be able to develop their own way of engaging with journalists, but ultimately need to adapt to the logic of the media. Howard thus felt comfortable on radio, and his use of this medium became the hallmark of his prime ministership.

According to Bongiorno, the press gallery was targeted sometimes unfairly by Howard’s press office. It could assist some reporters and hinder others by, for example, favouring some television programs over others in the granting of prime ministerial interviews. Bongiorno felt that in the last years of the Howard government, his program Meet the Press was unfairly treated because O’Leary thought he (Bongiorno) ‘hadn’t been treating the government with enough respect or fairly’.
Accessibility to press gallery journalists and political commentators

Accessibility to the prime minister was not a problem for many journalists. According to Bongiorno, ‘everyone thought Bob Hawke was accessible and he was, but Howard was without a doubt the most accessible prime minister we’ve ever had’. Paul Kelly also agreed: ‘there’s no doubt that Howard, as a prime minister, spent more time doing media than any other previous prime minister’. Paul Kelly said ‘Gough Whitlam (Prime Minister 1972–75) was praised because when the parliament was in session, he had a weekly press conference and that was it’, and Whitlam also ‘didn’t do talkback radio’. O’Brien also said ‘in broad terms John Howard was very accessible and I think he prided himself on being accessible’. O’Brien said ‘I genuinely respect John Howard for his willingness to front up on any number of tough situations and subject himself to the kind of exposure that he knew he would face on the program’. Grattan on the other hand, felt that she didn’t generally have very good access to the Prime Minister. Her access was via the press office; however, she granted that Howard was accessible in the sense of being ‘out and about doing things all the time’ but that this was a ‘sort of superficial accessibility’.

On accessibility, Howard confirmed his view on the media being ‘a very important part of the system ... a very legitimate part of the process’ (of politics and government) so he realised the importance of being available to the media. Paul Kelly said:

> Media coverage is critical, media coverage can change everything, media coverage sets the tone and tenor of so many debates and prime ministers are always influenced by media coverage and they are adjusting their message according to the media coverage, so media coverage is absolutely critical.

Paul Kelly said Prime Minister Howard saw it as ‘his obligation, an essential part of his role, to make himself readily available to the media, though he reserved the right to do so on his own terms’. These terms however, are governed by the logic of the media, and Howard knew he had to construct his political rhetoric to fit within the media’s programming formats. After all, according to Dawson, Howard ‘had a tremendous knowledge of the media, based on 30 years in politics’. These traits and strategies did not just emerge; they are the result of Howard’s personal communication skills, and his ability to identify a medium that would allow him direct access to the Australian electorate. Howard often made it look easy, however that is a false perception, and anyone having to contend with intense media scrutiny and the pressures of high office would appreciate it is far from enjoyable and relaxing.
Howard’s Love of Radio and his Focus on his Media Image

Howard on radio

Howard utilised the power of talkback radio as a communications strategy, as Hewitt (2000) noted, to bypass the press gallery and directly ‘connect with ordinary Australians’. Gazard said Howard ‘used to like radio more than any other prime minister’. Howard (2010, p. 587) said:

I used talkback radio more than any other prime minister because it was the most effective way of getting across an unfiltered message. An hour can be spent doing a Canberra press conference, yet what appears on the TV that night, on the radio or in the newspaper is entirely at the discretion of journalists or news editors and might bear little or no relation to the central purpose of the news conference. At the very least the talkback radio audience hears your message directly, and many of those audiences are very large.

Howard confirmed that:

Within a fairly short period of time I formed the view that one of the best ways of communicating with the public was to try to speak over the heads of the press gallery and the best method of doing that was to appear a lot on radio with a television camera or cameras in the studio and distributing the transcripts after I’d done the interview.

Middleton noted that, in his first term in government, ‘Howard’s use of radio was prolific’, and in fact Howard increased his use of the medium during his prime ministership. Howard said ‘I deliberately increased my use of talkback radio as a way of directly communicating with people, and I never made any bones about it’.

Howard and his advisors intuitively understood that talkback radio had emerged as a “new” news medium, with a very different logic to the “old” news media driven by journalistic, rather than by commercial values alone. Howard preferred one-on-one interactions via talkback radio, and as Crabb put it:

He was very comfortable to be on air answering questions live, taking callers that would call out of the blue, and you very rarely heard him stumble on radio … he was much more comfortable in the medium that allowed him to speak directly without fear of being edited or misquoted or anything like that.
This is one reason why ‘Howard wasn’t a great fan of television’, according to Wright, ‘because he felt he could be edited, so he’d only appear live, for instance, on The 7.30 Report’. Sinodinos confirmed that Howard ‘normally insisted on doing it live if possible’. Bongiorno said Howard’s use of talkback radio was widely regarded as ‘masterful’. Oakes (2008, p. 209) noted ‘increasingly the shock jocks of talkback radio have been taking over from political journalists the role of providing political information and questioning politicians’. Another view on Howard’s desire to use radio was proposed by Bennister (2012, p. 153) who suggested because ‘Howard had a poor television presence … his personal style was much better suited to radio’.

Howard felt:

One of the great virtues of talkback radio was that it obliged you to explain what you were doing in language that the everyday person could understand in a conversation. They’d say, “why are you going to introduce this?” and I’d say, “well, we’re doing it for the following reasons”. You weren’t reading from a script, you weren’t on a stage, you were, in a sense, having a conversation with somebody, and being able to argue, persuade, and debate is the most important thing.

Howard appeared on many talkback radio programs across Australia, and conducted over 1,000 radio interviews according to the prime minister’s official website (see Appendix 5). Another development in the coverage of politics was the interest television networks had in filming radio interviews. Speers said, ‘whichever television network was the most convenient would shoot Howard in radio studios and provide the footage to everyone else to avoid having more than one camera in the studio’. As an example, Speers said Channel Nine can plug into the 2UE studio at Parliament House ‘so they can send (footage) out live to the rest of the bureaus and the gallery’. Speers said ‘often networks may only get a few minutes notice that the interview was on’. Uhlmann confirmed ‘the ABC had a pooling arrangement with Channel Ten and SBS, Channel Nine and Channel Seven had separate arrangements’.

According to Mitchell, Howard grew into talkback radio: ‘Howard appeared on the program every fortnight … he was in power from 1996 to 2007, so it’s 11 years …it’s probably more’. Mitchell said it took six months to convince Howard to commit to appearing on 3AW regularly, however, once Howard committed to the program Mitchell said ‘he would call into us on the allocated day from just about anywhere in the world … he very rarely missed’.
Mitchell said Howard ‘was very available … he never dodged something because it was too tough, he would never call off’. Mitchell said Howard was ‘very nervous at first, surprisingly … he was pretty awkward with talk radio in the early stages and then he became a master’. Mitchell noted that ‘hate Howard or like him, you generally thought he was speaking as he found and he either addressed the question … or he very definitely stepped over it, often by saying “no, I’m not going to answer that”. Mitchell said:

Howard wasn’t a natural, but he worked at it. The listening audience loved the Howard segments … the phone reaction on 3AW was huge. When Howard was on air the only thing that I’ve ever got a bigger reaction on, apart from the Tampa, was the death of Princess Diana, they just wanted to talk about nothing else for weeks. And with the Tampa, it was the same thing, you just said good morning, we’ll take … bang! Off with the Tampa.

Howard used the Mitchell interviews as an opportunity, knowing the wide coverage the interview would receive from many other media outlets. Howard said:

I had a half-hour slot every fortnight at 8.30 am, peak listening time in Melbourne, and if there was something important the government was announcing or doing or defending or promoting, Mitchell would give me an opportunity to talk to his listeners with few interruptions, about that issue.

Howard said Mitchell ‘could always think of a question to ask that would elicit a response that produced news’. Mitchell did feel Howard was using 3AW to ‘get himself on the nice little neat grab on the TV news without having to go through the indignity of a mass press conference’. The reason for the extensive coverage of Howard’s appearances on 3AW was the presence of television cameras in the studio, providing a multi-media opportunity for the Prime Minister. Normally, a grab from Howard’s session with Mitchell would feature in the evening news of each of the three commercial television networks, plus the ABC. Howard said ‘normally there would also be a number of stories in the following day’s papers, as well as reaching the 700,000 people or whatever who would hear the broadcast’. Howard told Mitchell he felt ‘we had about a 95 per cent strike rate in … having a grab of him talking to me on the Friday night news’. Howard said ‘my technique with people like Neil Mitchell and Alan Jones was to go into the studio, and you would have cameras there, and obviously the transcript would be dropped in the press gallery boxes’.
Television cameras in radio studios

The appearance of television cameras in radio studios to record interviews on issues considered to be newsworthy, according to Mitchell, ‘was pioneered by Jeff Kennett, it was viewed as his weekly press conference. Jeff wouldn’t do other press conferences, so it was the weekly press conference, and we always got something out of him, so TV cameras were needed, and we even put lights in the studio floor’. Howard continued the tradition by giving approval for 3AW to have cameras in the studios when he appeared live. The television newsrooms, according to Mitchell ‘will ring us every day and say who have you got in the studio … with Howard and Jeff (Kennett), it was always at least three cameras’.

In relation to Howard’s media appearances on ABC radio, Uhlmann said:

> During election campaigns his (Howard’s) staff would endeavour to secure airtime on AM in particular, with the ABC endeavouring to keep Howard’s appearances to approximately one a week. This is why he often then went to News Radio who would be more than happy to pick up any comments he would make and again, other media would use this particular source to develop stories throughout the course of the day.

Fran Kelly said ‘every political interview in our Parliament House radio studio has a camera across it, and that works for us because it gives us a prominent profile for the news day’. Kelly says ministers like it as it saves them doing another television interview. Kelly also said, with the advent of ABC television breakfast news, they often switch live to the studio, a fact that Kelly acknowledged is great for their branding.

Radio listener feedback and its impact on Howard

Another factor in using talkback radio was the opportunity to hear directly from a vast cross-section of the Australian community. Megalogenis felt ‘John Howard saw talkback as a form of electronic focus group’. Howard said he felt talkback radio was ‘like talking to people in the street … it is good feedback’. According to Goot (2005, p189) ‘political leaders who pay too little attention to public opinion are accused of being “arrogant”, of not being “in touch”, or of “not listening”’, and Howard knew this instinctively and deliberately sought the views of constituents via talkback radio programs. As an example, Howard made the point that his policy on asylum seekers was partially influenced by the feedback he received on talkback
JOHN HOWARD’S APPROACH TO COMMUNICATIONS AND THE MEDIA

radio: ‘I think the evolving of my approach to asylum seekers was influenced somewhat (by talkback callers) in 2001 … and it became increasingly difficult to justify not doing more to slow down the flow’. Jones said Howard took a lot of talkback calls on the Snowy Mountain Scheme, when the federal government proposed to sell off their 13 per cent share, reported at the time by Lee (2006). Jones recalled his callers saying, ‘“Hang on, this is iconic”, I mean people felt that this was built by migrants and so on, and that was iconic, so he (Howard) then reversed the whole thing on the Snowy Mountains’. Byrne (2006) covered this Howard reversal on 2 June 2006.

Howard and his focus on his media image

In 1975, with the introduction of colour television in Australia, according to Van Onselen it was Howard’s ‘television appearances that convinced him he needed to do something about a rather prominent gold-capped tooth that was a legacy of old-style dentistry. ‘You could see it on television’ Janette told Van Onselen and Errington (2007, p. 60), ‘one of the dentists put a cap on it’. Savva (2010, p. 79) wrote of Howard’s image makeover when he got ‘new teeth’, and Savva penned a story ‘John Howard was hanging on to his leadership of the Liberal Party by the skin of his new teeth’. Savva said ‘I followed up with a column, putting it together with the more modern glasses he had acquired, and gleefully pointed out that he had his eyebrows freshly clipped, an attempt, I wrote, to tame the old ones, which I said resembled wayward caterpillars’. It provided fodder for Keating and other comedians to ridicule Howard for years.

On one occasion, the normally calm and controlled Howard lost his temper, and his image took a tumble at the Australian Reconciliation Convention (26 May 1997), celebrating the 30th anniversary of the 1967 Aboriginal referendum in Melbourne (see the State Library of Victoria coverage, (2014)). When Howard mentioned the Wik legislation some delegates stood and turned their backs, and Howard responded by shouting over the interjections, appearing to lose control. Howard said ‘that was just one of those rare occasions when I didn’t exercise the discipline I normally did, I should have just made my speech and sat down and that was that. That was not a good look’. There were very few occasions when the Prime Minister faulted in his media and public appearances, so these incidents highlight the fact that, despite his personal communication abilities, and his grasp of government legislation and the political agenda, under pressure lapses invariably occur.
To highlight Howard’s concern about his image, he described to Mitchell on 3AW ‘one of the worst moments in his prime ministership’. Mitchell said ‘it wasn’t September 11 when he was in the States, it wasn’t Bali, it wasn’t any of these things’. Mitchell said ‘it was footage of him playing cricket in India, Howard mentioned that that is one of the worst moments of his prime ministership’. The incident occurred in Dhanvi Pakistan in late November 2005 where the prime minister, just for fun decided to partake for a few moments in a local cricket game, and a sticky cricket ball that Howard was bowling caused him to miss-bowl a number of balls, much to his embarrassment. Howard obviously felt this image was humiliating and it shows the importance he placed on his image as a leader who wanted to be totally in control of the message and the way he was portrayed.

Howard also valued his image as a ‘fit and healthy man’ according to Van Onselen and Errington (2007, p. 368): ‘Television pictures, such as those from the 2004 campaign when he outpaced a group of young Greenpeace protestors while on his morning walk, were invaluable’. Another example of endeavouring to improve his image occurred the day after the announcement of the 2007 election campaign on 14 October. Howard dispensed with his ‘traditional navy suit’ and wore a white shirt and tie, without a jacket and in one scene waves a plush miniature Australian Rules football in his hands. This all occurred on the Liberal Party of Australia’s website in an endeavour to show the Prime Minister in a more relaxed and conversational mood in three new videos. The previous use of an autocue was gone, as Howard spoke “off-camera” about ‘experience, balance and renewal’.

Howard usually appeared comfortable and confident when interviewed. There were occasions, however, when his persona let him down and his image suffered. O’Brien suggested ‘there was a view that when John Howard was nervous or uncomfortable he developed a shoulder twitch, and I had noticed a sort of twitchy shoulder a bit and I think there's probably some truth in that’.

O’Brien also noted that ‘there were times when I felt that he was uncomfortable with a particular line of questioning, or he was uncomfortable in an interview, but he was like the Geoffrey Boycott (English Cricketer and opening batsmen 1962–1986) of politician’s interviews … he presented a very good defence at the crease’. Fran Kelly observed ‘when he (Howard) is under pressure, he had mannerisms that showed, and if you were a careful observer you could see that (he became) twitchy’. These observations go to the image and
persona a prime minister projects as the leader of the country. The media can be unforgiving, and any characteristic or flaw in a politician’s appearance can be very damaging, one example being Treasurer Costello’s “smirk”, a facial expression that aroused much media interest and shaped the perception of him being “smart and arrogant”.

Conclusion

It can be seen, from the evidence presented, that Howard’s focus on the media and the relationships he built up over time, and continued to cultivate with key players at every level, were very much part of his overarching media and communications strategy. The commitment to become totally immersed in the world of political commentary virtually every day of his prime ministership, demonstrated the importance he placed on the influence of the media and how that, in turn, shaped the public’s perception of his government, and himself as the country’s leader. From his early morning walks to his consumption of evening television news, Howard was indeed living in a “media-saturated” world.

The Prime Minister possessed considerable personal communications skills, and he would determine if new policy initiatives would be appropriate or desirable, by considering if he felt they could be successfully “sold” in the media to the wider Australian electorate. The assistance Howard received from his advisors, ministerial colleagues, close media allies, through to the shared passion his wife Janette had for all things political, combined to shape the media persona of a man well aware of how public perceptions are shaped by your ability to handle the scrutiny of a relentless and unforgiving media. Howard realised the importance of radio to reach his constituents without journalistic filters, and the importance of preparation for media interviews, citing the forensic grilling from some of Australia’s top political commentators, as good reason to be thoroughly briefed before subjecting himself to these interrogations. Howard also utilised Sky News, knowing it was used as a source of news by other media outlets, enabling him to conduct one interview that would ensure his key messages would then be picked up by other networks across the country.

This next chapter examines the logistics behind the management of Howard’s press office and the development of the strategies that supported the Prime Minister’s relationships and interaction with the Australian media.
Chapter 6: The Howard Government’s Coordination of their Political Messaging

Chapter Overview

This chapter focuses on the second of the four thesis questions:

How did the prime minister’s office approach the complexity of developing and coordinating its political communication during the Howard government’s tenure?

Included in this chapter is analysis of the interviews with John Howard, press office staff, ministerial staffers, journalists and media commentators, and Howard government ministers, all who worked closely, or had direct dealings with Howard’s press office. The staffing of the press office and the logistics of how the office ran is canvassed, as is the role Press Secretary Tony O’Leary played in coordinating the communication between press secretaries across government, along with the coordination role played by ministerial staff. This coordination encompassed not only the scheduling of media appearances, but the messages the government wished to impart on a daily basis. The development of the government’s media strategies is also explored, along with the logistics of developing key messages and the position the Coalition’s spokespeople would take in handling the media “interrogation” they faced each day. Media tactics and the crafting of talking points were often driven by Howard’s Leadership Group. Finally, the question of who sets the media agenda, politicians or the media, is canvassed.

The Operation and Coordination Role Played by the Prime Minister’s Press Office

The Press Office Staffing Structure and Administrative Functions

Tony O’Leary, as Howard’s Press Secretary, ran the office and also coordinated the activities of the 34 media staff serving the Howard ministry (Tiernan, 2006). O’Leary also managed the staff of eight within the prime minister’s press office and according to Tiernan, ‘this was the largest ever assembled by an Australian Prime Minister’. One of the reasons for the efficient
operation of Howard’s press office was the team of people who manned the operation. Tony O’Leary was full of praise for the team working within the prime minister’s press office. O’Leary said:

There were a broad range of skills within the press office, many experienced media practitioners such as David Luff, Ben Mitchell and David Gazard, and some younger talented people who had come up “through the system” such as Willie Herron. When we were thrown an issue we often workshoped ideas as a group, with a range of opinions voiced. We would then craft recommendations on a course of action, and usually our advice was taken.

Within the press office, Casey said there were seven staff during her time of employment with the press office and that included four support staff. Staff numbers fluctuated between six and eight, but included the press secretary, senior media advisors and assistant media advisors, and media assistants (Reference: annual staff list of Prime Minister Howard’s press office 1996–2007 supplied by the Parliament House Library from the Parliament House Communications Directories for 38th–41st Parliaments, attached as Appendix 2). Luff said ‘most of the Prime Minister’s staff were based in Canberra, but there were about five of us based in Sydney, and I was the most senior one … and you're there all the time so essentially if he went somewhere then I was with him’. The staff were professional and well versed in how the media operated, and according to Atkins, ‘they really understood about deadlines, and they understood the different needs of radio, television, and print media’. Jack Waterford, Editor-in-Chief of The Canberra Times, felt ‘Howard’s was the most disciplined office he had ever come across’. He also noted the contribution of ‘Willie Herron to the efficient operation of the press office’.

The operation of the press office

Coordination and management of media responsibilities is a massive task for any government. The intense nature of media scrutiny and the pace of the 24-hour media cycle is unrelenting. O’Leary said:

There was no formula to running the press office, you learn as you go. We were all part of a professional team where everyone contributed to its operation. There was no “one” individual who could claim credit for the press office’s success.
The press office was an integral part of the office of the prime minister. O’Leary said ‘Arthur Sinodinos allowed the press office to operate as an independent source of advice to the Prime Minister’. We have seen that Howard placed considerable importance on his dealings with the media, both in terms of the messages his government was imparting and the shaping of Howard’s own image and reputation. Howard had a very close association with his press office; he would liaise constantly with his media advisors, and often strolled into the press office itself to observe what the media were reporting on the day. Morris noted ‘with John Howard he would many times a day waddle up to the press office and just sit down and talk to them, and have a yarn, and tell them what was on his mind and where we were going’.

Howard himself, according to Casey, took a close interest in the media coverage of political events as they unfolded: ‘if we were in Canberra, he’d come into the office a number of times during the day’. His questioning would be very specific: “what did Channel Nine say?”, “what did Alan Jones say?” When Howard was interstate he would ring the press office for an update or briefing on current issues. According to Casey he would be briefed by ‘one of the three seniors’. This demonstrated the importance the Prime Minister placed on what political issues were gaining traction in the wider community each day.

If Howard wanted media advice he would seek it, and normally he accepted the advice given, but not always. As a parliamentarian since 1974, and having served in the Fraser ministry, Howard was a seasoned politician and well accustomed to dealing with the media. He really set his own media agenda and used the press office for advice and assistance, perhaps as a sounding board in many cases, but he alone would ultimately decide on how he would tackle a media issue.

Ric Smith, Ambassador in China from 1996–2000, Indonesia Ambassador in 2001–2002 and then Secretary of the Department of Defence from 2002–2006, said the press office ‘was businesslike and focused and they run a very tight operation’. Henry felt the professionalism and effectiveness of the press office ‘was helped by having the Cabinet office in the way that Howard set it up’. In 1996, Howard moved the Cabinet Policy Unit from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to his own office. Paul Kelly (2006 (b), p. 10) said:
The symbolism was stark, the engine room of executive government was not to be managed by public servants, it would be supervised by Howard’s political staff. It is the Cabinet Policy Unit that plans the agenda, lists the items, and writes up the Cabinet decisions, all from Howard’s office under the ultimate authority of his office chief, Arthur Sinodinos.

This decision to centralise these important tasks highlighted the importance Howard placed on the logistics of managing and coordinating the government’s political communication. This again highlights the coordination that existed within the prime minister’s office. Megalogenis said the prime minister’s press office ‘was a very disciplined operation’.

Andrew Robb, in 2006 Parliamentary Secretary responsible for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and in 2007 Minister for Vocational and Further Education, made the observation that ‘the media (press) office, like the whole (prime minister’s) office, had no personality … it didn’t become a story in its own right … they were an extension of Howard and it’s where the discipline came from.’

The logistics of running the press office

The Howard government’s press office was a well-oiled machine, with protocols in place to deal with both day-to-day issues, and the unexpected and sensational, that required an immediate and disciplined response from a particular minister or the Prime Minister himself. The logistics of handling the overall media management for the Prime Minister and the coordination of ministerial media statements and appearances fell to the press office. During the Howard years, Grattan said:

You’ve got to put it in the general context of the increasing organisation of publicity by government these days, so it’s a very elaborate process and has become increasingly elaborate which involves monitoring and keeping track of what your opponents are saying, and a lot of positive spin and publicity around what you’re doing.

This was the responsibility of the press office. The work of the press office sits within a political dynamic that changes on a daily basis. As Abbott stated ‘everything in Parliament House is ... driven by the exigencies of the day, every aspect of politics, including the prime ministerial press office is ... very much the product of the politics of the day’.
Shergold said one of the press office’s responsibilities would be to recommend the most appropriate method to launch or announce a policy, or deal with specific issues. They would question Howard: ‘look, if you announce the policy in that way, there is a danger of having mixed messages, and can we clarify what is the position you're trying to put Prime Minister? … what is that dimension for the policy?’ Shergold felt the press office had a very traditional relationship with Howard, being ‘there to help present the Prime Minister’s policy message when policies are being decided, or to deal with the media crises as they are breaking’.

The press office’s role was also to prepare the prime minister for media appearances. Speers said often he would interview the prime minister on one particular issue, however the press office:

Would canvass what else you wanted to raise in the interview … you didn’t always tell them everything you were going to ask obviously, you’d keep some things up your sleeve … but it’s part of their job to find out what’s likely to come up in the interview before it happens so they can brief the prime minister. In the latter years of the Howard government, you had Tony O’Leary, David Luff, Ben Mitchell, very switched on and very strategic about what media the prime minister would do, very aware obviously of the sort of questions the particular interviewer was likely to want to raise, and obviously they briefed the prime minister very well.

Loughnane’s observations of the press office and its role in advising Howard, and Howard’s leadership abilities, when faced with a major drama, are revealing:

The press office is a sub-section of the prime minister’s office and if there was a major drama, then the team itself is very hands-on and one of the reasons the press office was so good was that there was unilateral action, so John Howard always had clear views and if there was a problem he’d systematically just sit there tackling them, and every issue is different, but he was very, very good at it and he didn’t let things just fester. If things had to be addressed, they were addressed, and sometimes it might take two or three days to get on top of something, but he set about doing it and on he’d go.

Robb said the press office role was to ‘interpret and anticipate how (issues) would play out because sometimes you had no choice. You’re going to get a whack, we knew we were, but you’d try and put it in the best light’. Speers said he was provided with background briefings
THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT'S COORDINATION OF THEIR POLITICAL MESSAGING

on major issues by the press office almost every day: ‘usually on the phone, or they’d come in the office and go through the issue that we were talking about that day, and explain to us their thinking on it, their point of view. It would be either O’Leary, Luffy (David Luff) or Ben Mitchell’. As Sky News spent a lot of time on air talking about all things political, Speers said ‘it’s handy to have a lot more background information about where both sides are coming from’.

Starick said the press office would often give you a heads-up on forthcoming announcements:

And one of the really key things they would do is, if the Prime Minister is to make an announcement the next day, they would ring you up at, say, lunchtime (advising) you might be able to expect something later in the day. So they’d give you, obviously reading from a script, four or five key points on what the Prime Minister was going to announce the next day, and of course you’d generally get a front page story out of that.

Middleton said the way things work have been the same for years:

The press office would come out on a Monday morning when the news cycle was slow and they wanted to kick-start something for the week. Regularly there was an announcement, and everybody does this, if there was an announcement planned for that day they would give something to one of the papers to generate radio chat about it in the morning, and then there would be the announcement formally later on. So they’d get ahead of the news cycle, and that’s fairly standard practice for any government making an announcement.

Wright said he had to bypass the press office occasionally to secure an interview with the Prime Minister. Wright said ‘as the years went on, you had to compete very hard to get an interview with him (Howard), so you had to have your own way of going about it’. Wright would see Howard in the corridor, or at a function, and ask for an interview and Howard would agree and asked Wright to set it up with O’Leary. Wright said ‘O’Leary would be livid, because he knew what I was doing, and so O’Leary was suddenly on the back foot because he liked to be the gatekeeper’.

As an example of the higher-level role the press office played, Henry said ‘the press office was involved in the release of “A New Tax System” before the 1998 election, and managed the message on the implementation of the GST package’. Henry also confirmed the
Government Members Secretariat also became involved in this communications process. Costello observed that ‘as the (Howard) government wore on, the prime minister’s office became more and more powerful’. Mathews agreed, saying ‘my observation was over the years that all prime ministers become more powerful … and over the years they become very forceful and their office grows in stature’. Costello felt this was in part because later ministers, who often regarded Howard as their mentor and were ‘prime ministerial favourites’, were less independent than earlier ministers and looked to the Prime Minister for direction. As the Prime Minister became more powerful, Costello noted, ‘more of the media handling of things was centralised in his (Howard’s) office’. This meant that junior ministers had little media exposure themselves. When issues did come up that involved dealing with the media, they would rely on the prime minister’s press office for advice and direction, thus over time, according to the findings of this research, the prime minister’s office became increasingly influential. Adding to these observations, John Warhurst, Professor of Political Science at the School of Social Science at The Australian National University suggested:

Part of the role of a prime minister's office is … helping the Prime Minister retain control over his own party and over his own ministers. This included the control of political communication from minister’s offices and the coordination of media appearances, a role that fell to the press office.

Finally, Grattan revealed that someone in Howard’s press office was designated to look after Alan Jones. Howard confirmed this story and stated ‘I had somebody, that’s true. Alan was a prolific letter writer and there was, in fact, somebody, it wasn’t his only job, but there was somebody’, and ‘in fairness to Alan, one of the things he does do is that he does follow up issues that people raise with him’. Howard felt it necessary to ensure that all letters and enquiries Jones made were acted upon, in one sense confirming the power Jones wielded as a radio commentator.

The press office’s day-to-day administrative roles

Casey said her duties included handling initial media inquiries, collation of press clippings first thing in the morning and prioritising them, transcribing news stories, distributing relevant materials to the press gallery and handling travel arrangements for office staff especially during the election. The administration staff’s role was very specific according to
Casey: ‘our primary objective was to start transcribing straightaway, and watch the story, take it in’. These transcripts were often sent to the relevant minister’s offices as well. Casey said administration staff also set up press conferences: ‘again, we’d set those up for him (Howard) depending on how impromptu it was, how much time you had to do it with the gallery’. The assistants were also required to monitor morning radio: ‘listening to AM, the ABC news broadcast … and then you’d pull out anything relevant, and do transcripts’. Casey felt it was ‘quite laborious doing transcripts, we’d all do transcripts of John on radio or TV, so if he did Alan Jones in the morning we’d have to type that one up, and get that out to the appropriate people’.

Casey said, when Howard was on the road, a transcript of the ABC’s AM program and press clippings would ‘be faxed to him wherever he was … it was a constant supply of monitoring’. Loughnane said ‘John Howard had a transcript of absolutely everything, and he put out a transcript of every media event he did, every speech he did’. The press office also transcribed interstate interviews and circulated those along with Howard’s speeches. In the afternoons the assistants would monitor Question Time, and Casey noted:

If he was travelling, then you’d either be out on the road looking after the press, or, you’d be back in the office, transcribing. A staff member would remain in the press office until the evening news shows and The 7.30 Report were over and, when sitting, until parliament rose, and press office staff were also required to be on-call for anything else needed over the weekend.

In regard to transcripts, Morris made the observation that because Howard:

Had this extraordinary ability to structure things in his own mind before they were verbalised, and that meant that you didn’t have to use massive resources in the press office sitting there writing speeches and press releases. This meant, however, that the transcript for many journos became king, you know you’d have a small army there transcribing what he said on talkback radio, what he said in the speech, because it was never prewritten.

The office would also receive media monitoring clips from the previous day’s press coverage and collate these for distribution. Dale Starr, Media and Communications Advisor (for six months) to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage Senator Ian Campbell (2004–2007), said ‘each morning, I would collect a 150 page media clippings from the prime
minister's office. These were the political clips of the day, and we would sort through them to identify issues that impacted on our minister’. David Johnson was Minister for Justice and Customs in 2007, and his Media Advisor, Chris Wagner, said ‘he would also receive an email around 5.00 am listing the major daily newspaper headlines and top political stories of the day, and then followed by the media monitor clips between 6.00 am and 7.00 am that formed the basis of a tactics meeting with staff in the minister’s office every morning for 20–30 minutes’.

These processes demonstrated the ministerial offices’ professional approach to managing the media and communications issues arising on a daily basis, confirming the “well oiled machine” description many used to describe the operation of the prime minister’s press office. Megalogenis commented on the volumes of material the press office had to deal with: ‘you just look at the amount of paperwork that David Luff would oversee, you’d almost need an army of minders to be able to process the information that’s been generated’.

**Personalities in the press office**

There was a great deal of commentary during interviews for this thesis on the approach taken by Press Secretary Tony O’Leary, and the senior media advisors in the press office, in dealing with the media and ministerial offices. The critical work performed by the office required a high level of experience and expertise from those holding senior roles. Morris said a prime minister’s press office needs a variety of styles and personalities:

> You need a strong grumpy person who’s prepared to tell people to go to hell, you need a PR person that calms everybody down and you need somebody who’s a good mixer, strong relationship builder and each media office at prime ministerial or presidential level I think needs those three personalities. John Howard had it, whether it was O’Leary, or David Luff or Ben Mitchell; over the years he had that nice mixture. Willie Herron was another one who was outstanding.

According to Crabb, one strength of Howard’s press office was that it included a number of different personalities: ‘almost like a good cop, bad cop organisation’. This theory was supported by Wright: ‘there was always “good cop, bad cop” in John Howard’s media unit’. O’Leary was the ‘bad cop’, and according to Wright ‘he would be the guy who would be, if there was snarling to be done or a yelling match to be done he would do that’. Willie Herron,
Wright said, ‘was always the “good cop” who would calm things down and wash things over’. This was also a role Luff played. Luff, according to Wright, ‘later on took on a more senior role as lieutenant to Tony and the better cop, if you like, became Ben Mitchell’.

Middleton said:

David Luff was always helpful and polite and easy to get along with. Willie was similarly, the girls who worked in the office, and Scott (Bolitho, Media Assistant) who also worked there, were terrific, incredibly hard working. I think their jobs were very difficult at times as well, pressure, time pressure and all sorts of pressures on them.

Milne said O’Leary’s experience producing at Channel Ten meant he understood television, he would always be ‘acutely aware of the need for giving you enough time to be at the location, whether you had a splitter box for the microphones, what your access was, what the lighting was like, all that sort of stuff’. Milne said ‘I don’t think you can underestimate the importance of the fact that O’Leary came from the gallery, he understood the ground rules’. Fran Kelly said O’Leary would ‘wander into my office and give me a serve for something I’ve said or he would try and spin a lie’. But often, they (the press office) had a secret weapon for a long time, by the name of Willie Herron, in Howard’s office. She was a particularly effective media officer because she was very, very pleasant, smart, engaging, honest and so you’re predisposed to like what you heard from her’. Fran Kelly went as far as to say ‘she was very good at keeping the press relationship functional … if it had been left to O’Leary, I think it wouldn’t have been terribly functional’. Fran Kelly said O’Leary was ‘an aggressive operator and you just have to be prepared to deal with that, that’s the way he’s designed, the way he does the job, which is to be aggressive, and his reputation was as such’. Fran Kelly said she did develop a relationship with O’Leary: ‘O’Leary and I, over many years developed an understanding that what I did was commentary, so he would try and be an active participant sometimes in that commentary’. Middleton said ‘Tony was a volatile … character who managed his stress by outbursts of rage and that wasn’t always easy to work with’.

Wright felt:

O’Leary became what you would call arrogant by the year’s passing, I think he was always on edge and concerned that the media was always going to have a bit of a go, and so would be watching out for the knives and so forth, and perhaps flashing a couple of his own.
Marr suggested the press office ‘projected a reputation of aggression … it was sometimes just a defensive barbed wire around the office, and that was largely the aggressive manner of O’Leary’. Crabb recalled that ‘if junior correspondents got an angry call from O’Leary they’d probably sit up and notice’.

Inevitably, there were tensions between the prime minister’s office and the media arising from differing professional roles and responsibilities. The media, after all, were not there just to report what the government did, they were also there to question and probe, somewhat like an Opposition. According to Bongiorno, ‘Howard understood this role, but some of his staffers, particularly O’Leary, had difficulty accepting it’. Bongiorno said:

> It has been suggested O’Leary tried to bully journalists or unreasonably “head them off” stories, and deny information to journalists thought to be unsympathetic to the government, and also he accused some journalists of being nothing but “mouthpieces for the Labor Party” and as being “not on our side”.

Megalogenis confirmed that O’Leary ‘wasn’t very popular in the press gallery, but that wasn’t necessarily a problem for people with that experience’. Middleton observed that ‘some of my colleagues think he (O’Leary) was very good at his job because he was hard and tough … others think that he didn’t do his job as well as he could have, or didn’t serve his boss as well as he could have because he alienated people’.

Speers said ‘often you would have a heated exchange, particularly with Tony O’Leary, but that was part of his job and it was part of our job to defend the position and the angle that we were taking. While you could have a good argument, you could always move on and keep working together and keep doing the job’. Howard was, however, a great supporter of O’Leary who, he felt, served him well in his relationship with the gallery, ‘Tony never wanted to alienate me even from individual journalists that I’d get grumpy with’. Howard himself was also the subject of some very tough verbal stoushes with O’Leary: ‘there was no doubt he’d blow his stack at me from time to time’ Ultimately Paul Kelly said press secretaries are:

> Not responsible for what journalists write, they’ve got to try and influence, and I’ve seen them use different techniques with different journalists. If they think they can intimidate a particular journalist, well they’ll try and do it, and sometimes if they’re just having a bad day they’ll just scream at you.
In relation to the press office and the calls he sometimes received, Ross Peake, *The Canberra Times* political reporter, said he thought ‘there was a level of intimidation in trying to put us in our place … we simply didn’t accept that’.

In the final year of the Howard government Van Onselen said ‘Luff took a much stronger role’, noting ‘O’Leary was frequently grumpy in his role’. Where once Luff and O’Leary played “good-guy bad-guy” ‘in the last year O’Leary was all bad guy and Luff all good guy’. The overall feeling among many journalists interviewed, although not all of them, was O’Leary was swift to assume that people were against him and the government, and he had a tendency to play favourites, trying to deny access and information to certain journalists, and was an intimidating and aggressive person. O’Leary’s personality, and his ability to behave in this manner for the entire period of John Howard’s government, according to many journalists, was of concern; however others said they accepted O’Leary’s behaviour. Nevertheless, there was no evidence uncovered in this thesis research that O’Leary’s temperament had impacted on the reputation of the Prime Minister or his relationships with the media in general.

**The Press Office’s Co-ordination Roles**

**The coordination of press secretaries’ meetings**

Sandy Logan, in the interview with me, commented on the professionalism of the press office and the way Press Secretary Tony O’Leary handled his responsibilities. When Logan worked as a Press Secretary to Judi Moylan, the Minister for Family Services (1996–1997) in the Howard government, he felt the press office ‘encouraged input’. Logan said after the Leadership Group meeting early each morning when parliament sat, you would receive ‘what you would call, I guess, a cascading brief or a cascading flow of information’. Logan said ‘we had weekly meetings in the conference room, M6, next to the prime minister’s press office, where we discussed strategy, tactics and messages’. Charlie McKillop, Media and Policy Advisor to Attorney General Philip Ruddock, said these meetings ‘once a week (on Mondays at 10.00 am) was an opportunity just to thrash out any kind of threats and opportunities for the week ahead, particularly during parliamentary sitting periods’. McKillop said ‘O’Leary, as Chair, started with a critique of the Sunday morning political programs and would pretty much tell it how he saw it, and sometimes government ministers would be in the firing line of
that if he thought that an opportunity had been missed’. Nigel Blunden, Senior Advisor to Defence Minister Brendan Nelson from 2006–2008, recalls: ‘these meetings were a general overview of what we should be focusing on and what we should be doing … with ministers briefed on the outcomes’. According to Logan:

Attending were all press secretaries in the Howard ministry, around 20, 22, 23, whatever the ministry was, or assistant press secretaries if the press secretary was unavailable, but it was mostly the first run, the first eleven who would be there, and its focus was tactics, it was messaging, it was lessons learned. Sometimes there were people absent as a lot of press secs travel with their ministers, and in non-sitting weeks, and when things may be quiet, you may not in fact meet.

Sarah Stock, Senior Media Advisor to Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock in 2007 also referred to these press secretary meetings where ‘you would go through kind of top line Coalition policy and how we were going to go about communicating it’. The idea of these meetings, according to Stock was ‘always coordination, making sure that people weren’t, or offices weren’t, going off and making announcements that would compete with what would be deemed to be more important announcements’. Stock said ‘during an election year it was more formalised … that was a different kettle of fish than day-to-day … you just kept the prime minister’s office more abreast of what you’re doing’. Rarely was any written material distributed, it was usually a discussion, Logan suggesting:

Due to the pressures under which we worked, in the main, we were expected to take from the meetings all those bits and pieces that we needed, and in between meetings someone from the press office would quite often pop down, quick five minutes with O’Leary or with Gazard about a particular issue, if they felt it wasn’t being managed well.

**The coordination of Howard’s ministers’ media appearances**

Howard’s ministers recognised the importance of establishing regular communication between their press staff and the prime minister’s press office. Abbott felt ‘parliamentary parties are very hard things to control and anyone who sets out to control them is almost certain to fail ignominiously and spectacularly’. Warhurst said he could ‘see the argument for a certain amount of control from the top if an issue becomes a number one political issue in the country, even for just a week or two, then you can expect the prime minister's office to want to control it’. One of the press office’s roles was the “coordination” of media
management across government, not “control” of ministerial media appearances nor filtering public statements they wished to make on their portfolio responsibilities. McKillop said ‘I never felt that we were overly supervised by the prime minister’s office’. However, the amount of central control exercised by the prime minister’s press office over other ministers varied according to their rank. However Costello, as Deputy Leader of the Party, said he:

> Was a much more independent minister than most. If the issue of the day involved Treasury office matters, suppose we were getting thumped on the GST (that) morning we would handle the issue ourselves. However, junior ministers would be almost entirely supervised, even to the extent of being directed by the prime minister’s press office on what to say and when to say it.

For other ministers the press office may prepare a media release, as Costello said it ‘depended in my view on … how capable a particular minister was, or was perceived to be’.

Minchin confirmed Howard’s interest in the coordination of media events when ministers were involved: ‘he was incredibly fastidious about … maximising the benefits for the government, that things were programmed so that there was never two announcements on one day competing against each other’. Howard recalled issuing directives on a number of occasions such as ‘comment on this is to be restricted to me and the Treasurer’ or ‘me and the Foreign Minister’ or ‘me and the Defence Minister’. There was also a rule that in the first two or three days after a budget, comments would, as far as possible, be restricted to the Treasurer, the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister. Howard suggested this was ‘a precautionary thing, not a discipline thing, it was a prudent managerial decision’.

Logan highlighted the necessity to have someone in control: ‘you cannot leave it to individual minister’s officers if you want to have a cohesive and relatively well-controlled government, you have to have that messaging very consistently, and it has to come out of somewhere’. Whilst O’Leary oversaw the coordination of ministerial media appearances, Minchin said O’Leary ‘wasn’t popular in the ministry because he … didn’t have a particularly warm and embracing and cuddly style’. Minchin also said on occasions he would ‘have to go over his (O’Leary’s) head and go direct to the Prime Minister, and I think I had to do that a couple of times’. On these occasions Minchin said he ‘had a genuine complaint about the way the press office was approaching an issue’. Countering that comment, Minchin said O’Leary’s ‘judgment on media management of issues like that AWB (Australian Wheat Board) affair
was well respected’. In regard to press office personnel attempting to direct or counsel ministers, Costello stated that, ‘I never for a moment would take direction from a staffer. I had been elected as an MP. I was the Deputy Leader of our Party, I was a senior minister and if the Prime Minister wants me to do something, he can come around and tell me’.

Downer felt the press office ‘referred to ministerial offices matters that could appropriately be dealt with by ministers, so they didn’t try to cover everything themselves, and they made sure that there was an appropriate degree of coordination between the media offices of all, or at least, the key ministers’.

The issue of control over co-ordination is controversial; however, in any organisation, proper and professional media management decisions are made on who is the best spokesperson to deal with an issue, based on their knowledge of the subject, and their ability to handle forensic media interviews. It is thus appropriate for a government to do the same, to put their best spokesperson forward, or to provide assistance to a minister who requires help in preparing for a media appearance. An example of choosing appropriate spokespeople is highlighted by a comment by Defence Minister Peter Reith:

> The challenge for ministers is the high expectations both journalists and the general public have for you to be across every minute aspect of every issue. People expect you to have this encyclopaedic memory, I mean, I’ve never had that sort of memory, I just couldn’t remember every phone call I’ve had, and what seems to be today’s big issue, when you took the phone call (say) three weeks ago, it just wasn’t much of an issue (then).

Minchin said ‘everybody of course was fearful of the wrath of the Prime Minister if there was a balls-up’, particularly if there was a clash of key announcements, and if there was ‘then heads would roll, so it almost got to the point where people were terrified’. Minchin said ‘you had to have coordination of media management by the prime minister’s office, a lot of ministers resented it but … from the Whitlam days on, everybody in government has understood you can’t just have ministers running their own races, there’s got to be a clearing house’. To highlight the importance of the press office coordinating announcements, Minchin used the example of Defence Minister Brendan Nelson announcing the purchase of four C-17 Globemaster aircraft for the Australian Defence Force on 3 March 2006 (Smart, 2006). Minchin said ‘Howard went absolutely berserk because Brendan had made … the announcement about … these big airlifters’. The contract was worth around $A1 billion, and
the announcement, at the Richmond airbase, received coverage in Defence publications and little else. Minchin said ‘there was obviously a breakdown in communication between Nelson’s office and the prime minister’s office and Brendan thought he had permission to go and make this big announcement’. The story attracted very little media coverage and Minchin said ‘Howard was furious’. When media opportunities arose Andrews said his media advisor would always have:

Spoken to someone in his (Howard’s) office. If I was going to do a Sunday program, then obviously there would’ve been consultation with his office, and (if) other issues were running consultation with those other ministers’ offices as to what they were saying about a particular issue.

Ruddock said ‘I wouldn’t be clearing my lines in relation to every media interview I was about to have with his (Howard’s) office … we would (however) tell them if I did a doorstop’. Sometimes the prime minister’s press office may have overridden a request for a minister to be interviewed. Various reasons may be attributed to this decision as O’Brien suggests:

The minister is not up to it or that the issue is a bit hot or whatever so therefore, we won't give you access to that person … or we don't want that message to get out today because we're focusing on this message. If I was putting in a request for an interview with a minister … you'd get a fairly quick response but often it would take quite a while to get the answer back, and I know for a fact, that there were times when the request was referred to the prime minister's press office before the answer was delivered.

Is this control justified? According to O’Brien ‘where it's more about marketing then I take issue with it and say that that is unhealthy, that's an unhealthy level of control’. These observations highlight the tensions existing within the ministry towards the press office, suggesting O’Leary may have on occasion overstepped the mark, however, the staff were respected for their expertise and the contribution they made to the coordination of media communication across the government’s portfolios.

Reflecting on ministerial media commentary and a journalist’s right to extract information from them in the public interest, Paul Kelly sees a ‘perpetual tension between the media and the politician, with … the media pretend(ing) that its interests always coincide with the public interests, but the fact of the matter is that’s not correct’. Paul Kelly felt government ministers have an obligation to the Party:
THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT’S COORDINATION OF THEIR POLITICAL MESSAGING

Under the principles of Cabinet responsibility, government loyalty, responsibility to party, I accept the decision and I publicly support the decision. Journalists on the other hand complain that “these politicians won’t tell us what they actually think, isn’t this terrible?” Well, no it’s not terrible it’s … the difference between political morality and individual morality. What ministers will often do when you’re talking to them is they will tell you what their private view is and the reason they’ll tell you that is so you’re aware of the bigger picture, how they fit in.

Paul Kelly also noted that ‘sometimes they’ll go in as attack dogs and they will brief you against a Cabinet decision and you know when they’re briefing you that way’.

The coordination of ministers’ press officers

The press office needed to be in ‘control’ of the media interactions across ministerial portfolios, and according to Logan, were required to ‘react to the unexpected but they worked on that premise of no surprises, so keep us in the loop’. Often the media advisor’s role in a minister’s office was downplayed, or they were described as ‘spin doctors’. Shergold made the comment that ‘the media advisor probably, in many instances, became the most important person in the minister’s office from the point of view of the public service, even more than the person who was the senior advisor’.

Press officers within each ministerial office also act as gatekeepers, protecting ministers from too much media attention. As Blunden put it, ‘a minister cannot cope with the number of media enquiries and you are there to filter’. The ABC’s Fran Kelly suggested:

The media (press) office makes a mistake when it thinks that its job is to get in the way of what you’re doing, because you’ve got to keep doing what you’re doing, and a good media operative understands their job is to try and influence that, and have an influence on it, not think that “I can block it”.

McKillop said her role was challenging:

It was fun and games and basically trying to keep one step ahead of the press gallery … just constantly on the phone, making sure that they’re aware of what came up at a press conference, what was said and making sure that everyone was on the same page, particularly if there was a “red flag” for any reason.
In regard to the press office’s involvement, McKillop said ‘the prime minister’s office would be … making sure that communication flowed through directly to the people that needed it’. Chris Ward, twice working for Justice and Customs Minister Johnson in 2006–2007 as Media Advisor felt ‘the prime minister’s press office was relatively “hands off”, letting you do media with no need to check with David Luff for approval … a demonstration of the confidence in the minister and their advisors’. Logan also said ‘I could count it on one hand, where Gazard or O’Leary or even Luff would have contacted us because they were angry about something we’d done, I did not encounter raging bulls out of that office ever’. Gazard, said from both Howard and Costello’s offices point of view, ‘there was always dialogue, which was a good thing, and our offices participated together in key strategic and tactical meetings throughout’.

Faulks said, ‘I would think that 80 per cent of the stuff that happened, you would just simply copy the media release to the prime minister’s office so he (Howard) knew what was going on, but anything that was big, there would obviously be a meeting to discuss how it would be handled and what the line should be’. On that point, Stock said ‘O’Leary was someone who you would bring in … if you were in real trouble’. Stock said:

If there was a major issue breaking, you and your office would prepare (media briefings) if it was your area of authority and responsibility … and in those circumstances, you would definitely let the prime minister’s office know what you intended to do and the requests you were receiving (from the media), and if it was decided the Prime Minister would front the media, then you would back off.

The coordination of government department dealings with the media

The fear factor among public servants

During the early years of the Howard government, direct contact between journalists and government departments was discouraged. According to Abjorenson, ‘you used to call public servants, however the Howard ministers said all contact had to go through the ministers’ offices. Abjorenson noticed this:

From 1996–1998 where I would call a senior official, my contacts in the public service, to confirm or deny something I had, they’d say “leave it with me” and ten minutes later you’d have a call from the media advisor within the relevant minister’s office, so it was clear all public servants had to report all media contacts to the minister’s office.
Atkins also noted that, ‘under Howard, talking to senior public servants (was mostly) out of bounds and when you wanted to talk to them you’d be bounced back to the ministerial office’. Megalogenis said:

The bureaucracy … was less likely to speak in their own name under the Howard government … you sought backgrounding as opposed to direct comments and backgrounding for a journalist is in many ways more valuable than the active voice, because backgrounding helps you prevent or minimise the risks of mistakes.

Megalogenis also observed the changes in the way the bureaucracy was able to deal with the media over many years. He noted:

From Keating to Howard you found an incremental but noticeable improvement in discipline and the power of government over bureaucracy, with media liaison arrangements occasionally re-arranged to achieve greater co-ordination between departmental offices and the prime minister’s office.

*w The shadow cast by the heads of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet over public servants’ public comments*

Wright reflected on the appointment of Max Moore-Wilton, as Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) from May 1996 to December 2002, ‘to cower the public service, and he did, he made the public service, instead of providing free and frank and fearless advice, just an extra arm of the government’. Wright suggested public servants were frightened to talk to media and ‘by placing senior public servants on performance bonuses … if they stepped out of line, their career was on the line’. Tony Ayers, Secretary of the Department of Defence 1988 to 1998, said as far as frank and fearless advice was concerned, ‘Max gave it but bullied other people into not giving it’.

Howard did expect the federal bureaucracy to be cautious of what they said publicly about the government. There was a direction after 2001 by the Head of Prime Minister and Cabinet that secretaries should be cautious about giving public addresses, and promoting themselves usurping ministers, a fact verified by two departmental secretaries I spoke to. Howard could not remember giving this instruction:
That wouldn’t have been as a result of anything I said, my attitude on that was whilst from time to time politically neutral, politically careful speeches, by departmental secretaries was okay, it was not really the job of the public servants to be in the public domain, but I don’t remember giving a specific instruction to that affect. If Max Moore-Wilton or Peter Shergold had issued such an instruction, well, they may have and they were probably right, I mean, if you get somebody running around advocating something that’s completely different from what the government’s doing, well, you are entitled to raise your eyebrow at that.

Following are two departmental examples highlighting this communications control issue.

**Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs**

One example was the appointment of Sandi Logan to the Department of Immigration in 2005, where Logan’s responsibility encompassed fronting the media as the official departmental spokesperson, which followed a re-organisation after the Ruddock/Vanstone era. The department’s media unit was a shambles according to The Power Index (Knott, 2012), and Logan said the Immigration Department was ‘notorious for its “assumption culture”, series of stuff-ups, and fragmented computer system, poor record keeping and for having no relationship with journalists’. Abjoreson recalls ‘that was a shift where Logan became the official face, and to have one person, and his lines carefully devised in consultation with the minister and the prime minister’s office’.

**Department of Defence Communications Issues**

Defence had its own issues in dealing with the media, with Allan Hawke (2000), 1996–1999 Secretary of the Department of Transport and Regional Services and Secretary of the Department of Defence 1999–2002, slamming Defence’s public affairs in a speech to the National Public Affairs conference. Hawke said ‘the Defence approach was to ignore journalists who were negative about Defence, instead of attempting to engage them’. Hawke went on to say ‘governments in modern democracies cannot carry out military operations without proper support, and effective public affairs handling is indispensable to sustaining such support’. With such a strong focus on Defence, Howard would have been very keen to see improvements in the handling of Defence media and public relations activities. In relation to Defence and the control of the media message regarding the Tampa incident (August–November 2001), Marr suggested there was:
Micro-managing of operations coming out of Canberra, and in particular coming out of the Minister for Defence’s (Nelson’s) office by his press secretaries. So it was this, a sense in the military that the press secretaries and the Minister for Defence were trying to run the operations.

Marr said this was denied by some, but according to others, it is an example of a minister’s office taking control of media relations and communications from a department when politically charged events arise. On this communication control issue, Peake said he noticed a change after the Children Overboard saga hit the press again prior to the 2004 election: ‘I couldn’t get people in the public service to talk to me, and my friends in the public service used to joke about it … should I be telling you this or shouldn’t I be telling you this … paranoia was everywhere’.

Departmental secretaries’ policy on media engagement

Henry recalls ‘at secretaries’ meetings … on a couple of occasions I remember Max (Moore-Wilton) and then (Peter) Shergold, both of them saying that Howard’s view was that public servants should not be giving speeches, and that was a general statement, made in the secretaries’ meetings … and that probably did affect many of my colleagues’. However Henry conceded ‘clearly he (Howard) did want to control the messaging that was going out’. Henry kept giving speeches because ‘I thought it was part of the role’ but always ran his speeches past Treasurer Costello first. Henry made the point that trust was ‘the most important thing between a public servant advisor and a minister … I mean you don’t have to agree with one another, but you do have to be able to trust one another, it was fundamental’. In regard to how much freedom departmental secretaries had, Allan Hawke made the observation that:

It was very uncommon for the secretaries to speak at all publicly … and, indeed, in later years after my “sacrifice” (October 2002), Max (Moore-Wilton) made it pretty clear to other secretaries that it’s not necessarily a good idea to go out and talk in public, so Ken Henry is the only one who’s done it since.

Henry said he was encouraged to speak out on economic issues, and noted ‘on one occasion when one Reserve Bank Governor felt he should be the only person commenting on economic matters, Costello said “you have every bit as much of a right to be talking in public about economic policy matters including monetary policy if you want to”’. Minchin said ‘often the Secretary of the Department may be asked “how do you think we should be
handling this”, and the department or the secretary has got to be very careful to be looking at it objectively and not being caught up in the politics’. Andrew Podger, Secretary of the Department of Health and Aged Care (1996–2002) also gave many public speeches during his tenure, but felt ‘in the Howard years there was clearly much more political control and the prime minister’s office was never happy with senior public servants speaking publicly, and … speeches had to be cleared with the minister’.

Sedgwick noted:

Media management by the prime minister’s office … became increasingly more centralised as politics took on a more presidential style in Australia; however, when I was in the portfolio of Employment and Education, the Prime Minister had other bigger priorities and we didn’t have the same intense scrutiny (as some other departments) and we were thus left to paddle our own canoe, and we worked more through Ministerial Councils. If there was an issue, it would have been mediated through Minister David Kemp's office, not the department … the minister always did the media, I had no profile, and we didn’t have a departmental spokesperson.

The coordination of media monitoring functions

As Costello noted, ‘the press office could, of course, monitor what other ministers were saying ... and if there was a problem, report to the Prime Minister or maybe report back to them, with that monitoring function. This monitoring function extended, of course, to what opponents were saying’. But according to Grattan, ‘the actual monitoring was done elsewhere, within the Government Members’ Secretariat’. Morris said the:

Government Members’ Secretariat, or whatever it was and around the States, had people in various offices just designated to listening to talkback radio and transcribing (relevant stories) and sending it through if we needed to know. It’s a massive communication business and getting bigger and bigger, faster and faster.

The press office, however, did undertake research aimed at ‘nailing’ the Opposition by looking for inconsistencies amongst statements made. Howard commented that:

It’s a given in monitoring politics that if one of your opponent says something which is capable of exploitation, then you ought to know about it fairly quickly so if you want to comment on it you can. If you’ve got a 24-hour, seven day a week media cycle then you have to have constant monitoring.
This monitoring was supplemented by a press clipping service, which Ian Parry-Okeden said his company, Media Monitors which he established in 1977, ‘supplied to the prime minister’s office throughout Howard’s entire time as prime minister … mainly metro and major regional papers’. Young (2007, p. 11) noted that ‘between July 2002 and July 2005, nine key government departments spent $14 million on monitoring the news, and ministerial offices a further $1.9 million’. The press office would also monitor the work of press gallery journalists. Crabb recalled that junior press office staff often do ‘a sort of tour of the gallery, about an hour or so before news time, just to sort of suss out how people (were) assessing the day and getting out the government line’. Keeping an active watch on media commentary was critical if the government was to avoid undisciplined comments that would potentially provide ammunition for Opposition parties.

Matthews said he used media monitoring extensively when he was Chair and Chief Executive of the National Water Commission (2004–2010):

I got everything in the media that used the word water, everything … but it meant there were not only clippings from the Adelaide Advertiser, but the original media release from the State Minister for Water, the original speech by the Prime Minister when he mentions the Murray-Darling Basin, so I read the originals, and that was different.

This is an interesting comment, as obtaining original copies of ministerial releases ensures a departmental secretary or senior officer is aware of the ‘angle or filter’ a journalist has placed on a story.

**The Press Office’s Strategy in Controlling and Disseminating Political Messaging**

**Controlling political communication**

The Howard government developed a well-established and streamlined approach to controlling its contact with the media. In the early years of the Howard administration there was some lack of discipline and co-ordination, particularly amongst ministers who had hired inexperienced media advisors. Abjorensen recalled that, ‘some ministers were being torn to shreds, being allowed to go on the ABC’s *The 7.30 Report*’. There was insufficient strategic advice on managing media exposure. In 1996, the press office was finding its feet coping with ‘travel rorts and the loss of six frontbenchers’, according to Wright (2013). Blunden suggested Howard was ‘lucky to have Tony O’Leary who came with him in Opposition’.

163
There are a number of facets to the thinking behind any political party’s efforts to control its internal and external communication. For any government it is necessary for all spokespeople to speak “as one voice”, removing mixed messages and conflicting opinions on issues, so the government remains consistent in the information it releases and comments on publicly. This is also to give issues time to resonate with the public, without a spokesperson injecting yet another issue into the media mix, to dilute the impact of comments made by others.

The one liners, sound-bites and “key messages of the day” used by politicians at doorstop interviews, and in other media appearances, are part of the process of political communication, (see Young 2008 (b)). Participants explained that in the life of a government the coordination of one-liners and key media messages is critical for consistency and credibility. Control of political messaging went as far as delegating MPs to front the media each morning at the Ministerial, Senate or House of Representatives entrances to Parliament House. Walsh noted that ‘selected MPs would stroll up to the doors at 8 o'clock, deliver the line that had been worked out on the issue of the day … it's all stage managed, and election campaigns are just ridiculously stage managed’.

McKillop said, in regard to keeping Liberal and National Members of Parliament informed,

The Government Members’ Secretariat … would have an APH (Australian Parliament House) distribution list that they would just hit the send key, and that would be anything from question time briefs to talking points to what they call “standards”. (The information sent was) just a form of words to help backbenchers respond to issues of the day.

Costello said ‘if it was a clear message of the government on a big issue, it would be very common for some lines to be worked out and for that to be circulated by fax’.

There were also more subtle strategies for controlling the message. Atkins recalls that the Howard government started the practice of holding a press conference immediately upon the release of the document or report that was the subject of the conference, thus ensuring journalists had no time to read the material thoroughly and ask prepared questions. Atkins felt that was:
Terrible, and that started I know because I’ve talked to staffers in the Howard
government and in the (subsequent) Labor government and it’s done solely so that they
can just get their message out and dominate the initial wave of news in their words ... I
really think the Howard government ... turned that into part of their regular practice.

Kerry O’Brien nominated two strategies Howard used during his term in office: ‘one, the
strategic use of the daily media getting the message out on the day, working out what the
message is, and the other being the business of organised leaking’. This leaking became a
trend for political parties who would drop material to journalists, thus floating ideas in the
public arena to see what the voter reaction would be. The resultant constituent banter would
achieve one of three things: confirm to the government the acceptance of the Australian people
to what was proposed, help modify the idea, or soften up the electorate for an unpopular decision.

Another tactic Howard’s ministers used for controlling the message was ‘putting boundaries
around the information they gave journalists, according to Middleton, who said, sometimes:

You’re being given information and told the circumstances under which you can use
it, and those circumstances might involve not calling for comment from the other side,
or only disclosing a certain amount and not another amount, and this was a common
practice across all party lines.

For highly ethical journalists like Middleton, this must have caused a great deal of frustration.
Middleton also said ‘the press office and ministers know the time limits and deadline
pressures journalists work to, so often will play to that, by not responding to questions or
requests for interviews by media deadlines’.

The development of media management strategies and the communication
challenges politicians faced

It was critical for the government to have well defined communication strategies in place to
deal with the multitude of issues attracting media attention on a daily basis. These were not
ad hoc decisions, but mostly considered approaches to major situations either emerging or
erupting on the day. The development and coordination of these strategies fell to the prime
minister’s office and the press office. The Howard government didn’t always get it right, and
this is explored further in Chapter 8, but the experience of the Leadership Group, with advice
THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT’S COORDINATION OF THEIR POLITICAL MESSAGING

from the press office, allowed the government to ‘manage’ these matters as best they could. Morris outlined a strategy brought in by O’Leary which was ‘we must deal with an issue in the same media cycle, so if an issue arises, it should be dealt with that night for television or for the prints the next morning on the same cycle, not wait for a couple of days and sort out what happens, you’d just get murdered’. Alastair Campbell, Director of Communications and Strategy for UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, in an email to me as a contributor to this research, said he had a strategy on how he dealt with rebuttals to untruths:

The nature of the response would vary dependent on the issue. Daily meetings would take place to review the news agenda, decide what responses needed to be made, and maintain the “grid”, but crucial to all of this was co-ordination with broader strategic goals, with key messages sent via pager to party candidates and MPs.

The role of the Leadership Group in developing communications tactics and strategies

The Howard Leadership Group played a pivotal role in the development of media strategies and tactics. During parliamentary sitting weeks, meetings of Howard’s Leadership Group were held at 8.30 am each day to discuss the political issues emerging and the tactics to deal with them. These discussions centred on dealing with question time tactics, and the attention the media would give to certain matters that arose over the past 24 hours, or those that were ongoing. The group comprised John Howard, the Deputy Leader John Anderson, Treasurer Peter Costello, the Senate Leader and Leader of the House, and the Deputy Leader of the National Party. Howard said ‘Arthur Sinodinos, Tony Nutt (Principal Private Secretary) and Tony O’Leary were also always present at those meetings’.

Loughnane, also attended these meetings and said media was discussed, mainly ‘just stories that we saw as opportunities or potential problems’. When the group discussed media responses Loughnane said the main focus was on the ‘clarity of communication’. Morris said there was also discussion at the tactics meetings each morning, which flowed into the Leadership Group meeting, and it was here where we discussed, ‘what is the language we’re going to use, or what is the phrase that we’re going to use to answer these difficulties, and a lot of those did come out of the media unit; I’ve got to tell you though, a lot more of them came out of the Prime Minister’. 
Morris also said the Leadership Group was informed each morning of pending media issues by a variety of people because ‘there was sort of a culture which is, don’t surprise the Prime Minister, and as an example Textor worked for the political entity known as the Liberal Party, not the government, and he would brief the Leadership Group on the results of the research he conducted’. Textor said ‘the message would have been constructed at a very high level’, and was usually done through written advice through weekly tracking, both qualitative and quantitative. Textor noted he would advise the Leadership Group on major issues that ‘are salient to voters which are driving their consideration of their support for either party’.

As Costello recalled ‘the issues of the day invariably would be what was in the papers or what was being reported’. These issues were likely to come up in question time so parliamentary tactics needed to be developed. The meetings were, according to Abbott:

Inevitably about the media as well, what did the government need to do that day to come out looking as politically good as possible, and if a particular issue was running, information briefings would be commissioned and Howard might suggest that a particular minister do a door stop about it, so as to get on the evening news.

Costello recalled the tenor of such morning discussions:

Who’s going to put out a press release to explain the issue, sometimes it might be, look, we’ve got to get somebody on talkback radio ... sometimes it would be anticipatory, we expect today that this will become an issue, how are we going to manage it? The big things at the Leadership Group meetings would be how to handle the media of the day, how to handle question time, or it might be some policy issues that you discussed.

Costello said depending on the issue ‘the minister may have to be briefed, talking points prepared, facts and statistics collated, and the minister may have to put out a release. If it’s a big issue, you’ll have to go out and do a doorstop and get up on the evening news bulletins’.

Minchin stated the Leadership Group played a major role ‘in message management’. Minchin said the Prime Minister would ‘sound us out and often we would reach a conclusion as to the angle (the government would take), at that morning meeting’. Minchin also noted ‘the Leadership Group would have to make a decision without Cabinet being convened and things like that’. Minchin said the meetings were ‘primarily … about bushfires that we need to hose
much thought was given to the media and communications strategy the Liberals’ should adopt, with Latham building a bit of a profile in the media, reading to kids, talking about the ladder of opportunity, and we had been criticised, in part by the media, but by the public as well for going after Latham too quickly, so we tended to hang back a bit. Then we realised on issues like this we can’t hang back, we’ve got to do something. It was discussed with him (Howard) in his office, he’d kick it around, maybe have a meeting after he’d spoken to his leadership team colleagues, he might call them in and we’d go out, he might talk to them, he might call us back and say “this is where it’s at”. Howard would then outline his thoughts on the approach to take and say “well I’d better go out and announce this”. Sinodinos went on to say:

Discussion would then centre on how is the best way to announce this … do you give it to someone, do you give it as an exclusive to one of the tabloids, do you go on radio and do it, how late in the day, how will this impact on the TV news and do we want this to have vision, so it’s likely to be used tonight? And if we want it on the TV news tonight, gee, time is starting to get away from us, we’d better get back and alert the TV stations that this is coming, and then you do a quick presser to get this out, we’ll get vision and we’ll ready for the run. It depends on how quickly and emphatically you want to get your message out.

This example shines a light on the thought process and logistics behind the handling of media related issues, providing an insight into the strategic and tactical thinking of the Prime Minister and his ministerial colleagues and key advisors.

Another example of a strategic communications decision made by the Leadership Group was during the 2004 election campaign relating to Members of Parliaments’ superannuation, a matter raised by Labor Leader Mark Latham. Sinodinos said ‘we had to do something about it, and we knew, every time he (Howard) went on radio he’d face those sorts of questions, so we may as well try and cut it off, so swift action in those cases was critical to shutting down media hype and criticism’. Those decisions were made by ‘the Leadership Group and other senior people’ according to Sinodinos, who conceded ‘if the Prime Minister’s out on radio
being asked these sorts of questions for the next few weeks or months, it will just drown out any other message we are trying to get across. So it became an issue of damage limitation’. Howard announced the changes on 12 February 2004 and was interviewed that evening by the ABC’s PM program (Colvin).

**Research polling: the role it played in crafting political messaging**

Pollster Mark Textor said research played a major role in much of what the government said and did. This was all part of keeping the Australian electorate informed, and enabling Prime Minister Howard to ensure there was a consistent message emanating from the government. Textor said Howard certainly had ‘intuitions, but remember that in saying that you know he was right about something, remember it had probably been measured to death’. Textor makes the observation that ‘the relative success of political parties is measured by their ability to influence and tactically use this data, there’s no mysteries’. Pamela Williams (1997) dissected Howard’s 1996 election win, highlighting the role polling played, using focus groups and voter surveys to determine the targets for election advertising campaigns and key messages. Examining swinging voter hopes, fears and their emotional thoughts on many issues, led to the Liberal Party’s lines on the Keating government’s “special interests”, a brutal synopsis that the Liberals used to devastating effect.

Where research played a role in determining the government’s positioning statements on some issues, Howard also used his talkback radio callers, media commentary from a variety of newspapers and current affairs programs, his own ministers and advisors and those he spoke to from all walks of life, to assess the political environment and how constituents viewed the government’s performance. Professionally conducted research, combined with information from these various sources, contributed to Howard’s collective knowledge of voter feelings. Howard also had the ability to use this data to construct his own messages, to engage and communicate with the wider population in a way that was easily understood, a fact reiterated by many of the interviewees contributing to this thesis.
The effort to find a great and compelling one-liner is heightened during election campaigns. Textor said:

During campaign periods … qualitative (research) tended to help shape the structure of the message and how the message was put together, with quantitative (research measuring) its effectiveness, where we were weak and where we were strong geographically and demographically.

During an election campaign Textor said you would research, ‘probably every night’, with the research analysed by ‘a media tactics unit, which would be a few old media people and some permanent staff from ministers’ offices’. A deliberate decision would be taken to effectively divert a resource, or concentrate on a particular thing to leverage up evidence of something you were trying to prove about your opponent’. Textor stated ‘very little is said in a campaign environment that hasn’t been pre-tested, and usually the losing campaign is where people ad lib’. Textor said, how voters perceived political parties and their leaders is based on a number of criteria, not necessarily just the policy itself or a good line in the media. Textor used as an example ‘illegal immigration, it’s not about xenophobia, it’s about a world that is suddenly spinning out of your control’. In fact with so much of the world “out of control” Textor said, ‘you will seek to empower yourself by someone or something that enables you to get some semblance of control’. This remark relates to how Howard was perceived as a “safe pair of hands,” and his media appearances and communication style supported this persona.

Textor made reference to Kim Beazley (Leader of the Labor Party and Leader of the Opposition 1996–2001 and from 2005–2006), who was reported to be flip-flopping on initially announcing he would support the Border Protection Bill, introduced in parliament in 2001, and then not doing so the first time, but did when it was re-tabled a second time, earning him the name of Mr Flip-Flop (see Crosby 2001). Textor said ‘I can vote for John Howard, because he’s the guy who gives me the power to stick it up the rest of the world’. Textor researched how to focus on the key weaknesses of the Opposition forces like Beazley flip-flopping, the inability to take a firm policy decision, and hesitations about his (Beazley’s) Roll-Back Plan in 2001. Thus key messages and cut-through one-liners were not spur-of-the-moment thought bubbles, but carefully crafted and researched political messages.
Communication Challenges Politicians Face

Spin versus substance: the politician’s dilemma

Today, there are many critics of the overuse of political media advisors and spin-doctors, and the press office would be considered by some to be the guardian of truth and the buffer between the prime minister and the media fraternity. There were times when a minister’s press secretary would deny O’Brien an interview by using excuses such as ‘I don't think so, that's not really our message for the day’. And O’Brien said another line he got, on more than one occasion, was, ‘we've already got our message out for today’. O’Brien suggests preparation for interviews centres around the techniques of ‘how do I use this (technique) to avoid legitimate questions’. O’Brien feels:

There are very few politicians today, as far as I'm concerned, who will arrive at a studio prepared to genuinely engage in, what I would say, is the true spirit of that interview. Politicians have become captive to this web of media management, of media training, of spin doctoring, I just think it's unhealthy.

The interview avoidance techniques employed by most politicians reflects poorly on their credibility, and confirms the perceptions in the eyes of the public that politicians cannot be trusted. It also denies the voting public the opportunity to really understand the issues under scrutiny, a factor that is not healthy in a democratic society. Steve Ingram, Media Advisor to Philip Ruddock, had an alternate view to O’Brien’s on political spin: ‘you had to be manipulative, because the media was manipulative … you’ve got to become politically clever in the way you run to get your positive side of the story out …. this is not manipulative, this is really just good practice’.

Loughnane said ‘the most prominent public communicator for the government is the prime minister and … whatever the issue is today it would be the prime minister, as much as anyone else, who gets asked about it so he’s got to be across it’. Any politician fronting up to a media interview needs to be prepared, particularly in regard to what they can say about the topics they are being questioned about. Sadly, we see politicians avoiding the question, spinning an answer, being evasive and sometimes stonewalling legitimate questions.
Grattan noted ‘the fact that so much is planned and so much is spin’ and ministerial staff act as “buffers” between the prime minister and journalists, mean modern prime ministers, including Howard, are ‘much less accessible in a meaningful way than some earlier prime ministers’. ‘Everyone spins’ according to Bolt, and Paul Kelly feels ‘they’re always spinning a story, always, every issue they’re spinning a story’. Jeff Harmer, Departmental Secretary of Education, Science and Training 2003–2004, and from 2004 Secretary of the Department of Family and Community Services, said spinning is a politician’s job as ‘that's their way of counteracting what they would see as the bias of the journalist to try and make a headline story, so the politicians have got to defend themselves against that natural inclination by the media’. Andrews said, ‘spin is meant that the best gloss is put on a story, well then, of course politics has always involved spin, that’s true, but what is not acceptable is the lines given by the focus groups and that’s what we’re going to repeat ad nauseam’.

Minchin felt:

In politics you’ve got to practice and become expert in the art of nuancing things, of not always revealing the whole truth, which is not to say you are lying but … only saying what you believe needs to be said, or is in your own interest, or the government’s interest to be said.

Paul Kelly suggests ‘the nature of politics is to advance their policies and sell their policies and try and persuade people about their policies, so politics is about the art of persuasion and therefore they will have their own take on everything’.

The Australian public have excellent “spin meters” and can spot spin quickly, however, this obvious fact appears to have little influence or impact on most Members of Parliament, who continue to spin and gloss their messages for political gain.

The strategy of appearing on Sunday morning political programs

According to Costello, Sunday political programs such as Channel Nine’s Sunday, Meet the Press on Channel Ten and the ABC’s Insiders were regarded as ‘extremely important’, as a big interview on Sunday could ‘set up the week’. Costello said ‘Monday’s papers might lead with material from the Sunday interview, subsequently there were talkbacks leading off
papers, which, in turn, fed into that day’s question time and the evening television news bulletins’. Costello suggested ‘if someone goes on them (Sunday programs) and makes an error, it does set up the week, it dominates the media coverage’. Pyne was quite often on one of the Sunday political programs and said, ‘often you can get three, four or five stories out of them if you say anything interesting’. Thus, Howard and the press office made sure ministers appearing on the Sunday political talk programs had copies of predetermined talking points. Sinodinos said ‘there was always coordination where possible, we attempted to coordinate the appearance of ministers on the Sunday programs to make sure there was some discipline around that’.

McKillop noted that:

On the Friday of each week between O’Leary, and Savva in the Treasurer’s office … they’d pretty much work out who was going to be on what (Sunday) programme. If the Opposition went out on a Sunday and there was no government response, then O’Leary would want to know why and there’d be some pretty short sharp questions asked on the Monday morning.

The importance of these Sunday morning programs was noted by many interviewees for this thesis, and in particular by key journalists and media commentators. Milne said ‘a term we use in The Sunday Telegraph, it’s called journo’s journalism … it’s much easier to fill the news pages or the airwaves with the material that you just take straight off the (Sunday) morning programs’. Bongiorno, host of Meet the Press, thought such programs were ‘important as agenda setters’. While they had small audiences, they were watched by key players such as politicians, lobbyists, and political staffers, and they were important sources of material for other media. The practice at Meet the Press Bongiorno said ‘was to distribute transcripts of the program to all members of the press gallery, and make the full program available on the Internet within 12 hours’. Akerman, who appeared regularly on the Insiders, saw that program ‘as an important agenda setter for the Monday morning newspapers, with grabs from the program appearing in radio news bulletins from 11.00 am Sunday’. Atkins noted that ‘it’s a prime spot to be in at the start of the week, because you can roll something out that might last a couple of days’. Paul Kelly, a former contributor to the ABC’s Insiders said these Sunday programs are a ‘fantastic vehicle for the politicians to set the agenda, and I think a good opportunity for politicians to be questioned as well’.
**Who does set the media agenda: a politician’s dilemma**

Abbott noted that there were ‘inevitably’ occasions when the media tended to shape the government’s agenda. In his view, media reporting played a pivotal role in shaping the political process, including the actions of government. Abbott acknowledged ‘how you are going depends on how you are being reported, and inevitably how something is being reported then feeds back into what you’re doing’. An example of the Howard government “setting the agenda” was raised by Abbott, who sighted the Avian Flu pandemic (see Pratt, 2005) in 2004–2005:

> No one (would) be able to accuse the government of any lack of preparation, any lack of foresight, anticipation, any dilatoriness in terms of dealing with a pandemic and I also knew that you had to be very open and upfront about your preparedness and your unpreparedness, and what the media … did in this case was make me acutely conscious of the fact that I had to be at the top of my game on this one.

McNair (2011, p. 48) suggested ‘the media, however, are agenda-setters in their own capacity as providers of information, highlighting some issues and neglecting others, for reasons which are often beyond the capacity of politicians to influence significantly’. Howard ascribed particular importance to morning media programs, including the ABC’s *AM*, because he said journalists monitored these programs and ‘it was a good tactic to set the agenda (for the media) early in the day’. Fran Kelly felt the role played by morning radio in setting the agenda was pivotal. Fran Kelly stated ‘that’s why I do breakfast radio, because it’s the agenda setter, AM Radio National breakfast’. In the commercial radio sphere Kelly said ‘Alan Jones shapes the agenda, and you’ve now got Sky News, (all) very influential’. Paul Kelly (Kelly, 2006 (b)) said ‘for Howard, an interview before breakfast is not an unusual diet, and he had his favourite talkback hosts in each capital city’. Paul Kelly also made the observation that: ‘Howard markets his ideas, defends his policies and is a commentator on the nation’s conditions with news from cricket to curriculum. His core tactic is to set the agenda and have his opponents defined according to that agenda’. Parry-Okeden felt ‘Howard understood the news cycle better than most and didn’t let the media set the agenda if he could avoid it’.

Asked who sets the agenda, Bongiorno responded by suggesting ‘the agenda is, more often than not, set by governments because governments do things’ while conceding that Oppositions can also sometimes set agendas: ‘they can get an angle on an issue that’s running
that pushes the government off its agenda’. But so too can the media, particularly the print media; Bongiorno agreed, saying, ‘the print media can run with a campaign and the Murdoch media particularly do that’. John Laws, 2UE morning radio program host, felt Howard was ‘very clever in handling the media, but the media did try, and probably still does try, to set the agenda’. John Howard reflected on whether it's possible for a prime minister to shape the media agenda: ‘a prime minister can always shape the agenda if he or she is talking sense, and is producing good policy, because the media will always respond to good policy’.

Loughnane agreed with Howard, suggesting ‘I think ultimately it comes to the quality of leadership, if a leader is very clear in their views and determined, you can drive the media’.

Howard said:

I found, overall, that the Australian media supported sensible economic reform, and some of the more difficult issues that we had that involve genuine reform, the media was pretty helpful. I thought, for example, the media was reasonably helpful on the GST. Of all the economic reforms that Australia has had in the last 25 years, the GST was the most disruptive and complicated of all of them. The Australian media, by and large, went along with that reform too, they were quite well educated on the need for economic reform.

Howard was pleased when he succeeded in influencing the media agenda in this way, but could become frustrated when faced with the inevitable truth that his ability to control such agendas was limited, when, for example, media organisations insisted on keeping particularly difficult issues on the public agenda when he wished it would be otherwise. He was particularly frustrated with the ABC. When asked whether he thought the media themselves framed the political agenda, he replied that this happened ‘a lot’ and that it was a challenge to keep up with (or preferably be ahead of) the media on issues. Howard said:

They get obsessed about issues, the ABC gets obsessed, and during the whole of my prime ministership the ABC was obsessed about anything to do with Indigenous affairs and anything to do with the asylum seeker issue. They were always extremely critical of my position on boat people, asylum seekers, and certainly very critical of me over Indigenous policy because they felt I should have given an apology. And climate change, they thought I was a denier and all of that, but they’re entitled to their views.
These ABC views often irritated the government, and Manne (2005, p. 2), suggested that ‘as a consequence of persistent allegations of left-wing bias, from Howard government ministers and right-wing commentators, the public affairs programs on ABC television and radio have become increasingly timid and have lost their nerve’. Perhaps the complaints levelled at the ABC by the Coalition on these matters did influence the approach the ABC may have taken to these contentious issues.

Ric Smith suggested:

The media may often attempt to set the agenda, however, the views expressed by the media may be diametrically opposed to the wider Australian viewpoint. This in turn makes media consumers very sceptical of the agendas media proprietors and senior executives are touting.

Another observation was made by Heffernan (2006) on the power of words from British Parliament: ‘Prime ministers can significantly influence the news agenda through use of authoritative, self-referential communication’. Howard (2014b) summed this influence when he spoke the National Press Club, suggesting ‘Politics is a contest of ideas, and a contest of competing values. Political parties always do best when they posit their arguments and their politics on values and ideas’.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the second of the four thesis questions: how did the prime minister’s office approach the complexity of developing and coordinating its political communication during the Howard government’s tenure? We have seen the close working relationship Howard’s press office had with ministers’ press offices, and in particular the coordination role the press office played across the entire Howard government’s ministry, with Press Secretary Tony O’Leary also coordinating the communication between press secretaries. This coordination role also encompassed not only the scheduling of media appearances, but the messages the government wished to impart on a daily basis. The development of the government’s media strategies, and the development of key messages and the position the Coalition’s spokespeople would take in handling the media ‘interrogation’ they faced on a daily basis, was often driven by the Leadership Group. The role ministers themselves played, along with their own press officers dovetailing into the prime minister’s press office’s
agenda, illustrated why the function of media management operated very smoothly. Who sets the media agenda is an unresolved issue, as in many circumstances it can be either the media or political actors. Finally, the observations of key ministers in the Howard government revealed a consensus on the free reign ministers enjoyed in dealing directly with the media, the support they received from a competent press office, along with the interest the Prime Minister showed in his ministers’ media performances.

The next chapter explores the third question posed as part of this thesis: what impact did changing technologies have on John Howard’s ability to communicate with the wider Australian electorate?
Chapter 7: Changing Technologies and the Impact on Political Discourse

Chapter Overview

This chapter’s focus is on the third question posed as part of this thesis:

What impact did changing technologies have on John Howard’s ability to communicate with the wider Australian electorate?

Through the words of the 86 participants in this study and the Australian political communications literature, the findings in this chapter draw particularly on the interview material from press gallery journalists, media commentators and writers, Howard staffers and front bench ministers. The chapter explores the emergence of new technologies that changed the face and pace of political discourse. As outlined in Chapter 3, over the course of the Howard government new media platforms emerged, the growth of the Internet was profound, as was its impact on mainstream media and consumer viewing and listening. The electorate began to use the Internet to source political information, and as a consequence, politicians had to embrace this new technology as another method of reaching their constituents.

This chapter examines the new technological platforms that changed the media landscape, the increasing speed of the 24-hour news cycle, and how Howard ventured into social media but was reluctant to fully embrace it. It concludes that the very nature of political reporting has been influenced by these technological developments and this chapter explains how this, in turn, has changed the way election campaigning has been conducted and reported.
Technology: Its Impact on Politicians and Political Communication

The 24-Hour News Cycle and the Changing Dynamic of Political Reporting

When looking at the evolution of political communication Paul Kelly (2008c) suggests ‘you can’t look at media in isolation, you’ve got to look at the way the role of the prime minister has evolved and changed as a result of technology’. The demands placed on the Prime Minister by the media are extraordinary and Paul Kelly, in an interview for this study, felt ‘the Prime Minister is engaged in a perpetual conversation with the people, he’s involved in a perpetual conversation with the nation’. This thesis finds that the prime minister has this conversation with the Australian electorate on a daily basis and canvasses a multitude of issues with a cross section of media outlets. The Howard era saw the beginnings of the 24-hour news cycle. Crabb described this as ‘a terrible beast’ as it opens up ‘acres of space’ that need to be filled. This inevitably puts pressure on journalists to fill their respective bulletins and pages with news, whilst meeting sometimes unrealistic deadlines, perhaps leading to misreporting. Van Onselen however felt ‘Howard’s energy was enormous in terms of the media … he was in certain ways one of the first politicians in my view who understood the 24-hour news cycle of the media’. This comment supports Young’s (2007, p. 104) findings and conclusions:

Where it had been an optional extra, professional political communication had by the mid-1990s become an essential plank in any serious program for government. No longer an appendage to the main business of government, by the 1990s communication had become a strategic instrument of policy design, presentation and implementation.

The political actors interviewed for this thesis reinforced this observation of Young’s as they reflected on the increasing importance of media to the prime minister’s role. Paul Kelly also makes the observation on how technology and the media changed, noting ‘there’s absolutely no doubt in my time as a journalist, that the media-politics interface has just been totally transformed. There was no 24-hour media cycle when I first started, none whatsoever’. Paul Kelly also felt:

If there’s a development it’s more emphasis on the 24-hour media cycle, and there’s constant scrutiny of what’s on the surface, it’s like an iceberg, there’s more and more scrutiny of whatever it is, the 10 per cent of the iceberg above the surface and less attention on the 90 per cent of the iceberg below the surface.
Paul Kelly (2006 (b)) also stated that:

Howard is a 24/7 party politician who runs a permanent campaign. He has integrated politics into policy and administration to a degree unachieved by any of his predecessors. Howard campaigns on behalf of his government each day, almost from the moment he completes his morning walk.

Ruddock commented on the speed with which reporting is now handled as being ‘almost immediate and instantaneous with print media, instead of being a document of record you now have to be a commentator … unbiased reporters of facts are now commentators offering opinion, and it has been a very significant change’.

This is a very significant observation, highlighting the multifaceted responsibilities journalists and media commentators are now required to undertake. Dawson noted that, with the massive amount of data now available to journalists there has been a shift from ‘observation to interpretation, with journalists enviably having to interpret as well as observe’ the political landscape. Morris said ‘communications has to be so flexible, has to be so immediate, you’ve got so many deadlines throughout a day and there are periods in politics where long-term planning is … how do we get to 11 o’clock?’

**Howard’s Approach to Emerging Technologies**

This research found the Liberal Party, and for that matter most Australian politicians, did not embrace the Internet and seize the opportunities it provided, to reach a potentially new audience. The Internet opened up an array of communication channels to political actors that they would never have envisaged when the Howard government was first elected. Costello felt ‘the Liberal Party was pretty slow’ in their take up of new technology. Megalogenis said the ‘first thing to go up on the Prime Minister’s website was (posted in) mid-1997’ (Liberal Party of Australia, 2007). According to Abjoreson, within Howard’s press office there was little consideration of new media options, and little strategic thinking about the use of evolving communication technologies’. Luff recalls ‘The changes between then (2001) and the end of last year (2007) are dramatic in terms of the speed and how things happen, and the Internet’.

Megalogenis made the observation on the Liberal leadership’s use of the Internet that ‘he (Howard) might have been the last western leader to do so at that time’. This is a very revealing statement, and highlights the thinking of the conservative political elite in Australia, who were focused on managing and controlling their communication within the framework of traditional media.
When it came to new technology, Howard was a ‘traditionalist’ who didn’t have a computer on his desk, according to Baker. Howard confirmed this fact: ‘No, I didn’t use a computer while I was prime minister. I don’t know whether I had one on my desk. I may have’. However, the Prime Minister said he did use a computer at The Lodge: ‘I think I had one at The Lodge and I would occasionally look things up there, yeah, but I didn’t use it in the office, no’. This is surprising in a world where advances in technology were shaping the interaction between constituents and their political representatives, and how voters were accessing new media platforms for news and general information. Howard still relied on mainstream media, in the main, to communicate with his constituents. Atkins says in any case ‘it was only towards the end of this period (Howard’s term in office) that the Internet became a source of news by itself or that media outlets started to provide updates via the Internet’. ‘As media operations became faster and more complex, the load on politicians’ according to Costello, ‘became heavier, with the advent of Sky Television, the demand for news became continuous’.

The Growth of New Media Platforms

As Howard increased his use of talkback radio over his eleven and a half years as prime minister, it highlighted his reluctance to experiment with other forms of new emerging media platforms and formats. One example was Howard’s lack of engagement with programs such as Rove, hosted by Rove McManus, a late night television variety show which aired initially on Channel Nine from September 1999 for only 10 episodes, and then as Rove Live on Network Ten from 2000 until November 2009 (interrupted from November 2006 for some months due to the death of Rove’s wife). A politician exposing themselves to talented young comedians taking a comical look at the politics of the day and parliamentarians media performances was certainly a risk for Howard, who would look very much out of place and very uncomfortable within this slick, youthful format.

Luff revealed the press office did receive a ‘request from Rove to do interviews and we never did that’. Luff said the ‘advantage for someone going on there was completely outweighed by the negatives’. Howard’s non-appearance did at one stage become a problem for the Prime Minister, with Pyne noting ‘the fact that he (Howard) wouldn’t go on Rove Live and people were holding up signs at the cricket saying, “Go on Rove”, it was a great strategy from Rove’s point of view, but a fiasco for the Prime Minister’. Labor Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd however appeared several times on the program. Rudd was a seasoned television performer,
with Van Onselen and Senior (2008, p. x) suggesting ‘Rudd’s broad appeal was attributed to his early morning appearances on Seven’s top-rating *Sunrise* program’. Rudd appeared weekly on *Sunrise* for over five years finishing on 16 April 2007.

Kevin Rudd had also used FM radio effectively in Opposition, where Labor had a strong following in the 18 to 34 age group, and it was apparent that Howard had ‘left the run too late to start to appear on FM radio’ according to Megalogenis. Van Onselen and Senior (2008, p. xi) said ‘a cornerstone of Rudd’s efforts was FM radio’. FM radio was also a medium Howard shunned, as the format of FM radio would not have suited Howard’s more conservative approach to media appearances and interviews. The fast paced, often irreverent content would not have suited Howard’s persona. Luff however, said ‘it is a bit of a myth that Howard didn't do FM radio, he did right from the time I started (in the prime minister’s press office in 2003) we’d do FM radio’. Pyne said despite the Prime Minister doing as much radio as possible ‘where that failed was that he didn't do that with FM. His radio strategy was almost entirely focused on radio commentators’. Megalogenis had a similar view to this, by reflecting on 2005 and 2006 where ‘no amount of talking on talkback radio was going to substitute for the fact that there was another medium (emerging) … which was FM radio’.

**Howard as the First Multimedia Prime Minister**

Despite Howard’s slow uptake of new media Megalogenis said ‘you could probably have Howard as the first multimedia prime minister that we had’. Megalogenis was reflecting on Howard making the transition from print and commercial television to talkback radio, and as Megalogenis observed ‘almost carpet bombing by transcript and by policy document’. As evidence Megalogenis said Howard:

> Happened to be the prime minister when the Internet became part of our lives, but he also happened to be the prime minister when talkback radio came into its own. The proof of the pudding was Howard’s election victories, he won four of them on the trot and there was no mistaking his voice by the time he was at his peak with his powers around 2002 and 2003, and there was no mistaking his voice because his voice was everywhere, and that’s why I think … you’d look at him as almost the first prime minister of the multimedia age.
Fran Kelly made the observation that when:

Howard wouldn’t do (ABC radio’s) PM program because the newspapers got to bed early; now no one cares what time the newspapers go to bed, because it’s not about the newspapers, it’s about their online sites, the news cycle is going the whole time.

Young (2007, p. 104) noted ‘the 1990s saw the rise of 24-hour news, the Internet, and a much more rapid news cycle than had been faced by previous generations of politicians’. Speers said a news story is now ‘shifting throughout the day, with different angles and reactions and responses and developments, hour by hour throughout the day, so a story can go full circle within 24 hours’.

Many interviewees participating in this research felt the advantage Howard had was a very experienced press office, along with his own ability to manage his media responsibilities, fine tuned over many years, and his willingness to rise to the challenges imposed by the demands of a 24/7 news cycle. Megalogenis felt ‘Howard’s lack of initiative in embracing new technology such as ‘FM radio, blogging, YouTube, Twitter, it was really just a comment about the times moving ahead of that government that had been in power for too long’. It can be concluded that Howard worked differently, not embracing the new technology but working with it. Howard understood the logic of this new medium and the 24/7 expectations of the new technological age, but engaged with it in a fashion that matched his traditional approach to media, one he had successfully adopted since entering politics some three decades before.

**Howard’s Venture onto YouTube**

This traditional approach to the media was highlighted when Howard used YouTube for a climate change announcement on 16 July 2007, opening his statement with “Good Morning” ("Howard joins YouTube generation," 2007). This attempt to use YouTube to launch his Climate Change Policy was not well received. Speers noted how strange Howard’s style was on YouTube ‘addressing the camera like he would with a national address, flag behind him or whatever, sitting down, suit and tie, that’s not how people use YouTube’. Sinodinos conceded ‘last year’s election (2007) was a lot about thinking about the future and Howard’s about to retire, so he’s not interested in the future’. Howard stated:

The decision to launch the policies on YouTube; a different medium now … that was just a natural progression, that was a … suggestion, strategy, tactic whatever you want to call it, put to me by my press office and I thought it was very sensible. I don’t know (if it worked), we lost the election so I don’t think we lost the election because of our media strategy.
Luff confirmed ‘the decision to go to YouTube was the media people, you would’ve seen the website evolve into more importance, especially from 2003 probably, and YouTube, in 2004’. The reaction to Howard using YouTube was mixed according to Luff:

They thought Howard, the old fellow, why is he trying to do YouTube, and some people would say that it was desperate … others were saying it was ironic that Howard’s the old guy and Beasley or Rudd, they’re meant to be the younger ones, and Howard’s trumped them by being the first one on YouTube, so it was sort of square.

Howard at least accepted the recommendations of his media advisors and took the plunge into this new media platform, despite his comfort with the more traditional forms. Pyne said when Howard ‘was doing YouTube, I found it cringe making and it was more laugh value for young people than genuinely useful’. Pyne remembered a call from Howard’s press office asking “does Christopher use a teleprompter for his YouTube performances?” We said, “well, of course he doesn’t, because that’s the whole point”. Pyne said, ‘the fact that they would even ask that question indicated how completely out of touch they’d become’.

Sinodinos had another take on this new wave of technology: ‘if you look like you’re coming through as someone who is at an age where you don’t normally associate with that new media, it can work against you’. Luff said Howard’s videos were based on his ‘audio message (that) morphed into video message from 2003, where the Prime Minister could be walking somewhere or just looking down the camera or sitting on a desk or sitting behind the desk … we did that with Iraq’. These videos, because they were broadcast quality, were used by TV and Luff said ‘then YouTube probably came in 2006/2007’. Middleton confirmed Howard’s venture into YouTube ‘was not about using YouTube, that was about getting coverage on TV with video news releases … the morning TV shows would pull them down and run them, and nobody was watching them on YouTube, they were watching them on TV’. This, in itself, appeared to be a very successful strategy in providing the media with quality footage and current commentary they could use immediately.

A strategy the prime minister’s press office implemented was only releasing these YouTube videos when there was something to say. According to Luff we filmed these clips ‘around every ten days or two weeks or something like that, but we didn't set it in the same way as the audio message’. An example was on the morning of Wednesday 1 August 2007: ‘Howard used a YouTube video post to declare that the Commonwealth Government would take over
the Mersey Hospital (in Tasmania) and preserve its existing services via a $45 million rescue package. Under the plan, the Commonwealth would have financial responsibility of the hospital’ (Van Onselen & Senior, 2008, p. 70), and this timely announcement was available to all media outlets via the government’s website, avoiding the necessity to call a press conference and go through the motions of creating an event, thus seizing the moment and initiative quickly. This use of YouTube and its immediacy was very appealing to the political elite, whose aim was to be a step ahead of their political opponents.

Another view on Howard’s use of YouTube was articulated by Megalogenis who suggested:

The authority of his office is almost compromised by the medium, in getting into a medium that doesn’t respect him, that wants to call him John or little Johnny, as opposed to Mr Howard.

This is a very perceptive observation, considering the strategy the press office adopted, perhaps without considering Howard’s persona and the image he portrayed on YouTube, one of a senior conservative politician using a medium more suited to younger more dynamic talent. Thus this “lack of respect” Megalogenis refers to is an issue for any politician seeking to boost their credibility and win the support of voters. There is also a danger for long term governments, when it comes to adopting new technologies according to Megalogenis: ‘the longer they're in power the greater the risk that they miss what the next tool is, because they then become comfortable with the habit of power and comfortable with the habit of using the tools that got them to power’. To a certain extent, this criticism could be levelled at the Howard administration, however it is obvious they used these new platforms, albeit in a limited way, to disseminate their political messages.

Technology and the Impact on Election Campaigns

The speed and capabilities of new communication technologies made the task of media management very challenging, particularly during election campaigns. Crabb noted that ‘when elections are called, the prime minister’s office immediately puts together a campaign list of journos who will be on the road, and it includes representatives from all major media outlets’. Crabb said the great advantage of being on the campaign trail was that you could get ‘off-the-cuff, off-the-record access to the Prime Minister’. This was possible in 2001, however subsequently (from 2004) access became much more restricted, usually to just
formal press conferences, which led media to question the value of being on the campaign trail. Akerman recalled how new mobile phone technology in the early 1990s changed the dynamics of ‘political set pieces’ that had been prepared for journalists on the campaign trail: ‘now, a journalist travelling with an incumbent leader could also be simultaneously in contact with their equivalent travelling with the Opposition Leader and this provided opportunities for journalists to derail the day’s set piece if a more interesting matter had come up’. On Howard’s press office, Akerman suggested:

They tried very hard to create the issues and maintain the focus on the issues that they wanted to air, but these days it’s extremely difficult to control. The media is a hydra headed monster and it’s impossible for one group to determine what the news agenda will be.

Grattan (1998 (b), p. 40) noted the ‘coming of the mobile phone and fax (and now email) has transformed campaigning, and will continue to do so. It is a game of action and reaction’.

Some aspects of the ‘campaign trail’ were fairly constant, essentially the idea of getting a representative group of journalists on a plane or a bus to cover specific media events organised by the prime minister’s press office. Other aspects of campaigning evolved, with Megalogenis suggesting in 2007 things were different, in part due to Sky News that became ‘a continuous presence in the election campaign … it was giving you another constant information source’. Crabb notes that the journalistic experience of being on the campaign trail became ‘totally different because of the technology’. Mobile access to the Internet and improved mobile telephone services had radically altered the “knowledge environment” in which journalists on the campaign trail operated. They could access online news early in the day, continually keeping track of developments, and with this access, it became much more difficult for press officers to control the information environment in which journalists on the campaign trail operated. Dawson noted the discipline of trying to run with one message a day and avoiding distractions during campaigns, suggesting ‘campaigns should be more orderly than non-election periods’. However, this would prove difficult as new methods of communication, and the pace of electioneering, made the coordination and control of political messaging virtually impossible.

The campaign trail, however, could be very tightly controlled by the prime minister’s office to the extent that the journalists would not be told in advance where they would be travelling to each day and what kind of visits would be made, whether for example to a hospital, school,
factory or household. This was because the press office did not want the journalists to be able to anticipate what kind of policy announcement would be made. Journalists would simply be told to assemble in the foyer of the hotel at a particular time. As Crabb commented, ‘you really hand your life over to these (press) officers’. In the earlier years of the Howard administration, journalists on the campaign trail were largely disconnected from what was happening in the rest of the country and from what was happening in the campaign of the other side. Journalists, particularly if they were in regional centres, would also have limited (or delayed) access to media coverage of campaigns. The practice of “filing by telephone to copy takers” was also a great limitation, as it usually involved filing a single story at the end of the day using a landline phone from the hotel which had been organised for you by the prime minister’s office. As new technology platforms emerged, transfer speeds became faster, and Sky News became more dominant, journalists didn’t have to be on the campaign trail. Megalogenisis highlighted his view on this issue:

A press conference is on at 12.00 pm and it’s in Cairns, and I’m sitting in the office in Melbourne and I’m blogging through the day, I’ll have the TV on, I get to watch the press conference live, I get to call a much quicker judgement about whether the transcript was worth going through in detail or not, so everything’s accelerated and I think this is what you are observing with a lot of these media forms.

Sky News emerged as a game changer for the coverage of election campaigns, providing instantaneous live feeds of all major media conferences, giving journalists, located anywhere in the country, access to breaking news without leaving their newsrooms. Sky News’s David Speers nominated ‘the text message … particularly during campaign time, as a major technological advance and you’d often get text messages (from staffers, from either the prime minister’s office or senior minister’s offices, and press secretaries) on everything that was happening with both sides … it’s giving you an immediate heads up’. Speers also mentioned:

The emergence of Sky News and live coverage of major events has been a big technological change ... also YouTube is certainly one of them, and email’s been a huge thing as well. You now have transcripts sent through all day long, media alerts, press releases, so your inbox is constantly full of the stuff, but it’s very handy.
All these new innovations were a blessing for journalists on the campaign trail, and profoundly changed the way politics was reported in Australia. Tony Eggleton, former Liberal Party Director 1975–1990, put things in perspective: ‘I remember we had a fax machine … for the 1987 election with John Howard, we had a fax machine put in the car so that we could get fax messages as we were travelling around the campaign’. How things have certainly changed.

The impact of the emergence of Sky News

The advent of the 24-hour television news channel, Sky News, had a major impact on Howard’s media strategy. Sky News was important because it was used as a source of news by other media outlets. The Prime Minister could grant an interview with Sky News as his only interview for the day, knowing that it would be covered by all the other channels. Howard thought that the advent of Sky News reduced somewhat the importance of ABC radio’s AM program as a political agenda-setter. O’Brien made the observation that:

You do the quick interview with Sky, you don’t get too much scrutiny, you go about your business, that gets picked up by others, or you go out and you do the quick doorstop. Doorstops are much more perfunctory, much more superficial, much easier to control and often … you’ll get the junior journalist often at those doorstops depending on the importance of the person and the issue and the story of the day.

O’Brien suggested ‘Sky has probably become a convenient way for a minister or a politician let’s say, to disseminate a message, get some electronic bites out’. Although Sky programming now has more in-depth political analysis shows such as AM and PM Agenda, O’Brien feels ‘for politicians Sky has come to be seen as a talkfest, they're just there, you know, they're just part of the cycle and easy for politicians to pop themselves up there, get a quick run and off they go’.

Howard appeared quite regularly on Sky News. Uhlmann said after his morning television appearance Howard ‘would then rarely appear unless there was an issue that had to be hosed down. Quite often Howard would stop during the day, perhaps walking from a meeting somewhere, to briefly address a media scrum, only if he thought it would contribute to
solidifying his key message’. Howard thus used Sky News effectively; realising if it were necessary to make further comment through the day on any issue there was ample opportunity to do so by being door stopped. Speers said after Sky News opened their bureau office:

We increased our presence and our profile and we would request more interviews and, yes, Howard’s office was usually fairly good to us at Sky News, he gave us fairly regular interviews across a range of subjects. The prime minister’s press office would ring us and let us know that he’s going to be doing something, and give us an idea that this is going to be significant.

Speers felt ‘we’re very much a part of the loop … with major announcements they’ll make sure we’re there’. Speers said he would often interview the Prime Minister in his Parliament House office: ‘you can plug into the wall and go live to air from his office, so that’s what we normally do, and the interview, once it’s gone to air then other networks will want to use parts of that interview for their own purposes’. Speers agreed ‘it does become a bit of a news source for other news outlets to turn to’. Speers said sometimes networks would request a copy, but when it was the Prime Minister being interviewed ‘everybody wants it so we can send it out to everybody in the one hit’.

**Conclusion**

As Paul Kelly noted, ‘the Prime Minister is engaged in a perpetual conversation with the people, he’s involved in a perpetual conversation with the nation’. As new media technologies emerged in the latter stages of the Howard government’s administration, it was apparent Howard did not readily embrace the platforms of FM radio or social media, such as YouTube, to any great extent. Howard did launch policies on YouTube, but with mixed success, and he looked uncomfortable in an unfamiliar medium. Howard was also reluctant to appear on the new formats of late night live television programs, considering them a “risk”. This became a point of difference for a more “youthful” Labor Opposition whose leader Kevin Rudd felt and looked more comfortable in sparring with sharp witted television hosts and posting videos on YouTube, a medium attracting a young and discerning following.
The nature of political reporting also changed from the mid-2000s with print media journalists now not only being reporters of fact, but commentators offering opinion on new social media platforms, as the pace of news reporting gathered speed. In election campaigning these changes made the task of media management very challenging for the press office and campaign headquarters. Howard worked differently, not embracing the new technology but working with it. Howard understood the logic of this new medium and the 24/7 expectations of the emerging technological age, but engaged with it in a fashion that matched his traditional approach to media, one he had successfully adopted since entering politics some three decades before.

Chapter 8 explores the Howard government’s approach to political crises and the challenges it faced during its final term in office. Its focus is on the final question this thesis poses: how did the Howard government handle communications when faced with “political crises”? It also examines a number of major national issues, where well-defined communications structures broke down as pressure mounted on the government, both from the media and public backlash, and where discipline among the ministry faulted. The chapter concludes with a study of the Howard government’s final year in office: 2007. It was here that the machinery of the government’s media and communications strategies, so well oiled over ten years in office, started to erode. A number of issues arose that grew into crisis situations, and ultimately the government itself knew their time in office had run its course.
Chapter 8: The Howard Government’s Approach to Political Crises and the Challenges of 2007

Chapter Overview

This chapter focuses on the final question this thesis poses:

How did the Howard government handle communications when faced with a political crisis?

Interviewees who contributed to this chapter include departmental secretaries, Australian Defence Force personnel, ministers’ media advisors and ministers themselves, senior bureaucrats, media commentators and journalists. It examines a number of contentious issues that tested the government’s media and communications skills. Three specific case studies are explored, highlighting how Howard handled his communication as these issues unfolded: Police Commissioner Mick Keelty’s comments on Australia’s involvement in Iraq, the death of Private Kovco in Iraq and the Children Overboard affair. The final section is devoted to “the crisis” of 2007, the year the Howard government’s reign in office finished, and the observations of many of the key political players on the government’s communications strategy and what went wrong.

Communications Breakdowns and Cover-Ups

The Howard government faced many political “crises” over its term in office. Sinodinos reflected on what eventuates when a crisis strikes: there is ‘lots of talkback, lots of stuff in the papers, you know, dominating news headlines on TV, and ministers pick up on all of that, they pretty quickly know, gee, we’ve got a problem here’. In certain situations Howard had a tendency to micromanage some issues. Sinodinos noted:

When they became crisis issues … he was never one to shirk from the work that needed to be done. And that was particularly when there was a crisis in a particular area that had become important … to the government’s agenda or survival and then he would throw himself wholeheartedly into it.
Walter and Strangio (2007, p. 16) noted ‘Howard’s instinct to control, has, if anything, grown more frenzied as he contemplates power slipping away’. When the Howard government faced a crisis, many of those interviewed for this study felt the government was less than forthcoming with information, or the government was attempting to cover-up their ineptitude: Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, the Australian Wheat Board “oil-for-wheat” kickback scandal, and Dr Haneef’s link to terrorists allegations are just three examples. Loughnane suggested there were situations that were not deliberate cover-ups at all:

You think you’ve (the government) got the story, but then there’d be some new piece of information come to light and it wasn’t people misleading, it was just new – a new development or a new piece of information or somebody had forgotten to include something in the briefing … so in my view, the government generally and John Howard in particular, was fastidious about what he said publicly based on briefings and material that he had.

Managing the message is particularly difficult for a government when issues are moving rapidly. Such was the case with the Children Overboard affair and the war in Iraq, where it appeared the government found it difficult to look at a strategic communications approach to these issues because events were moving at such a rapid rate. Loughnane said of these two issues: ‘additional information kept coming and so I don’t believe in either case there was any suggestion of cover up or anything like that’. Loughnane said new bits of information were coming in all the time and sadly the Prime Minister conducting a media interview, according to Loughnane ‘is considered the equivalent of evidence in the witness box. Your Honour, if there’s something, a new development or a new piece of information or whatever, well, why didn’t you tell us before, what are you trying to hide’. The expectations of the Prime Minister and ministers is extremely high, and whilst answers may not be provided on the spot, Loughnane said ‘almost certainly in every case … you’d find that there would have been subsequent briefing to the media’. However despite what a government does, the media will pursue a case and have an opinion on every issue, such as Megalogenis who in a Twitter feed on 4 April 2013 stated ‘forget the Hirdstorm and carbon tax, the biggest whopper told over the past 10 years was John Howard’s on Iraq’.

In exploring the issue of accuracy, Brendan Nelson, Defence Minister 2006–2007, felt ‘there is a culture among some of them (journalists) that Defence has always got to be about cover ups, that it’s always got to be about conspiracies’. Nelson said it’s more likely to be
The Howard Government’s Approach to Political Crises and the Challenges of 2007

A ‘cock up … and a lot of what happens in the Defence area that didn’t go well is basically a confluence of circumstances beyond anyone’s control’. Chief of Army Leahy had a theory on stuff-ups:

There's not evil people out there trying to do things wrong, there are good people out there trying to do things right who occasionally get it wrong. And the press, or elements of the press, they’ll report it in that dramatic sense and try and make good and bad out of it. Well, it’s just an old-fashioned cock-up.

Both Allan Hawke and Nigel Blunden suggested the Howard government was unfairly accused of covering up certain issues. Allan Hawke said ‘if it’s a choice between a cock-up and a conspiracy, 98 per cent of the time you can go for cock-up’. Journalists may often jump to conclusions, suspecting a sinister motive for the government not being more forthcoming on certain issues, however Allan Hawke suggests the vast majority of the time ‘there aren’t conspiracies, there are just failures in communications’. Loughnane felt ‘people wish to believe there’s a conspiracy and the reality (is) … there’s no conspiracy’. Robb said ‘If you’ve made a mistake you’ll try to put the best light on it, some people go and lie but people often play it down, or whatever, in the hope that it will be overtaken by other things and then they’ll go and fix it up’. Sadly, when people lie Robb said ‘in that way, a stuff up has become a cover up’. On accuracy in the media Matthews said, ‘to be frank I don’t think I’ve ever seen a media story on a topic that I knew well, that was accurate, ever … I think almost all media articles are wrong in some degree’.

Specific Case Studies

Mick Keelty on Terrorism and Australia’s Involvement in Iraq

This affair highlighted the government’s attempts to shut down dissenting views, with the Prime Minister believing he is justified in correcting a statement made by a government appointed senior executive that contradicts government policies or positions on political issues. Henderson (2004) said ‘Mick Keelty has been a fine Police Commissioner, but this does not mean that he should not be corrected if he states a view that is inconsistent with that of the federal government’. On Sunday morning 14 March 2004 on Channel Nine Keelty made the following comment after a bombing in Spain: ‘if it turns out to be Islamic extremists responsible for this bombing in Spain, it's more likely to be linked to the position that Spain and other allies took on issues such as Iraq’.
The story was covered extensively by the media, including Henderson (2004) and Nicholson (2004b). Sinodinos said ‘After I saw Mick on there (on Channel Nine) and the Madrid stuff came up I rang the national security guy and I said “have you seen that, that’s not consistent with our line, about why we are a target”’. Sinodinos then rang Howard: ‘I guess I bear more responsibility than he (Howard) does in a sense because I did raise it with him and I said, “Well I think the problem with this is …” [and] it was an election year’. Sinodinos was advised by Howard to “have a word to Mick”. Sinodinos said:

I rang Mick … and he must have still been in the studio I think. I said, look I think this is going to create a problem and the Prime Minister’s been appraised of that and he’s quite concerned about that. It will have to be cleaned up at some stage because the journos are going to pick up on it, and he said he was a bit taken aback, he was in the studio at the time, and he realised there was a problem and I think he asked at the time, “well, what do we do about it?”

Sinodinos said journalists then started asking questions of key players including ‘other ministers and General Peter Cosgrove (Chief of the Defence Force 2002–2005) … so it was starting to look like the government was beating up on the police commissioner’. Ruddock, in an interview with me said ‘Mick Keelty made an error of judgement in allowing that inference to be drawn’. Downer said on Channel Nine’s Today Show on 16 March 2004 ‘I think he's just expressing a view which reflects a lot of the propaganda we’re getting from Al Qaeda’. Willkie (2004, p. 184-185) described the Australian Government’s reaction to Keelty’s comments as ‘savage’. Sinodinos remarked: ‘it’s a situation where once the story got up, there was a sexy bit to it: “Police Commissioner appears to contradict government”, the media got onto it, everybody gets asked for a view, before you know it, it’s snowballed out of control’.

Cosgrove was an obvious target for the media and he was pictured standing next to Defence Minister Hill at a media conference on another issue at the time. Cosgrove's reply, when asked about the Keelty comments, that ‘I see the same intelligence as he is seeing, and I disagree with him on this occasion’ was very damaging. Sinodinos felt Cosgrove was ‘put in a difficult situation, and the media knew that, but that’s why they were doing it’. On the ABC’s The 7.30 Report that evening (O'Brien, 2004) the claim was made that ‘the government also sought to line up Defence Force Chief General Cosgrove and ASIO chief Dennis Richardson to discredit Mr Keelty’s comments’. Former senior Defence official Alan
Behm (Head of the International Policy and Strategic Divisions of the Department of Defence from the mid-1990s) told The 7.30 Report ‘what would concern many of the members within the counter-terrorism community is the vulnerability of such a senior figure to admonition and rebuke from the government on a matter which, to the minds of many of them, they could see no need’.

Sinodinos said the whole affair:

Made for a messy week or so of media, and again, it was, I’m not blaming the media, they’re just a messenger, but they are the conduits for which all this stuff gets filtered and they ramp it up by asking everybody, and everybody comes in on it, and before you know it, you’re off and running. (We should have) probably tried to stop everyone from commenting, I think. It should have been closed down earlier because I think once the horse had bolted it was very hard to do that and it had been hard to keep the stable door shut.

Morris said ultimately there are people like the Federal Police Commissioner, or the:

Boss of the Reserve Bank, boss of the ACCC, they are all tied up with the government, they’re also independentish and they still have the ability to say, “Well I’m sorry if it caused angst, prime minister or press office, but I was asked this question and I answered it”, there’s not much you can do, you just have to live with it.

When asked was the media management following Keelty’s comments on Channel Nine handled well, Howard replied ‘I think that was … an untidy incident, I agree with that’.

The Private Kovco Case

The Kovco case highlighted a communication breakdown within the Howard government and Howard’s personal involvement in the case, which confirmed his attributes as a compassionate and empathic leader when dealing with the family of Private Kovco.

Private Jake Kovco died after being shot in the head with his own service pistol in the Australian Embassy barracks in Baghdad on 21 April 2006, (Department of Defence, 2006). Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston (Chief of Air Force 2001–2005 and Chief of the Australian Defence Force 2005–2011) said: ‘Defence Minister Nelson started speculating about what had happened … he was drawn through a couple of scenarios before he said this is going to be investigated’. The message should simply have been that the matter was under
investigation. Howard concurred that in this instance some confusion arose because there was ‘too hasty a comment by the minister about the cause (of what happened)’. Houston said ‘the media are very quick to try and construct what happened on the basis of very skimpy evidence, very few facts, facts that haven’t been tested, haven’t been through an investigation process’. Houston also suggested ‘the media is always looking for a conspiracy, and if it’s a choice between a conspiracy and a screw-up, it’s probably a screw-up’. Nelson said ‘to me it was the first death that we’d had in Iraq, it was not a combat death’, and ‘what I said was on the basis of what I’d been told at the time and I kept contemporaneous notes’. I could have ‘let the Military explain themselves … (as) some people thought I should have done’.

The Kovco debacle became further convoluted when the wrong body was initially flown from Iraq. Blunden, Defence Minister Nelson’s Media Advisor, said on the night of 26 April 2006 at around 9.00 pm that the Chief of the Army (Peter Leahy) told Nelson at the Canberra Airport “the right body was not on the plane”. Blunden said the Prime Minister needed to be informed so Minister Nelson phoned Howard early in the morning (Thursday 27 April 2006) when he and Army Chief Peter Leahy arrived in Sale to tell the family the wrong body was on its way from Iraq. Nelson said:

I rang him (Howard) and he was sound asleep and they put him on the phone and he spoke to her (Private Kovco’s wife). It was extraordinary, expletives and other things from the Kovco end and then Howard came back on … (and said to me) “that was the right thing to do … if you need to, call again, don’t hesitate to”.

By 4.00 am on 27 April the story was out, and this demanded quick action. At 5.00 am Blundell wrote a press release explaining the matter which was approved by Minister Nelson. A subsequent doorstop for Nelson was arranged (at Melbourne Airport), however, by then new information had emerged about the circumstances of Kovco’s death. In this saga Blunden said they were ‘on the back foot because they couldn’t control the flow of information. We were very reactive to the media’, recalls Blunden. Sinodinos supported those assessments, adding ‘we should have expected better handling (of this issue) given the experience we had with things like Children Overboard, for example’. Sinodinos said the minister ended up in a situation where he received two different versions of what happened based on advice from Defence, and ‘this is the old problem, that you don’t always get the most accurate advice first up’.
Sinodinos wasn’t sure if there was a directive from the prime minister’s office that said everything related to Private Kovco’s death must be channelled through their office because it was so sensitive. However, ‘there was certainly an understanding that on these sorts of sensitive matters there should be liaison with the prime minister’s office, and then the office may give advice about how to handle a particular situation’.

The Children Overboard Affair

This affair became one of the government’s most controversial crisis situations, implicating high-ranking Defence personnel, government ministers and staffers, bureaucrats, and the Prime Minister himself. This affair was dominated by a litany of communication failures and attempts to centrally manage media coverage of what were politically charged events. It goes to the heart of government communications, and a government’s endeavours to control the flow of information to the media and ultimately the general public. The Children Overboard controversy began on 7 October 2001. As part of Operation Relex, HMAS Adelaide intercepted a boatload of asylum seekers. Information was communicated from Defence to the government that children of asylum seekers had been thrown overboard. Over the coming days, dispute arose over the existence of photographs showing children being thrown overboard. On 10 October Peter Reith released photographs purportedly showing children being thrown overboard, but on the same day Peter Reith’s office was advised there were doubts about the accuracy of the photos.

Major issues arose between Admiral Barrie, Chief of the Australian Defence Forces from 1998–2002, and Defence Minister Peter Reith over the media handling of the Children Overboard affair. When it came to operations involving the Australian Defence Forces, Barrie said he ‘wanted to control his own media relations, taking responsibility to “report the facts” of any operation it deemed to be newsworthy, however Minister Reith insisted that all media would be run through the minister’s office’. The result, Barrie acknowledged, was that ‘the government was able to “put a spin” on this particular Defence operation which took place during the 2002 election campaign’. Marr was astounded at the control placed on Defence not to comment to the media:

It was peace time and the press was not allowed to talk to any member of the armed forces, not even the CDF (Chief of the Defence Force). You couldn’t even talk to Barrie, they couldn’t talk to anyone. They could only talk to Ross Hampton (Defence Media) and the Minister for Defence’s office. Now that was a truly astonishing thing to do.
Vice Admiral David Shackleton (Chief of Navy 1999–2002) directly blames the minister and his insistence on controlling the flow of information for the Children Overboard communication issues:

The minister wanted to control the whole thing and the Children Overboard debacle was a good example of how information was controlled or not controlled. So when it ended up on the TV it was the wrong picture, it was because the channels that the military would normally use to make sure that things are the way they ought to be had been bypassed and so we ended up with a year’s worth of Senate inquiry which cost God knows how many thousands of man hours because people had just not bothered to slow down and do things at the right kind of pace.

This is a significant statement and goes to the essence of media relationships and communications strategies. Do governments surrender to the logic of the media and provide information when requested, or do they insist on verifying the accuracy of information before releasing a statement publicly?

When incidents became crisis situations, such as in the Children Overboard affair, there were attempts at damage control. But this was a difficult task, because of the number of stakeholders involved, the difficulty of re-asserting control once public statements were made, and the media covering the story using comments from multiple, often unidentified, sources. Many interviewees for this thesis suggested the Children Overboard affair, and the photographs of children being thrown overboard, was the one issue where the government’s claim wasn’t believable. Howard did concede that ‘I understand why people would raise that, it was certainly an untidy thing’. Allan Hawke felt ‘the media, I think, came to the view that they’d been hoodwinked’. Shackleton also believed that when the Navy was attacked in the press you could either:

Do nothing therefore the story becomes by default true, or you can write and ask for a retraction or have your own letter put in the paper as a clarification, in which case you’re seen as “me thinks he protests too much”. So you’re really stuck in this you-can’t-win position. But doing nothing to me is, by and large, not an option.

Fran Kelly said, during the interview for the television series *The Howard Years* in 2008, ‘Howard was quite defensive on that (Children Overboard) in the interviews. Yeah I think probably … he was at his most defensive on that point’.
The media were to pursue Howard over this issue, with the matter flaring up after whistleblower Mike Scrafton, Defence Minister John Moore’s Chief of Staff in 2000–2001 and then in 2001 Senior Advisor to Defence Minister Peter Reith, wrote a letter to *The Australian* newspaper that was published on 16 August 2004. The ABC News website (17 August 2004) also reported Scrafton saying ‘another former senior bureaucrat was prepared to come forward to support his claims’ (that he told the Prime Minister children were not thrown overboard back in November 2001). ABC political editor Michael Brissenden (2004) described the Children Overboard affair as ‘one of the most controversial chapters in Australian politics’. On the ABC television’s *Insiders* program on 22 August 2004 (Cassidy, 2004), Fran Kelly said ‘Mike Scrafton’s statement is very damaging for the Prime Minister’. This was because it highlighted the conflict between Scrafton and the Prime Minister Howard over this issue. Fran Kelly said: ‘it put the Prime Minister in a difficult position because what was he to do at the National Press Club three days before an election (held on Saturday 10 November 2001) … say, “look, I’m sorry, we’ve got this all wrong”’. Fran Kelly concludes ‘I know of no Australian prime minister who would do that, none, in those circumstances, none’.

Scrafton, in giving evidence at the Senate Inquiry (SSCCMI, 2002) into this affair, said he had told the Prime Minister in November 2001 that the video did not prove children had been thrown overboard (Nicholson, 2004a). Scrafton also said in the telephone conversation he had with the Prime Minister at Kirribilli on the evening of 7 November 2001 (McGrath, 2004), ‘I told him that nobody in Defence believed that children had been thrown overboard’. Scrafton said the following day at the National Press Club (8 November 2001) ‘he denied that I had made the last two comments to him. He basically said he and I discussed the film and that was all’. Howard admitted:

> It should have been sorted very early in the piece, between the minister’s office and the Defence Department’s public relations. There were people in Defence who knew and presumed that the original story was wrong but why wasn’t that effectively communicated to me or to the minister? What was the Secretary of the Department doing?

*The Australian*’s Paul Kelly was very critical of the Howard government over Children Overboard, suggesting it was ‘a very serious lapse in governmental integrity and it indicates fundamental problems in the relationship between the public service and the government’. Paul Kelly felt in a ‘proper functioning government the story would have been corrected at the start, around about 11.00 am – 12.00 pm, so … the issue would never have continued on’.
To complicate matters, Paul Kelly in *The Daily Telegraph* on 7 September 2009 (Kelly, 2009b) suggested Moore-Wilton had several times confirmed to him, whilst interviewing him for his book *March of the Patriots* that he told Howard of Houston’s advice to him during the final week of the 2001 election campaign that no children were thrown overboard. Moore-Wilton, following discussions with many people, then retracted his statement on the fifth discussion with Paul Kelly on this issue, suggesting that ‘his recollections relate to the conversation I had with him (Howard) in February 2002 after the election’ (Kelly, 2009b).

In order to help manage the issue the prime minister’s press office would ring individual journalists with private briefings; for example, during the Children Overboard affair the press office would ring Cassidy, the ABC *Insiders* host, most Saturdays: ‘I’d get a call in the morning, they knew that on a Sunday morning it would be too late, so I would get the call on a Saturday and they would take me through a couple of the key issues, just to make sure that I understood it from their point of view’.

Costello had a view of this whole sorry saga: ‘my own take is: it started off as a stuff up … and nobody could really get it back. Reith released some photos … which had been cropped, and they appeared to back up the story until you actually saw what had been taken out’ (see also Costello, 2008, p. 164-167).

**The Crisis of 2007**

As the year 2007 commenced, the government’s relationship with a number of journalists had soured. Costello stated:

> The media wanted a change of government … the government … had been there for a long time, journalists wanted fresh stories, and fresh sources and more interest. It didn’t really matter what we did, it was going to be written in a sort of pretty negative way and conversely it didn’t really matter what Rudd did because it was going to be written in a positive way.

Howard felt no matter what the government did in his final year in office:

> The mood of the public at the end of 2007 was akin to somebody who’d read a very long and interesting book, they quite enjoyed reading it but they were ready for something else. There was no hostility, I didn’t find people hostile to me or to my government, they thought we’d done a good job… they voted for change.
Howard acknowledged ‘the media too, by and large, decided in 2007 that … I’d been there a long time, they were getting thoroughly bored with me and I suppose sections of the public were getting bored with me as well, and they thought (Kevin) Rudd was the answer’.

Howard tried in vain to convince Australians he was not yet defeated, and in a media conference on Sunday 14 October 2007 in the prime minister’s parliamentary courtyard Stuart (2007, p. 203) reported Howard as saying ‘this country does not need new leadership, it does not need old leadership, it needs the right leadership’ taking a direct swipe at Rudd. Howard’s communication skills and media savvy appearances were to be put to the test during an intense election campaign. There were also tensions between the government and the media over freedom of information as evidenced by the “Right to Know” campaign, launched in May 2007 by a coalition of media organisations led by News Limited and including Fairfax Media, FreeTV Australia, commercial radio, ABC, SBS, Sky News, ASTRA, West Australian Newspapers, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, AAP and APN News and Media – who all funded an independent audit into media freedom. The audit team was chaired by Irene Moss AO (see Moss, 2007). This media campaign certainly did not assist the Howard government in the lead-up to the 2007 election.

The 2007 media plan

Howard started to plan for the election early in 2007 through discussion on the media strategy and tactics. Howard said ‘I put together, really, a central group of ministers in the early part of 2007, and we would talk about a broad media strategy but not the detail of the media strategy. The detail of a media strategy or media tactics is really something that’s best worked out between the press offices of the prime minister and the senior ministers’. However throughout the year it became clear the government was not “on-message”, and Walsh reflected on this issue by suggesting ‘you cannot manage the media and manage a message if you don't have one and they didn't have one (in 2007)’.

Fran Kelly said the stress showed on Howard in 2007. Fran Kelly recalled one interview during the 2007 election campaign (on ABC Radio National breakfast) where ‘I got a lot of audience feedback, outraged at his tone. In the interview he would get frustrated and he would say: “let me finish”’. 

What the research polling showed during 2007

Textor, the Liberal Party pollster, suggested ‘if there’s a very big negative driving votes against you, you need an equally big change or idea to change it. Fiddling around with media tactics and doing press releases is mercifully free from the ravages of relevance’. Interviewees for this research said there were a number of defining moments that highlighted Howard’s mastery of communication, and also the challenges he faced over his eleven and a half years as prime minister. Textor’s research uncovered a number of examples:

9/11, his (Howard’s) decision to implement a GST, his response to Port Arthur, the continuing difficulty over Hanson in the early term, petrol prices in 1998/2001, and an overreaction to the early successes of Latham in 2004 … and perhaps masking a lack of development of new policy which accentuated the time for a change.

Textor also said ‘I don’t think they ever thought that the Prime Minister was anything but honest. I think … in the end they just thought time was up’. Malcolm Mackerras, commentator, author, lecturer and academic, suggested polling made life much easier for governments, telling me ‘the constant polling they do these days is part of my reasoning for arguing governing is much easier today than it was in those days’ (contrasting Howard with Prime Minister Stanley Bruce 1926–1929 who lost his seat). Mackerras said ‘continuing polling every day … they get some way of reading the public mind. Mackerras also said in 2007 ‘Howard losing Bennelong was completely predictable’ (see also Stuart 2007, p. 288-289).

An indication of the communication issues Howard faced was reflected in a March 2007 Newspoll that Van Onselen and Errington (2007, p. 395) referred to, which found ‘68 per cent of voters considered Howard arrogant, while just 29 per cent felt that way about Rudd’. Van Onselen and Senior (2008, p. 67) also noted the 22 July 2007 Daily Telegraph front page story that stated voters were increasingly viewing Howard as ‘Old and Sneaky’. ‘If there was any chance of recovery’, Savva (2010, p. 229) suggested,

It ended on 6 August with the publication in News Ltd tabloid newspapers of supposedly confidential polling conducted for the Liberal Party by Crosby/Textor. This polling was so secret that only a very select few people, or so it was thought, had been allowed to see it. The Herald Sun headline, “Old, Tricky and Losing”, was devastating.
Gazard felt ‘Howard became less message-driven over the course of the final year. He was desperately trying to find something to neutralise, but whatever he did, the polls basically flat-lined’. On industrial relations being the start of the downfall of the government, Textor said, ‘no we don’t often assess research like that, it tends to be a much more balanced view’. The government endeavoured to win public support for this policy, but as Textor noted ‘an enormous amount of time, energy, effort, media time was spent trying to sell this policy, (but) it was unsaleable’.

The challenges of communicating the key policy issues of 2007

The Howard government was desperate to communicate their policies to the electorate in 2007, to highlight the policy agenda they had crafted to take the nation forward. The media had a field day, dissecting these initiatives, putting Howard and ministers under immense pressure to explain the benefits of what were either unpopular decisions, or those put together with little thought and great haste. Here are three examples that highlight the serious issues the Prime Minister, as the government’s leading spokesperson, faced with his communication and the handling of the release of major policy initiatives during 2007.

WorkChoices

Alan Jones said Howard was very concerned about WorkChoices, with Jones suggesting Howard:

Rang me on several occasions about this, you know just basically (asking), “what are they (his talkback callers) saying? What’s happening out there?” And he was convinced of the validity as I am today of WorkChoices because WorkChoices is brilliantly named, badly explained, but brilliantly named.

From a communications perspective, according to Paul Kelly (2008c), political damage was inflicted upon Howard by the ‘ACTU and its astute leader Greg Combet through its television campaign’. The Howard government spent $121 million on WorkChoices advertising and explaining its WorkChoices laws (Marris, 2007). Lucy and Mickler (2006, p. 75) raised the ‘inconsistency between Howard’s alleged gift for reading the mood of the electorate and the manifest unpopularity of his government’s industrial relations legislation’, raising the spectre of Howard’s sheer stubbornness and blinkered approach to his personal political agenda. In July 2007 the Howard government refused to release surveys under freedom of information
laws (the application lodged by The Melbourne Herald on 2 April), blocking access to 2005 research on ads promoting WorkChoices on the grounds that releasing the material is contrary to the public interest (Dunlop, 2007). This is despite the Department of Workplace Relations saying the results could be made public. Pyne said he thought ‘the cracking down on the Freedom of Information stuff was peculiar, and I thought we’d got very bad publicity for issuing D notices for security things for the media that were about Treasury matters and so on’.

Speers said WorkChoices is one example of the Prime Minister taking control of an issue. The Liberals realised, Speers said, that their ‘changes to WorkChoices which came in early 2007, where they decided to include the safety net, they realised that removing the unfair dismissal provision was not a good idea’. The Liberals ‘decided to use a safety net and the Prime Minister took very direct control of that’. Speers said ‘Howard went very much on the front foot in the media, called a lot of journalists directly (that rarely happened) and was ... trying to turn things around because they knew that WorkChoices was key. So he took ownership of that absolutely’.

MacKerras felt ‘WorkChoices was insane, but I could quite see … the control-freak mentality of Howard thinking not only was it achievable but cementing it as a great reform of his government’. Warhurst felt ultimately the government ‘lost the public relations battle’ over WorkChoices. This highlights Howard’s sheer determination and stubbornness to drive his political agenda in the media despite considerable criticism of the policy.

**The Murray Darling Basin Solution**

Treasury Secretary Ken Henry thought Howard ‘was capable of reacting a bit too quickly to events and with insufficient advice’. He referred to Howard’s initiative to invest $10 billion on a national water management plan that included the Commonwealth takeover of Australia’s biggest river system, the Murray Darling Basin, announced on 25 January 2007 ("PM unveils $10b plan for water," 2007) as an example: ‘The government was under a lot of pressure on water, it had been running as a campaign in the newspapers for quite some time, and they needed a breakthrough … but it’s a funny way to respond to a big issue, to have essentially what appeared to be a kneejerk response’. 
Henry was critical at the lack of consultation with his department when the policy was hurriedly developed. Howard admitted:

There wasn’t a Cabinet meeting on it because it was really put together at a time when people were dispersed on Christmas holidays but I had lengthy discussions with Minchin, the Acting Treasurer at the time. I certainly discussed it with him and I assume that he discussed it with the Treasury.

Henry however confirmed Treasury was not consulted: ‘I was pretty upset myself that this $10 billion policy had been developed without any involvement of the Treasury or the Treasurer’. Henry himself said ‘that was not well handled … I found out about it only shortly before Costello found out about it’. Treasury wasn’t involved in the development of this policy according to Henry: ‘I understood he (Howard) and Malcolm Turnbull had developed it, with how much public service advice, I don’t know … it’s a case in which the normal mechanisms for the development of policy were completely sidestepped’. As soon as he was made aware of it Henry was going to call Costello but he was told he wasn’t authorised to do so, but within a few minutes Costello rang Henry and ‘Peter Costello blasted me for not having informed him of the development of this policy. And I said, “Well you don’t have to tell me how you found out about this policy. I can guess that the Prime Minister has just called you hasn’t he?” And Costello said, “Well, yes, he has”’.

This situation was certainly the exception rather than the rule. Henry remarked ‘for the most part the place didn’t operate that way at all, if anything there seemed to be an extraordinary amount invested in due process’.

What caused the government a great deal of embarrassment was the leaking of Henry’s speech he gave to Treasury staff at the Hyatt Hotel Canberra on 14 March 2007, suggesting Treasury had little influence in the $10 billion takeover of the Murray Darling Basin announced in January. The Sydney Morning Herald covered the story (Coorey, 2007). Howard defended his handling of the development of the policy:

There was certainly, at a departmental level, there was extensive discussion between my department and other relevant departments, they were consulted, I don’t think Treasury actually said it was never consulted. Ken Henry made a speech in which he alluded to it in a critical way because he then said the speech was private but it was posted on the Treasury Intranet and 550 people had access to that so it was hardly private.
Howard insisted Treasury were consulted: ‘it’s true that there wasn’t a formal Cabinet submission on it, but the idea that the Treasury weren’t consulted, or ministers weren’t consulted, that’s not true’. Howard said both he and Treasurer Costello were not happy: ‘No, I wasn’t, and Costello was very angry with that and he complained to Ken Henry about it in very strong terms’. In regard to the Murray Darling Basin, Oakes (2008, p. 355) also confirmed:

The Department of Finance was kept out of the loop until three days before Howard's speech when, in the words of Department Secretary Ian Watt, they were asked if we would “run our eye over, lightly … the costings that had been worked out by the task force”. Watt said Cabinet was never consulted.

Henry first knew the contents of his speech to staff had been leaked when Laura Tingle from the *Australian Financial Review* called him and quoted him excerpts of his speech. Henry said ‘was I shocked … I was sick’. It was 2 April 2007, and the story appeared in the *Australian Financial Review* the following day under the heading ‘Revealed: Treasury chief’s blast at government policy’ (Tingle, 2007). Henry said ‘I’ve thought a lot about it over the years … it should never have happened. I’m not at all embarrassed about having said it to the troops, that’s one issue. The worst thing about it was that somebody from inside the department leaked it for whatever reason. It certainly embarrassed me, and it did have a political impact’.

The result was Henry ‘never gave them (the staff) a printed copy of an internal speech again … well when I say gave it out, it was on the Intranet’. Henry said he actually had an ‘arrangement with Costello that before I spoke publicly on anything, that I would make sure that he had the opportunity to review a draft of what I was going to say … and I thought that was perfectly reasonable, in fact I offered that to him, he didn’t seek it from me’. Henry said the exception to this rule was appearing before Senate Estimates. Any feedback Costello gave, Henry said, ‘for the most part I took those comments on board’ (see also Costello, 2008, p. 314-315).
The Northern Territory “Intervention”


The policy was put together very quickly, it’d been festering and developing in discussions that Brough, (Malcolm Brough Minister for Families and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs January 2006–November 2007), was having with people and this report came out, “Little Children Are Sacred”, and (in response our policy) was fairly speedily put together, yes.

The Intervention was announced on 21 June 2007 (Commission, 2007) and according to Henry ‘it was professionally put together, but on a weekend something as massive as that?’ (see also Altman & Russell, 2012, p. 4). Shergold said in relation to the intervention:

It came out of a discussion within Cabinet and then very speedy work was done over a couple of days when Cabinet finished. The press office were closely involved as we had to do it quickly, we needed stealth, we didn't want the story appearing in dribs and drabs and therefore the aim was to work out how the government was going to intervene, and then involve the media unit on their advice on the timing, how to announce it and who to announce it, and for them with us honing down, “Well, what were the key messages here?”

According to Howard, the media covered his announcement of the Intervention extensively: ‘well, the media were quite supportive of it, I had an almost uninterrupted interview with Tony Jones the evening of the day we announced it (21 June 2007). The media were sympathetic’, (see Jones, 2007). However, there were many critics, including the Northern Territory Government and some Indigenous groups. According to Textor, this issue didn’t rate with voters: ‘the NT intervention … wasn’t as large in people’s minds as what everyone says it is. I mean it was another thing that excited Canberra (press gallery journalists) like the Bridge Walk, David Hicks, that everyone else never wants to talk about’. Textor was making the point that ‘this is why research exists because most of the stuff that is written and said is irrelevant’. The Intervention is an excellent example of a policy rapidly developed for political purposes. No one suggests the issue is not extremely serious, however many reports indicate the problem was previously identified as needing urgent action. In the run-up to the 2007 federal election Howard felt this would resonate positively with the Australian electorate, but as Textor confirmed, ‘it wasn’t necessarily a vote switcher or winner’.
The 2007 election campaign

Tight communication co-ordination within the Howard government broke down under the pressure of the 2007 election. Crabb thought during the campaign:

> There was poor communication between Howard and his office as a collective group, and the party organisation. This was very evident at the campaign launch when lines Howard chose to use, such as “love me or loath me, at least you know what I stand for” were unfamiliar to the campaign organisation and left many “dumb-founded”.

Grube (2011) noted when election campaigns are called ‘these are moments of definition; moments when leaders rhetorically frame the battle to come … this pattern, or speech cycle, is not governed solely by the policy issues of the day’. Howard was moving from predetermined and agreed media statements, to comments he himself felt were appropriate to make at the time that would hopefully gain media attention and resonate with the general public.

It was also evident in the way Howard (2007) re-introduced the topic of “reconciliation” to the political agenda through a speech to the Sydney Institute on 11 October 2007, a few days before calling the election. Crabb said ‘it had been anticipated the speech would be about Australia’s economic priorities’ but without party consultation, Howard chose to speak about reconciliation and the possibility of developing a new preamble to the Australian Constitution in which Australia’s Indigenous people would be acknowledged. Crabb suggested one of ‘Howard’s great strengths in the past was … running with a message that had been constructed with the assistance of the party organisation, pollsters and so on’. Crabb felt ‘in the 2007 campaign, however, it appeared that the previous emphasis on “firm messaging” was not being sustained’. Howard, according to Crabb, ‘was retreating into a bunker and was (only) taking advice from his family and his close media and political advisors’.

On Sunday 14 October, Howard announced Australia would go to the polls on Saturday 24 November 2007. Van Onselen and Senior (2008, p. 115) noted: ‘fronting a microphone accompanied by the slogan “Go for Growth”, the Prime Minister was looking his age and lacked the energy he had usually displayed over eleven and a half years in the job’. Oakes (2008, p. 371) reported Howard was ‘not looking prime ministerial, says one seasoned political observer: “he’s reduced to being just a candidate with a bucket of money”’. Brett (2007, p. 81) said the press conference ‘set the themes of his lacklustre campaign: it was back to the past’. Oakes (2008, p. 370) referred to the Oz Track 33 polling in 2007 warning that
Howard was being seen as 'increasingly rattled and not responding well under pressure' and the report's advice that the Prime Minister needed to 'reconnect with voters' to counter Rudd's warm reception by the electorate'. Savva (2010, p. 256) reflected on the leaders debate on Sunday 21 October 2007, suggesting:

> For the Prime Minister, it was an unmitigated disaster. Saturday night and all day Sunday at The Lodge … not one of his three press secretaries – O’Leary, Luff, or Mitchell, all of them expert in preparing the Prime Minister for the media, was included in the debate preparation. The result was information overload, and not one single cut-through line.

Savva noted the change in the Prime Minister over the last three years of his term: ‘the man who had come up with “Who do you trust?” in 2004 to encapsulate everything that was right about himself and wrong about Latham was a very different man from the one who would front up to Rudd on 21 October’. These observations confirm the change in Howard’s communications style and the change in his approach to consultation and taking advice, perhaps due to the pressure of an impending election, and his inability to find a cut-through policy and platform that would capture the imagination of the media and the voting public.

**Reflections on What Went Wrong in 2007**

**The lack of consultation**

Howard himself had changed as the year unfolded, and one telling observation Henry made was the ‘lack of consultation in 2007 and impulsiveness on major policy issues’, which he found bewildering. This was echoed by many political players interviewed for this research. Many knew Howard was a highly competent prime minister, although he became increasingly isolated as time went on. Matthews said Howard ‘thought that he had a good understanding of what the average person thought, but I think over time the distance between him and the average person increased, but his confidence about his understanding of the average Joe didn’t’. Pyne, on reflecting on the Howard years, said:

> I think over time prime ministers always end up going into themselves, to the people that they trust the most, who stood by them the most, and people who criticise them get shut out and people they perceive as being enemies they shut out and that’s why prime ministers shouldn’t be in office for eleven and a half years. In the end Howard didn't have anything new to say to the public.
Despite these situations arising, Howard reflected on the discipline his ministers had shown over the almost 12 years in office:

I thought my ministers – overall, they really did remain on message. There were lapses but, gee, when you think about it, we were there for almost 12 years and they were few and far between. And some of them happened in the last year when people felt that the tide was going out.

Howard also misjudged the Australian public’s feeling on the United States and in particular their view of George W Bush. Sheridan explores this partnership in detail (Sheridan, 2006). It could be said Howard and George W Bush’s close personal relationship clouded Howard’s judgement. The hosting of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in Sydney, from 2–9 September 2007 could be seen as a negative for Howard, not the triumph the Prime Minister had expected.

**The media’s involvement in the Howard government’s downfall**

On the media’s treatment of the government, Howard said:

We didn’t lose because of a critical media. I thought the media was unhelpful, some media outlets were very unhelpful and I thought Channel Seven was terrible, I thought it was atrocious the way they treated many issues, but I don’t blame the media for our loss. The media were unhelpful but they weren’t the cause of my defeat. You can’t, when you lose something like that, you can’t blame it on the media, I don’t do that.

Overall, Howard felt he had engaged with the media effectively during his tenure as prime minister: ‘I quite enjoyed my interaction with the media. I managed to keep an interaction with the media all through my time and that’s very important’. Fran Kelly said despite Howard’s ability to almost always accurately read public sentiment, in the final few months Kelly thought:

Howard misread the public moods generally in the sense that it confused him, as he wasn’t getting any negatives as he walked around the country. He kept saying this and that’s true … people didn’t hate him, they just thought his time had passed, they wanted a new leader, they wanted to move on and they didn’t think he could take them there.
Oakes (2008, p. 379) confirmed this view: ‘voters were well and truly over him (Howard) and no longer impressed with his bag of tricks’. Megalogenis felt ‘the habits that took them (Howard government) to power become the habits that they think will sustain them in power, but there is obviously a big shift occurring under the Howard government and which I date back to about 2001 and 2002’.

Loughnane felt in 2007 ‘there were some journos who were actively looking for a change’. Loughnane took particular exception to Howard’s interview with the ABC’s Kerry O’Brien on The 7.30 Report on Tuesday 20 November 2007, suggesting O’Brien’s ‘smart alec comment to Howard at the end of his interview … was just, in my view, completely unprofessional’. What O’Brien (2007) said was ‘this could be our last (interview), but if this turns out to be the case, thank you sincerely for making yourself available as often as you have even in some of the tougher moments’. This appears to be a sincere thank you to Howard, and an acknowledgement that the opinion polls were consistently showing the Liberals were in for a massive election defeat.

However the media savaged the government on certain issues. Fran Kelly thought Howard had ‘got it wrong on Hicks and he read it wrong on climate change, he was way too late for that’. Brett (2006b, p. 222) suggested the failure of the Howard government to protest strongly to the United States on the detention of Hicks, and Mamdouh Habib in Guantanamo Bay without formal charges ‘seems to put protection of the civil rights of Australian citizens second to the need not to offend a powerful ally’. Pollster Textor confirmed, however, that his research revealed the Hicks controversy ‘never really rated as an issue’.

In noting the communication skills of Prime Minister Rudd (2007–2010 & 2013) and Prime Minister Gillard (2010–2013), and reflecting on John Howard's performances over eleven and a half years in office (1996–2007), it is now apparent that media skills and the ability to communicate effectively are paramount to the success of a political leader. This thesis does not extend beyond 2007; however, those who carefully analyse a leader’s media performance and their communication style will note the comparison with the Howard era, and form their own judgements on this hypothesis.
Howard leaves with his integrity intact

This thesis concludes from the evidence gathered from the 86 interviews conducted that no-one ever managed to land a blow on Howard’s personal integrity, and considering the intense media scrutiny the Prime Minister was under, this is significant. Despite the political scandals of the Howard government discussed in this thesis, there were no situations that brought into disrepute Howard’s personal reputation. Many would disagree with his policies, decisions, and some of the explanations he gave on certain matters; however his personal life, financial dealings and the associations he developed with a wide cross-section of the Australian community were never under question.

Gazard made the observation:

One thing I did enjoy about working for Howard and Costello, there was never any impropriety around their leadership … the Prime Minister never owned a share in his life, at considerable detriment to his personal fortunes. No one ever managed to land a blow on their personal integrity, which was nice.

If there had been a whiff of scandal or impropriety then the press gallery or the Labor Party would have seized upon it immediately. With Howard, what you saw is what you got, what you heard is what he believed, where he stood on issues is what you already knew.

After his election defeat, according to a Howard staffer, he and Janette came in to say goodbye to the staff, which everyone appreciated, but understandably in a way, they were consumed with their own situation and showed little sensitivity to the fact that everybody else in the office had lost their jobs as well.
Conclusion

This chapter dealt with the fourth research question: how did the Howard government handle communications when faced with a political crisis? Over its eleven and a half years in office the Howard government faced many challenges and political crisis situations. Their response to the death of Private Kovco in 2004 and the way the government handled its reaction to the comments on Iraq by Police Commissioner Mick Keelty in 2006, are just two examples of issues which arose that created a perception in the eyes of many of an uncaring and/or deceptive and inept government.

This thesis finds that despite the successes Howard enjoyed during his terms in office, through a combination of Howard’s own persona and communication skills, supported by a professional team within the prime minister’s office, the well refined administration structures and processes that brought the government to power, and kept it there, began to erode. Whether it be the Liberals’ late uptake of new media platforms and Howard’s inability to maximise the potential of this new technology, to the media’s obsession with new Labor Leader Kevin Rudd, or journalists’ negativity towards an ageing Liberal government, the government were less disciplined in many areas and this potentially impacted on their electoral success.

Despite endeavouring to “set the political agenda”, and controlling the messages the Liberal government formulated, they failed to gain traction with the many policy initiatives the government released during 2007. To an increasingly sceptical electorate, nothing would stop the tide of public opinion surging towards a change of the country’s leadership. The year 2007 is evidence of the momentum that can build against what many would argue was a good government, with others suggesting the series of blunders and mismanaged events culminated in the decision of the Australian voting public that they had had enough. Ultimately, the electorate had tired of an administration that had lasted for well over a decade.

The next, and final chapter highlights the key findings based on the 86 interviews conducted for this research, and the conclusions drawn from the observations made by these key political actors.
Chapter 9: Conclusions

Chapter Overview

This chapter draws together the main findings of previous academic research, and qualitative analysis of “on-the-record” observations from the extensive interviews conducted for this thesis. It provides a synopsis of the conclusions flowing from the research into the Coalition government’s media performance and Prime Minister Howard’s communications skills. It canvasses the findings on Howard’s approach to media management across government, the role of media advisors and the impact of new technology on government communication. It concludes with reflections on 2007, the final year in the life of the Howard government.

This thesis has addressed the following questions:

1. What was Prime Minister Howard’s personal communication style, what strategies did he use to keep the Australian electorate informed, and how did political actors during this period view Howard’s style and performance?
2. How did the prime minister’s office approach the complexity of developing and coordinating its political communication during the Howard government’s tenure?
3. What impact did changing technologies have on the Howard government’s ability to communicate with the wider Australian electorate?
4. How did the Howard government handle communications when faced with “political crises”?

Below are the key conclusions drawn from the analysis of the research interviews with the 86 participants who contributed to this thesis.
Howard’s Personal Communication Style

Howard’s media persona and image

Analysis of interviews with 86 informants concludes that the former Prime Minister’s carefully cultivated personal style was a crucial element of his overall communication persona. Grattan described Howard as ‘awesomely ordinary’ (Dryenfurth, 2007; Hartcher, 2007). Howard himself admitted to O’Brien (2006); ‘I believe in being average and ordinary. One of the reasons I do is that’s who I am’. Brett (2005, p. 32) said the ‘Howard’s are of suburban ordinariness – barbecues, cricket, the annual holiday at the same beachside resort, jogging in a shiny tracksuit festooned with logos’. Howard used this style to his advantage and Australians generally felt comfortable with his persona. This thesis has described Howard’s power over creating this symbolism, as Hackman and Johnson (2009, p. 6) suggested, communication ‘is based on the transfer of symbols, which allows individuals to create meaning’. Although Howard was considered to be ordinary, conservative, safe, and the “white picket fence family” man according to Edgar (2014), Howard was considered to be tough. Salusinszky (2006), referred to Howard’s tremendous capacity to not be affected, prickled or stung by what people say about him.

Howard could also inspire with his skilful use of words. DeBats, McDonald and Williams (2007, p. 240) highlighted Howard’s leadership qualities, oratory and communication skills following the events of 9/11. They interviewed Calvert in 2005, who said Howard’s advisors felt ‘Howard’s words were well-chosen and that his obvious feelings “shaped the whole character of Australia’s official response to those events”’. DeBats (2007, p. 247) said ‘Howard was able to act on his convictions and values, thus revealing aspects of his political personality’.

Living in a media saturated environment

This thesis has found that John Howard lived in a media saturated environment and incorporated his management of media issues into his hectic private and professional life. Howard commenced embracing media opportunities when he began political campaigning and then entered parliament in 1974. He is still an active media participant, despite his political life ending in 2007. However, Howard’s life became “media saturated” when he
became prime minister, due to the growing proliferation of media outlets, coupled with their relentless demands for access to the country's leader and chief spokesperson. Early starts, prolific consumption of newspapers and radio news programs, extensive briefings by proficient staff, an outstanding memory, being across the detail of the government's extensive agenda, and the ability to handle media engagements with relative ease enabled Howard to cope with intense media scrutiny, along with the massive workload any prime minister carries. The way Howard immersed himself in the waves of media coverage that daily flooded the airways and newsprint became a hallmark of his term in office. Journalist Paul Kelly (2006 (b)) noted 'Howard operates in a 24 hour media cycle for the 1000 days of each three year term'. Howard's morning walks captured the media’s attention, and as he exercised he listened to the radio, returning to have breakfast and read the daily newspapers. Howard said 'maybe I'm a creature of my generation, but there's still no substitute for having a quick flick at the papers yourself first thing in the morning without relying on anybody else'. Howard was assisted in his dealings with the media by an active press office, and a number of confidants, most significantly his wife, Janette, who also read the political press profusely, and who Van Onselen suggested was 'John Howard's closest political advisor'. Costello (2008, p. 225) and Abbott made reference to Howard’s “one person focus group” at Kirribilli, referring to Howard using his wife Janette as a political sounding board.

Participants interviewed for this thesis identified Howard’s immersion in news media as a key feature of his personal communication style. Luff said Howard had 'done more media than anyone in Australian history', and Steketee (2001) suggested 'Howard is arguably the most media-active prime minister Australia has ever seen'. These reflections are supported by documentary evidence provided in Appendix 5, which breaks down the 2,657 media appearances Howard handled during his prime ministership, as listed on the Liberal Party of Australia’s Pandora Archive site. It includes over 1,000 radio interviews, 384 television interviews, 787 doorstops, 300 press conferences and 178 joint press conferences (see Chapter 5). Prime Minister Howard saw it as his obligation — an essential part of his role — to make himself readily available to the media, though he reserved the right to do so on his own terms. After all, according to Dawson, Howard 'had a tremendous knowledge of the media based on 30 years in politics'.
CONCLUSIONS

Howard’s approach to his media communications

Howard’s media appearances were aided by an unusually good memory and an ability to speak in a style that the electorate understood, and as such was one of the country’s most competent media performers. ‘Howard is also a media manager’s dream’ according to Van Onselen and Errington (2006): ‘he is almost always on message … he takes a close interest in both Liberal Party campaigns and government communications strategies’. Howard understood the mainstream media well and adapted to its logic, but worked with the media to drive the political agenda, understanding the necessity of controlling the messages he wished to impart using short, concise phrases. Howard always put the best light on the government’s political position, a technique known as “spin” (Pearson & Patching, 2008). Howard’s senior media advisor, David Luff’s said ‘you don’t spin John Howard’. Grattan noted that now ‘so much is planned and so much is spin’, and according to Bolt ‘everyone spins’. This thesis concludes that Howard was, however, his “own man” and that his encyclopaedic knowledge of the Coalition’s political platform, and each of his minister’s portfolios, enabled him to competently handle media interviews dealing with issues pertaining to any of his government’s policy initiatives.

Hugh Mackay (2006) in The Age summed up Howard’s success as a communicator in this way: ‘it is his ability to reinforce what is already there—dark as it may be—that the true genius of Howard’s prime ministership lies’. Paul Kelly (2006), writing in The Australian, observed ‘contrary to most analysis, Howard is an ideas politician. His success is based on creating a brand that the public wants. Week after week on talkback radio, speaking the language of the common man, he talks values. He knows the public is moving in the direction of cultural tradition and social order, a trend Howard picked up early’. Mackay said ‘no challenger, on either side of politics, comes close to Howard in terms of the respect he enjoys in the Australian electorate’. Mackay said ‘even the many disillusioned voters who no longer trust Howard speak of their respect for the man’s dogged persistence, his economic credentials, his political cleverness and his powerful instinct for survival’. An important finding of this study was how Howard’s approach to communication attributed in part to his electoral success, and to his success as a politician.
Consistency of messaging and language

Howard’s approach to communication impacted on his response to the introduction of new policy platforms. His first priority was thinking how the wider electorate would accept new policy initiatives (see Chapter 5). Former departmental secretary Henry suggested Howard viewed policy recommendations with ‘a balance of what made sense in policy terms, and … would I ever be able to explain it to people? Would I ever be able to get sufficient public support for it? These things were always being balanced in every issue’. In his interview for this thesis Howard agreed with this synopsis.

Howard had a keen appreciation of public opinion, and the need to communicate in language that the media and public would recognise and remember. On most occasions, particularly with key policy announcements and during election campaigns, words and phrases used in the media by the Prime Minister and his ministry were carefully crafted. Journalists started using these terms in their questions, such as “illegals” and “queue jumpers” to define asylum seekers. This is an example of how political elites can drive political discourse. Baum and Potter (2008) looked at the relationship between leaders and the public, and incorporated a third strategic actor, the mass media, ‘which we believe plays a critical role alongside citizens and elites in shaping the public’s attitudes about, and influences on, foreign policy’.

Howard’s consistency of language was a hallmark of his prime ministership. Howard’s one-time speech-writer Baker stated: ‘He used the same quotes today he used 15 years ago’. Murray (2010) in a thesis on “John Howard, a study in political consistency” suggests in his abstract ‘Howard's key policies were consistent throughout his political career from his entry into the Australian Parliament in 1974 until his prime ministership ended in 2007’. However Crabb felt Howard’s ‘consistency’ could come across as ‘stubbornness and inflexibility’, and she felt this could have related to Howard’s longevity as prime minister. Dyrenfurth (2005, p. 183) stated after Howard’s fourth election win in 2004: ‘John Howard’s greatest legacy for the position of Australian prime minister is unlikely to be viewed in terms of policy development but, rather, the language with which he addressed and sought to influence Australian society’. This observation of Dryenfurth is supported by the findings of this research into the examination of Howard’s communications style and media strategy.
**CONCLUSIONS**

**Howard’s media appearances**

Despite Howard’s extensive media experience and his capability as a media performer, he would practice prior to fronting tough political interviews: ‘I would go through in my own mind and I would have a brainstorming session with senior staff before major news interviews’. Howard rarely made a mistake whilst being interviewed. Mitchell on 3AW said Howard was ‘very, very, very hard to crack’. Speers said he found ‘it was very rare that he (Howard) would be caught out’. Howard’s attention to preparation was highlighted by Phillipps (2002, p. 21), who contends that two trends account for the resurgence of media advising over the past two decades: first, a more incisive and belligerent journalism, and second, a more sophisticated approach on the part of politicians in seeking to influence the media (see also Schultz, 1998). Howard agreed that ‘every successful politician has to have some thespian qualities, no doubt about that’, noting ‘you need a certain sense that you are on a stage’. Hajer suggested (2009, p. 9), in the age of mediatisation, ‘new actors get easy access to the stage’. Howard was certainly not a new actor, entrenched, and very effectively so, in traditional media formats.

**Howard’s ill-disciplined media performances**

Lloyd (1992, p. 115) suggested prime ministers accepted the principal responsibility for the presentation of the federal government in the media, and for the conduct of formal relations with the media. Howard accepted this responsibility and was willing to admit there were a few media performance lapses during his term as prime minister. Howard described these as ‘ill-discipline’. One occurred on his 61st birthday on 26 July 2000 when, in a radio interview, he stated ‘if the party wants me to lead it to another election, which will be at the end of next year, I am happy to do so’. The second became know as ‘The Athens Declaration’ on Friday, 29 April 2005 when Howard was interviewed in Athens and stated ‘he had beaten Beazley twice in the past’, and when asked if he could beat him a third time, he (Howard) shot back: ‘Yes, I would hope to try’. Both caused the Howard press office and the ministry a great deal of angst.
Howard’s Communication Strategies

Howard’s overarching media strategy

Choice of medium was a significant element of John Howard’s media strategy. Howard was unique among former prime ministers and his own ministry, in using talkback radio as his main form of political communication to speak directly to the Australian electorate. Many of the participants interviewed for this thesis identified this mastery of the radio medium as a hallmark of his prime ministership. According to Gilchrist (2001, p. 6) Howard ‘used talkback radio more than any predecessor’. Howard admitted ‘I deliberately increased my use of talkback radio as a way of directly communicating with people, and I never made any bones about it, because if you do a news conference in Canberra, you are utterly at the mercy of the individual journalist or news editor as to what gets in a newspaper, is on air or is on the box’. Howard felt ‘one of the great virtues of talkback radio was that it obliged you to explain what you were doing in language that the everyday person could understand in a conversation’. Howard also used his media appearances to solicit the views of commentators and talkback callers on his government’s decisions and policy proposals. On talkback radio, Megalogenis felt ‘John Howard saw talkback as a form of electronic focus group’.

Howard used talkback radio as an effective media strategy to combat his frustration with newspaper and television editors and journalists who he said edited and filtered political commentary. Howard also knew the flow-on impact of a live radio interview, particularly if television cameras were in the studio. Usually a grab from Howard’s session with Mitchell on 3AW Melbourne would feature in the evening news of each of the three commercial television networks, plus the ABC. Howard also understood what caused the rise in popularity of talkback radio was the mobile phone, a fact highlighted by Gould (2007), which was coupled with increased ownership of these devices and longer commuter times. Radio remained a prime medium even though internet communication became more accessible. Ewart (2010, p. 7) suggested ‘the ability to access radio on the Internet means that talkback is available to a much larger audience, thereby widening its participatory scope’.
CONCLUSIONS

The prime minister’s press office considered *The 7.30 Report* an agenda setter, with host Kerry O’Brien a particularly formidable interviewer. Howard himself admitted to me he spent time preparing for an interview with O’Brien, and other ministers highlighted the importance of the program to the dissemination of information on their respective portfolios.

**The Howard government’s internal communications strategy**

Coordination and consultation were hallmarks of Howard’s internal media and communications strategy. The fine-grained analysis of interviews with members of John Howard’s office provided valuable insights into the media practices of the prime minister’s office. During parliamentary sitting weeks, meetings of Howard’s Leadership Group were held daily at 8.30 am, to discuss the issues of the day and the tactics to deal with them. Costello said ‘the big things at the Leadership Group meetings would be how to handle the media of the day, how to handle question time’.

The overwhelming commentaries on the prime minister’s office were of professionalism and competency. Several interviewees suggested it was one of the most effective in Australia’s political history. Howard surrounded himself with a highly experienced media team and an excellent chief of staff in Arthur Sinodinos. Staff stability was also a feature of the press office, with Tony O’Leary serving in that role for the entire period of the Howard government. The prime minister’s press office also coordinated ministers’ and departmental press secretary meetings. Logan said ‘we had weekly meetings in the conference room, M6, next to the prime minister’s press office there, where we discussed strategy, tactics and messages … attended by all press secretaries in the Howard Ministry’.

**Howard’s control over ministers**

The evidence contained in this thesis confirmed neither Howard nor his office exercised absolute control over ministers’ offices. The ministers of the Howard government interviewed for this thesis included Kevin Andrews, Tony Abbott, Andrew Robb, Nick Minchin, Peter Costello, Alexander Downer, and Christopher Pyne. Each of them described their differing relationships with the prime minister’s office; but most summed up their experience as Nelson did: ‘once John Howard made you a minister he basically left you alone’. This
conclusions

challenges recent Australian political communication literature that suggests the
intensification of media management (Barns, 2003; Lucy & Mickler, 2006). Whilst there was
coordination of ministers’ media appearances and messaging, the evidence obtained from this
research did not point to sustained control over ministerial communication: the exceptions
being crisis situations and, in particular, the “children overboard” affair (see Chapter 8).

Howard’s control over public information

Hamilton and Maddison (2007, p112) suggested Howard ‘ushered in a decade of
unprecedented executive control over political communication’. Many of those I interviewed,
who were close to Howard and his government, contended that the interpretation of ‘political
cover-ups’ or the threats to ‘withdraw funding if groups spoke out against the government’
was based on people's own political stance, and whether they were personally impacted by
government decisions. It was beyond the scope of this thesis to interview Howard’s political
opposition or minority groups that may have been disadvantaged under some of the Howard
government’s policies.

A number of factors suggest there was a tightening of information control during the 1996-
2007 period. Frustration at the Howard government’s management of their political message
led to the formation of Australia's “Right to Know”, a coalition of 12 major media companies
in May 2007 who commissioned Irene Moss (2007), to produce a “Report of the Independent
Audit into the State of Free Speech in Australia”. The report of this coalition refers to the
campaign against the multitude of Acts of Parliament and legislation designed to prohibit
access to government documents by the media and general public, with many of these laws
being introduced by the Howard government. Related to this is the hard line Howard took on
government department leaks. Ester in Hamilton and Maddison (2007, p103, p179) wrote
extensively on how the Howard government endeavoured to stop bureaucratic leaks,
particularly by referring such incidences to the Australian Federal Police. Ester also found
that off the record briefs virtually disappeared and leaks evaporated following this approach.
The strategy behind the development of key messages

Liberal Party polling assisted Howard to craft key, well targeted messages during his prime ministership. Goot (2005, p189) stated that ‘political leaders who pay too little attention to public opinion are accused of being “arrogant”, of not being “in touch”, or of “not listening”’. Howard’s use of polling research was critical to the Coalition’s formulation of key messages and slogans. Loughnane said focus group research ‘would drive the messaging, so it was more strategic, and then John Howard would toss findings around, and then he would set on his own form of words’. Howard’s election slogan in 1996 was ‘for all of us’, a clever line ‘aimed predominately at middle Australia’ (Brett, 2005). Megalogenis made the observation that ‘the 1998 election campaign, the 2001 election campaign and 2004 election campaigns, he (Howard) was able to reduce to single issues, the 1998 tax reform, 2001 border protection, and 2004 interest rates’.

These punchy themes, accompanied by snappy messages, were the cornerstone of a disciplined approach to media commentary, developed as part of the overarching communications strategy. Despite the preparation of key messages Howard often spoke without notes: ‘I wasn’t big on … being scripted. I tended to think about the sort of things I would say … it would just come to me as I spoke’. In a recent speech to the National Press Club, Howard (2014b) spoke without notes for over 15 minutes and stated ‘we sometimes lose the capacity to argue the case … we sometimes think it’s sufficient to utter slogans. In truth, in politics you need both slogans and arguments’.

Howard on the use of ‘plausible deniability’ and his honesty

Throughout his time as prime minister, Howard was accused by commentators and political opponents of employing a number of tactics to maintain the upper hand of the strategic communication battle. One of those was referred to as “plausible deniability” (Stewart, 2008) (see also Chapter 5). In regard to Howard’s honesty and integrity, the Children Overboard affair was the most criticised and controversial event of Howard’s prime ministership, according to those interviewed for this thesis. Chapter 8 detailed the varying viewpoints on the position Howard took, some suggesting Howard was ‘misinformed’ by public servants rather than Howard himself being ‘misleading’. Having interviewed many of those involved in this incident, even those considered to be Howard supporters, on this occasion some did
feel Howard was not being totally forthright about what he knew. Did Howard ever lie? O’Brien explored this with Howard in his March 2006 interview on The 7.30 Report. On being asked whether ‘you’re not a good liar’ Howard responded ‘(I’m) a very bad one … I don’t convincingly lie as Hugh (Mackay) says. I really don’t’ (O’Brien, 2006). There are politicians who stretch the truth, spin, back flip on promises, or blatantly lie, and there are countless examples of this behaviour exposed by the media (Kitney, 2004). This is why politicians are held in such low regard by the voting public. In the research for this thesis there were those who disagreed with Howard’s stance and, or, explanations on issues, some calling him a liar. Many other participants felt Howard was a genuine, honest and forthright man of great integrity. From a political communications standpoint, history will often judge a politician’s honesty, however the public has to judge political statements based on face value, supported by verifiable facts.

**Agenda setting, mediatisation of politics and the impact of new technologies**

The Howard era saw an increase in the intensity of political reporting. On reflecting on the 24 hour news cycle, Paul Kelly (2006 (b)) felt ‘it is the brand of politics that is transforming governance. Winning each 24-hour political cycle demands a flexible yet focused media message and a “rapid response”. Howard’s office and the apparatus of government are geared to these political demands’. In an interview for this thesis Howard said: ‘that’s true’. Howard articulated the importance of influencing the media agenda, saying ‘a prime minister can always shape the agenda if he or she is talking sense and is producing good policy, because the media will always respond to good policy’. Hjarvard (2007) stated ‘modern politics comes to be centred on the manipulative struggle between journalists, politicians, and media advisors’. These findings highlight the intensity of his strategic battle to maintain control over the news agenda (see also McNair 2011, p. 48). This became apparent as the Coalition was not able to influence the media agenda in 2007 as it had done in previous years, and it didn’t take full advantage of new technology in the 2007 election campaign.

It was also apparent from the interview material collated and analysed, that Prime Minister Howard did not have an overarching strategy to deal with new media technology platforms, ones that intensified the speed of political reporting. In fact, Howard by his own admission, never had a computer on his desk, and only occasionally may have used one at The Lodge. Despite Howard’s slow uptake of new media, Megalogenis said ‘you could probably have
CONCLUSIONS

Howard as the first multimedia prime minister that we had’. Megalogenis was reflecting on Howard making the transition from print and commercial television to talkback radio, and asMegalogenis observed ‘almost carpet bombing by transcript and by policy document’. Howard’s approach to monitoring the media did not alter over his eleven and a half years in office despite the changes in technology platforms that emerged around him, particularly in the latter stages of his prime ministership.

Howard was a traditionalist, and a great media performer within traditional media settings. Hajer (2009, p. 9) suggested political leaders ‘must be performers in order to be persuasive in our mediatised environment’ and Howard did, indeed, master the mediums of radio and television, in order to communicate his political message. As an example, he conducted his radio appearances as he had always done, but, according to 3AW’s Neil Mitchell, became more comfortable with the radio talkback format as time went on. Although Hajer (2009, p. 9) states the mediatised age has ‘reordered the political landscape’, this thesis suggests that individual political leaders can resist or adapt to these changing environments. Howard was a politician who did not conform either to the logic of new media platforms, or to the new formats that emerged. Howard’s strategy was not to embrace new technology but to work with it. Howard understood the logic of this new medium and the 24/7 expectations of the new technological age, but engaged with it in a fashion that matched his traditional approach to media, one he had successfully adopted since entering politics some three decades before.

Labor Opposition Leader Rudd seized on the opportunity social media platforms provided. Labor used the new social media platforms effectively, highlighting a stark difference between both leaders: Howard a conservative “old school” politician who uses AM radio, compared with Rudd, a new, fresh Labor leader in tune with modern social media technology and using it to engage the electorate. Howard’s venture into YouTube was described as a failure by many participants interviewed for this thesis, as he approached his appearances on this new communications platform as he would a conventional television interview. Howard maintained his appearances in mainstream media, however declining appearances on programs such as Rove Live on Network Ten, a lighthearted show with experienced comedians as panellists and interviewers, a format not suited to Howard’s media persona. For the same reason he did not appear on certain FM radio station programs. When relating this to the mediatisation of politics theory, Howard did not expose himself to new media formats that he considered were inappropriate for his own style, and as a very competent media performer, news outlets accepted

228
Howard for what he was; a conservative politician with a consistency of language and style, an “ordinary bloke” that had been the hallmark of his communication persona as prime minister. One of the conclusions of this thesis is that the personal attributes and overall communication strategy of a political leader are more important than adapting to a particular media logic.

Howard himself did not feel his reluctance to embrace these new media platforms impacted on the 2007 election result. The election campaign itself was described as ‘the YouTube election’ (Macnamara, 2008), but Costello felt in the take up of new technology ‘the Liberal Party was pretty slow’. Howard felt:

The decision to launch policies on YouTube, a different medium now … that was just a natural progression. That was a … suggestion, strategy, tactic whatever you want to call it put to me by my press office and I thought it was very sensible. I don’t know (if it worked), we lost the election so I don’t think we lost the election because of our media strategy.

This thesis also concludes that this lack of personal exposure to social media impacted on Howard’s ability to read the political winds in his final term and his loss of traction as the year 2007 drew to a close. This thesis has also found that long term governments face risks when adopting new technologies. According to Megalogenis: ‘the longer they're in power the greater the risk that they miss what the next tool is, because they then become comfortable with the habit of power and comfortable with the habit of using the tools that got them to power’. This finding supports some of the propositions found in the literature on the mediatisation of politics and adapting to the logic of the media.

**Howard’s strategic approach to political crises and the challenges of 2007**

Howard was well versed in handling crisis situations. Sinodinos noted:

When they became crisis issues … he was never one to shirk from the work that needed to be done. And that was particularly when there was a crisis in a particular area that had become important … to the government’s agenda or survival and then he would throw himself wholeheartedly into it.
As the 2007 election drew closer Walter and Strangio (2007, p. 16) noted ‘Howard’s instinct to control, has, if anything, grown more frenzied as he contemplates power slipping away’.

With the Children Overboard affair and the war in Iraq, it appeared the government was unable to maintain its established strategic communications approach to these issues because events were moving at such a rapid rate. Loughnane said of these two issues: ‘additional information kept coming and so I don’t believe in either case there was any suggestion of cover up or anything like that … people wish to believe there’s a conspiracy and the reality (is) … there’s no conspiracy’. As the increasing pace of news creates urgency for media outlets to secure comments from political actors immediately; it creates false deadlines as the media relentlessly compete to be “first” with a breaking story. This suggests that the inability of a government to adapt to changing media routines and logics can have significant political impacts.

Howard’s end

Howard himself realised that he faced enormous hurdles in 2007 to win a fifth term in office. He attributes the media with a great deal of influence in his government’s demise, saying:

> And the media, by and large, decided in 2007 that … I’d been there a long time, they were getting thoroughly bored with me and I suppose sections of the public were getting bored with me as well, and they thought (Kevin) Rudd (Labor Leader December 2006–June 2010) was the answer.

Howard however said ‘we didn’t lose because of a critical media … I don’t blame the media for our loss’. McNair (2011, p. 67) noted that the media and journalists ‘provide platforms for politicians to make their views known to the public, but also in judging and critiquing the variety of political viewpoints in circulation’, and the media reflected the mood of much of the Australian electorate. Howard also lost his authority and ability to control the media and political agenda in 2007, and according to Van Onselen ‘Howard’s office would be very frustrated with what ministers were doing without the script’, a shot at those departing from pre-determined messaging as a lack of discipline emerged in government ranks.

In 2007, Howard himself admitted the electorate had just turned off listening to the Liberal Party policy agenda, a major reason why they lost the election. Abjorensen (2008, p. 176) said ‘it is an inescapable fact that he (Howard) has dominated Australian political space in a
way not seen since Robert Menzies was in his prime’. Howard was determined as ever to win the 2007 election to the very end, saying at the National Press Club lunch on Thursday 22 November, two days before polling day, ‘I’m not going to hypothesise about defeat, OK?’

In reflecting on Howard’s prime ministership, what has emerged is a picture of a prime minister who described himself as an ‘ordinary man’ with, what many interview participants described, as impressive leadership abilities. The focus on Howard’s communication style, as it related in particular to his media appearances, revealed a man somewhat lacking in charisma or dynamism, but devastatingly effective in connecting with his constituents, speaking in plain simple language, using radio talkback shows frequently to put his government’s case directly to the Australian people. Those interviewed for this research, including some of the Prime Minister’s severest critics, and members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, radio and television interviewers, political commentators and journalists agreed Howard was an impressive media performer, a good communicator, a man not afraid to tackle issues head-on publicly and maintain his strongly held beliefs in the face of often fierce opposition. Howard dominated the government, and in his public appearances his strength of conviction, very good memory, and tenacity made him a formidable opponent. There were times during his media interviews when Howard was not as forthcoming as many would have liked. There was his evasiveness on occasions, his intransigence on social issues many saw as a major flaw, and his determination to fight to the very end when all around him were calling for change. The 2007 election year was one of high political drama with the media forensically examining every Howard government manoeuvre. Ultimately, the government fell, but Howard himself stayed true to his convictions and his media appearances and public utterances were as always “on message” and delivered in the style the Australian public had become accustomed to. The fact was the public in 2007 were no longer listening and even for a communicator as experienced as Howard, the end of a long era in government had arrived.
What the Howard era can teach future Australian governments’.

We have seen major communications issues facing both the Labor and Liberal governments’ following Howard’s loss in 2007. This thesis does not explore these matters post 2007, but makes the following brief observations based on the findings of this research. The Rudd, Gillard and Abbott governments’ have all had issues in articulating some of their policy positions, and coordinating various ministerial responses to controversial initiatives. Apart from a commitment to regularly consulting with caucus, there are other lessons for government spokespeople on Howard’s approach to communications and media management and the coordination of this messaging across the ministry and the Canberra bureaucracy.

The lessons in relation to political communications: talk in language the general public can understand, don’t use spin, or espouse rehearsed lines in a robotic fashion. Have a willingness to face tough interviews with professional commentators such as Leigh Sales on the ABC’s 7.30 and be prepared to debate controversial issues. As chief spokesperson, a prime minister should be able to summarise complex policy initiatives to allow electors to assess the government’s suggested stance on important issues facing the nation. There must be a willingness to be consistent in communicating political messages and policies so the electorate understands what a government, and the prime minister, stands for.

Media management lessons: A government requires a strong “leadership group” that determines strategy and tactic on key media issues on a daily basis, particularly when Parliament meets, Proper coordination, not control, of media appearances and announcements will maximise media coverage. A culture of trust should prevail where there is a willingness to allow Minister’s of the Government to speak to the media without the necessity to seek approval from the prime minister’s office. A professional communications and media team must be installed within the Prime Minister’s Office, with experience and knowledge of the logic of the media, and how to embrace new and emerging technological platforms.

The coordination of messaging lessons: having a system that ensures decisions of the leadership group are communicated immediately to communications and media teams, and to the wider ministry and MP’s. Ensuring the Prime Minister has a strong and effective Press Secretary able to coordinate government wide communications and deal appropriately with key media players.
## Appendix 1

### Interviews Conducted

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1988–1991: Senior Writer *The Age*  
1992–1996: Senior Writer *Canberra Times*  
2001–2010: Political Commentator News Corp  
2002–2004: Tutor University of Canberra  
Former Political Science lecturer at ANU’s School of Social Sciences. Political advisor, speechwriter and corporate communications editor |
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<tr>
<td>Ayers</td>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>03/10/2008</td>
<td>1988–1998: Secretary of the Department of Defence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>01/09/2008</td>
<td>1997–2000: Senior Advisor (part-time) to John Howard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2000–2002: Senior Advisor (full-time) to John Howard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunden</td>
<td>Nigel</td>
<td>16/10/2008</td>
<td>2006–2008: Senior Advisor to Federal Defence Minister Brendan Nelson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Former Associate Editor of <em>The Herald Sun</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2001–2011: Panellist on ABC’s <em>Insiders</em> Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Previous Asia Correspondent for News Ltd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Radio commentator, blogger and television host.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

234
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Additional Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campbell</td>
<td>Alastair</td>
<td>21/02/14</td>
<td>Via Email response from London 1997–2003: Director of Communications and Strategy for UK Prime Minister Tony Blair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassidy</td>
<td>Barrie</td>
<td>05/05/2011</td>
<td>2001–: Host of ABC television's <em>Insiders</em> program Former National Correspondent for <em>The 7.30 Report</em> and Correspondent for <em>The Australian</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Name       | Gary Dawson | 25/03/2009 | 1995–1998: Media Advisor to the ACT Chief Minister Kate Carnell  
|           |             |           | 1998–1999: Director, Economics ACT Chief Minister's Department  
|           |             |           | 1999–2004: Senior Advisor in the Prime Minister Howard’s Office, serving the PM's Press Office  
| Name       | Alexander Downer | 05/12/2008 | 1996–2007: Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs  
|           | Tony Eggleton | 03/10/2008 | 1975–1990: Federal Director of the Liberal Party of Australia and Campaign Director  
|           |             |           | 1997: Chief Executive for Australia's program to celebrate the Centenary of Federation  
|           |             |           | 1999: Editorial board of Foreign Affairs  
|           |             |           | 2002: Member of the Australian Government's Aid Advisory Council  
|           |             |           | 2002: Chairman C.E.W Bean Foundation  
| Name       | Paul Everingham | 15/10/2008 | 1978–1984: Chief Minister Northern Territory  
|           |             |           | 1984–1987: Federal Member for the Division of Northern Territory  
|           |             |           | 1997–2002: Senior Advisor within the Federal Government in the Finance, Industry and Resources portfolios, working with Ministers John Fahey and Nick Minchin  
<p>|           |             |           | 2003–2005: Executive Director of the Liberal Party in Western Australia |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Roles and Positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faulks</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>20/01/2009</td>
<td>1997–2007: Senior Advisor to Federal Government Ministers responsible for the portfolios of Education, Science and Training; Health and Ageing and Family Community Services as a Chief of Staff to the President of the Senate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazard</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>15/03/2009</td>
<td>1996–1999: Senior Media Advisor to Prime Minister John Howard</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2003–2004: Senior Advisor to Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2004–2007: Senior Advisor to Federal Treasurer Peter Costello</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1999: Chief Political Correspondent, <em>The Sydney Morning Herald</em></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2002: Political Columnist, <em>The Age</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2004: Political Editor and Bureau Chief, <em>The Age</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>Clive</td>
<td>14/01/2009</td>
<td>1994–1997: Senior Lecturer in Public Policy ANU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1993–2008: Founder and Executive Director of the Australian Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1997–2002: Fellow in Public Policy ANU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2007: Co-author of <em>Silencing Dissent: How the Australian Government is Controlling Public Opinion and Stifling Debate</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Harmer | Jeffrey | 16/10/2009 | 1996: Deputy Secretary of the Department of Social Security  
1998–2003: Managing Director of the Health Insurance Commission  
2004–2010: Secretary of the Department of Family and Community Services |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hawke | Allan | 27/01/2009 | 1996–1999: Secretary of the Department of Transport and Regional Services  
1999–2002: Secretary of the Department of Defence  
2003–2005: High Commissioner to New Zealand  
2006–2008: Chancellor of the Australian National University |
| Henry | Ken | 27/08/2012 | 2001–2011: Secretary of the Department of The Treasury |
| Houston | Angus | 02/04/2009 | 1996: Royal College of Defence Studies in London  
1997–1999: Chief of Staff, Headquarters Australian Theatre (HQAST)  
1999–2000: Commander Integrated Air Defence System  
17 August 2000: Head Strategic Command  
4 July 2005: Air Chief Marshal and Chief of the Australian Defence Force |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Howard   | John    | 14/11/2008 | 1974–2007: Member for Bennelong  
1975–1977: Minister for Business and Consumer Affairs  
1977: Minister for Special Trade Negotiations  
1996–2007: Prime Minister of Australia |
| Ingram   | Steve   | 07/12/2009 | 1996–1998, 1999–2007: Mostly Media Advisor, but at times also Policy Advisor and Chief of Staff to Federal Minister Philip Ruddock |
| Jones    | Alan    | 11/05/2010 | 1988–2002: 2UE Sydney Breakfast Host  
2002–2GB: Sydney Breakfast Host |
| Kelly    | Fran    | 18/02/2010 | 1993: Australian politics, working for ten years in various roles within the Canberra press gallery  
To 1997: Chief Political Correspondent and Bureau Chief ABC.  
1997: ABC Radio National's Breakfast program as the political correspondent.  
2001: Political editor for ABC TV's The 7.30 Report  
2003: Overseas posting as the ABC’s Europe Correspondent based in London  
2005: ABC Radio National Breakfast |
<p>| Kelly    | Paul    | 10/02/2009 | 1996–Present: Editor-at-large, The Australian |
| Leahy    | Peter   | 29/01/2009 | 2002–2007: Chief of Army |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position/Role</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>2003–Present: Federal Director of the Liberal Party of Australia</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2004–2007: National Campaign Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mackerras</td>
<td>Malcolm Australian psephologist (one who studies elections), commentator, author and lecturer on Australian and American politics. Australian Defence Force Academy. Developer of the MacKerras Pendulum, a table of federal electorates in order of two party majority.</td>
<td>12/09/2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddison</td>
<td>Sarah 2007: Author of <em>Silencing Dissent</em></td>
<td>10/02/2009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marr</td>
<td>David 2002–2004: host of the ABC television's <em>Media Watch</em></td>
<td>10/12/2009</td>
<td>Co-author of <em>Dark Victory</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feature Writer, <em>Sydney Morning Herald</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2004–2010: Chair and Chief Executive of the National Water Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Prefix</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1999: Senior Writer <em>The Australian</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Middleton</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>19/01/2009</td>
<td>1995–present: Chief Political Correspondent SBS Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Newspaper columnist (<em>The West Australian, The Age</em> and <em>Sun Herald, The Canberra Times</em>, and <em>The Canberra Times</em>, and radio commentator (6PR, 2GB, ABC radio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Panellist on the ABC’s <em>Insiders</em> program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2003: Political Editor <em>The Australian</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minchin</td>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>16/03/2009</td>
<td>1996–1997: Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1997–1998: Minister Assisting the Prime Minister</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2001–2007: Minister for Finance and Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>13/10/2009</td>
<td>1987–Present: 3AW Radio Host (from 1990 host of the station’s morning program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Description</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris Grahame</td>
<td>1996–1997: Political Advisor to John Howard 1997: Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister (May–Sept)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parry-Okeden Ian</td>
<td>1977: Established Media Monitors Australia Former Sydney radio announcer and late night talkback host on 2GB/2UE 1972–1986</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Leary Tony</td>
<td>1996–2007: Prime Minister Howard’s Press Secretary</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peake Ross</td>
<td>The Canberra Times Political Reporter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Positions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jan 2002–2004: Australian Public Service Commissioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2005: Head of a Taskforce on the delivery of Health and Aged Care Services for Prime Minister John Howard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyne</td>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>15/04/2009</td>
<td>2003–2004: Parliamentary Secretary to Minister for Family and Community Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2004–2007: Parliamentary Secretary to Minister for Health and Ageing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2007–2007: Assistant Minister for Health and Ageing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21 March 2007–3 December 2007: Minister for Ageing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reith</td>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>14/07/2009</td>
<td>17 March 1996–18 July 1997: Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11 March 1996–18 July 1997: Minister for Industrial Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Positions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2006: Parliamentary Secretary with ministerial responsibilities for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.  
2007: Minister for Vocational and Further Education |
2003: Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Reconciliation  
30 January 2001–26 November 2001: Minister for Reconciliation and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs  
2001–2003: Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs  
| Scrafton| 11/12/2009 | 2000–2001: Defence Minister John Moore Chief of Staff  
2001: Senior Advisor to Defence Minister Peter Reith |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
1997–1998: Secretary Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs  
1998–2001: Secretary Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs  
2001–2002: Secretary Department of Education, Science and Training |
| Shackleton | David     | 12/02/2009 1996: Director General, Information Management, Defence Acquisition Organisation  
July 1997: The first Director General, Command and Support Systems, responsible for development and acquisition of all of Defence's major command and intelligence information support systems and major operational headquarters.  
July 1998: Rear Admiral  
July 1999: Vice Admiral and Chief of Navy  
July 2002: Retired |
| Shergold | Peter      | 15/10/2008 1995–1998: Commissioner of the Australian Public Service  
1998–2002: Secretary of the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business  
2003–2007: Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sinodinos</td>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>29/08/2008</td>
<td>1997–2006: Chief of Staff to Prime Minister John Howard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2001–2002: Australian Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia during the time of the 2002 Bali Bombings  
2002–2006: Secretary of the Department of Defence |
| Speers     | David                                                                    | 14/04/2009       | 2000–present: Political Editor, Sky News  
| Starick    | Paul                                                                     | 30/03/2009       | *The Adelaide Advertiser's* chief reporter. He covered the 2004 federal election campaign and has been *The Advertiser's* chief-of-staff, senior writer, science writer and environment writer.  
Deputy Editor, *The Advertiser* |
<p>| Starr      | Dale                                                                     | 28/01/2009       | 2004–2007: Communications and Media Advisor (6 months) for Senator Ian Campbell, Minister for the Environment and Heritage               |
| Stock      | Sarah                                                                    | 02/12/2009       | 2007: Senior Media Advisor to Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock                                                                     |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sullivan</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>09/10/2009</td>
<td>1988–1999: Deputy Secretary at the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1999–2002: Chief Executive Officer of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2001–2004: Secretary of the Department for Family and Community Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2004–2008: Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and President of the Repatriation Commission and Chair of the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1999–2004: co-host of 666 ABC Canberra's breakfast program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2005: producer of the morning program on 774 ABC Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2006: Chief Political Editor for ABC radio’s current affairs section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Role</td>
</tr>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Onselen Peter</td>
<td>2004–2011: Associate Professor in Politics and Government at Edith Cowan University Western Australia Briefly an advisor to Tony Abbott, Minister for Workplace Relations in the Howard government Author and media commentator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagner Chris</td>
<td>2006–2008: Federal Attorney General’s Department, Civil and Criminal Justice Division. Seconded twice over this period to work as Media Advisor in the office of the Federal Minister for Justice and Customs David Johnston</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walsh Kerry-Anne</td>
<td>Senior journalist for 25 years in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery 2003–2009: Sydney <em>Sun-Herald</em>’s political correspondent in Canberra Columnist for several local and overseas papers, a producer of TV programs, and a panellist on the ABC’s <em>Insiders</em> program and on Sky Agenda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warhurst John</td>
<td>1993–2008: Professor of Political Science, School of Social Sciences in the College of Arts and Sciences at the Australian National University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Details</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Hugh</td>
<td>01/09/2008</td>
<td>1995–2000: Deputy Secretary for Strategy, Department of Defence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2001–2004: Director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute at the Australian National University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Professor of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2

### Annual Staff List of Prime Minister Howard’s Press Office 1996–2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Apr-96</th>
<th>Sep-96</th>
<th>Feb-97</th>
<th>Sep-97</th>
<th>Nov-97</th>
<th>Aug-98</th>
<th>Aug-99</th>
<th>Mar-00</th>
<th>Aug-00</th>
<th>May-01</th>
<th>Mar-02</th>
<th>Sep-02</th>
<th>Mar-03</th>
<th>Sep-03</th>
<th>Apr-04</th>
<th>Apr-05</th>
<th>Apr-06</th>
<th>Jun-06</th>
<th>Jul-07</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tony O'Leary</td>
<td>x x x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Press Secretary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anthony Benscher</td>
<td>x x x</td>
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<td>Media Advisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willie Herron</td>
<td>x x x</td>
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<td>x x</td>
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<td>Assistant Media</td>
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<td>Advisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allison Brown</td>
<td>x x x</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Officer</td>
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Taken from Parliament House Communications Directories for 38th–41st Parliaments: Parliament House Library Canberra.

Note: April 1996 was produced as an 'interim' directory’, so lists may not have been complete.
Appendix 3

Research Questions Asked

Public Servants: current and former

1. How are media briefing papers drafted for the Minister’s office within the Department?
2. What happened to these briefings once prepared?
3. If the Department didn’t issue media statements or act as the media point-of-contact, who did?
4. How do you feel the media portrayed the Department’s position on the issues you were involved with or had knowledge of?
5. Did you feel the Government’s ultimate public position on these issues reflected the Department’s?
6. Can you comment on how technology changes over the years impacted on the way you collected and disseminated information specifically for media use?
7. What level of media monitoring did you utilise and how did the use of this facility impact on your reactions to issues, on the Department’s decision making and ultimately what was communicated to the wider Australian community?

Press Gallery Journalists/editors of newspapers/political correspondents

1. Can you outline the role of the Prime Minister’s Press Office as you see it?
2. What was their involvement in the following: Tampa, Children Overboard Affair, Private Koveo’s death, the Australian Wheat Board inquiry, the War in Iraq, Terrorism related issues?
3. How would you describe the role the Prime Minister’s Press Office played in managing these situations?
4. How would you describe the Prime Minister’s Office (and Press Office) relationship with the media and journalists?
5. How would you describe the overall involvement the Prime Ministers’ Press Office had in developing messages provided to the media from other government departments?
6. In your opinion what impact does this media/information control have over a democratic society?
Academics/authors

1. What was the overarching findings of your research?
2. What observations have you made on the operation of the Prime Minister’s Press Office?
3. What were the major frustrations you unearthed among public servants in regard to the Prime Minister’s office and Press Office (if any)?
4. What do you think the impact on democracy could be with the centralised control of government departments’ media messages?
5. Do you think the Howard Government listened and responded to public concern about the free flow of information from departments that surrounded incidents such as Tampa, Children Overboard Affair, Private Kovco’s death, the Australian Wheat Board inquiry, the War in Iraq, Terrorism related issues?
6. What responsibility do individual government departments have to inform the public?
7. What impact would centralising the ‘control of the message’ through the Prime Minister’s office have?

Former staff members of the Media Unit

1. What did you see as your primary role?
2. Describe how the Press Office operated?
3. What involvement did the Press Office have in the following: Tampa, Children Overboard Affair, Private Kovco’s death, the Australian Wheat Board inquiry, the War in Iraq, Terrorism related issues?
4. What other issues did the Press Office have a watching brief over?
5. What directions did the Press Office, or the Prime Minister’s office, give to departments on how they should respond to media requests for information on these incidents?
6. What directions did the Press Office, or the Prime Minister’s office, give to the responsible Minister’s office on how they should respond to media requests for information on these incidents?
7. Do you believe the role the Press Office played was effective in ensuring the accuracy and consistency of the government’s message in relation to these incidents?
8. Is there a legitimate role for a more centralised approach to the dissemination of government information to the public?
9. What part did media monitoring play during your term in the Press Office?
10. How were new technologies utilised as part of the Press Office overall communications strategy?
11. In your opinion what impact does the centralisation of information control have on a democratic society?
Politicians/Government Advisors

1. How would you describe your relations with the Prime Minister’s Office?
2. How do you think the government handled the following incidents: Tampa, Children Overboard Affair, Private Kovco’s death, the Australian Wheat Board inquiry, the War in Iraq, Terrorism related issues?
3. How would you describe the role of the Prime Minister’s Press Office?
4. What specific examples are there where the Prime Minister’s office has asked for information to be passed through them prior to public release?
5. When the department issued statements to the media, or a spokesperson fronted the media, were there times when the Prime Minister’s office or Press Office reacted to this coverage?
6. What examples are there where the media have published/broadcast stories that vary from the advice the department has given?
7. Was the department ever pre-empted by the Prime Minister’s office or Press Office on stories that the department would normally handle?
8. In your opinion what impact does the centralisation of information control have over a democratic society?
9. What part did media monitoring play during your tenure?
10. How did you use new technologies as part of your overall communications strategy?
Appendix 4

Chronology: The Howard Years: 1996–2007

First Howard Term: 1996–1998

1996

On 2 March 1996 John Howard became the 25th Prime Minister of Australia. His election theme was “For All of Us”, and they secured a decisive 45 seat majority in Parliament. Howard quickly dismissed six departmental heads as the Treasurer Peter Costello announced a budget deficient of $9 billion, labelling this the Beazley Black Hole. On 28 April 1996 – in Tasmania the Port Arthur massacre occurred, where gunman Martin Bryant shot 35 people at this iconic tourist site, propelling John Howard to introduce uniform national gun laws banning all semi-automatic firearms across Australia. The move was vigorously opposed by many, and when Howard addressed a pro-gun meeting in Victoria, on 16 June 1996 in Sale, he wore a bullet proof vest, a measure recommended by the Australian Federal Police.

On 20 May 1996 Howard commenced his push to reform the Australian waterfront, a move squarely aimed at boosting productivity, a move apposed by the powerful Maritime Union of Australia. In August a violent demonstration erupted outside Parliament House Canberra as opposition to Howard’s proposed budget cuts and new Industrial Relations legislation mounted.

Newly elected Member of Parliament representing the seat of Oxley in Queensland, Pauline Hanson, delivered her controversial maiden speech on 10 September 1996 – stating “Australia is in danger of being swamped by Asians … who … have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate”. Howard refused to comment on her views, however many MPs were openly critical of Hanson’s stance, including many in the Coalition.

On 14 October Howard accepted the resignation of Victorian Senator Jim Short and Tasmanian Senator Brian Gibson the following day, over Ministerial impropriety in relation to conflict of interest concerning bank licences.
The year ended with the media speculating that the Government was prepared to use troops on the waterfront, and other harsh measures in order to deliver the reforms Howard was planning. These reports were denied by Industrial Relations Minister Peter Reith, Transport Minister John Sharp and Howard himself. The Workplace Relations Act was enacted on 31 December with the assistance of the Australian Democrats Leader Cheryl Kernot.

Just prior to that legislation, on 23 December the High Court of Australia handed down its decision on Wik. The very controversial ruling enraged many, including the Queensland Government and the National Farmers Federation, as the High Court said the grant of a pastoral lease does not confer exclusive possession, and native title therefore continues to coexist.

1997

The year commenced with another Ministerial resignation, that of NSW Senator Bob Woods on 3 February, for alleged improprieties in relation to expense claims.

Waterfront reform again dominated the headlines, and commenced with discussions taking place between Industrial Relations Minister Peter Reith, Transport Minister John Sharp and Stevedores heavyweights Patrick Stevedores and P&O, on the 12 March 1997. The focus was on how to implement changes and reform of work practices on the waterfront. On 21 April John Howard agreed to an ‘interventionist strategy’ Peter Reith and John Sharp had developed for implementing reform on the waterfront.

In responding to the High Court’s Wik decision, the Howard Government released ‘The Ten Point Plan’ on 28 April, and Howard and Deputy PM and Nationals Leader Tim Fischer, then travelled to Longreach on 17 May to address a rowdy crowd of 2000 where Tim Fischer said ‘The Ten Point Plan’ contained “bucketfuls of extinguishment,” and promises that pastoral leases would not be affected by native title claims.

Pauline Hanson launched her One Nation Party on 11 April and Prime Minister Howard on 8 May addressed the Australia-Asia Society in Sydney, taking the opportunity to finally criticise Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech attacking Asian migrants the indigenous Australians.
In May and June both Howard and Treasurer Peter Costello start to raise the prospect of introducing a GST, a commitment Howard had made not to do on 31 August the previous year saying “It’s (GST) off the agenda’ and “never ever”.

Prime Minister Howard addressed the Australian Reconciliation Convention, celebrating the 30th anniversary of the 1967 Aboriginal referendum, on 26 May 1997 in Melbourne. Howard lost his temper as delegates booed the PM, some standing and turning their backs as Howard shouted in defence of his Ten Point Plan.

In what the Labor Opposition, and many media outlets, described as Howard’s biggest backflip, the Prime Minister stated he would go the next election proposing the introduction of a GST, but providing generous tax cuts as compensation.

On 11 July the Western Australian MP for Forrest, Geoff Prosser, resigned due to Ministerial impropriety in relation to conflict of interest.

The Howard Government was hit with a number of additional Ministerial resignations in late September, a week which Howard described as ‘septem dies horribiles’ (seven days of horror). On 24 September two Minister’s tendered their resignation: Transport Minister John Sharp after being found guilty of breaching the Prime Minister’s Ministerial Code of Conduct relating to travel, as did Administrative Services Minister, David Jull. And on 26 September, Peter McGauran, Minister for Science and Technology, resigned for making false travel allowance claims, the whole affair labelled “travelgate”. Two of Howard’s staff also took a fall: Grahame Morris, Chief Political Advisor and office manager, Fiona McKenna, dismissed for supposedly covering up these travel rorts.

The Asian economic crisis hit on 23 October 1997, which wiped $10 billion off the Australian share market.

As the year drew to a close the Labor Opposition raised the formulation of ‘The Dubai Plan’ on 3 December, accusing the Howard Government of hatching a secret plan to recruit and train (in Dubai) a non-union workforce to work on the waterfront.

Finally the Kyoto Protocol was signed by Australia on 11 December but with the proviso that it is not bound by it, and in fact would be allowed to increase its greenhouse gas emissions beyond 2000.
1998

The Government hosted a Constitutional Convention in Old Parliament House on 2 February to explore the possibility of a referendum for an Australian republic, with John Howard succeeding in convincing delegates to give “majority support” for the republican model, that is appointing a President by a two thirds Parliamentary majority. The referendum was scheduled to be held in November 1999.

Reform burst onto the Melbourne waterfront on the evening of 7 April when non-unionists were brought in to replace Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members, with Patrick Stevedores Chief Executive Chris Corrigan, using security guards and dogs to remove waterfront workers from the docks. After a Federal Court decision on 22 April 1998 that found Patrick’s had “engaged in an unlawful conspiracy” Patrick’s had to reinstate its 1,400 sacked workers, which occurred on 5 May. At the same time the Government and Patrick’s were forced to negotiate a new workplace agreement with the MUA.

Pauline Hanson came to prominence again when Treasurer Peter Costello announced on 10 May he would place One Nation last on his How to Vote cards in his Victorian seat of Higgins. Prime Minister Howard decides the Government will make this preference decision on a seat-by-seat basis. In the Queensland election on 13 June 1998 Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party wins 11 seats and 22.67 per cent of the vote and Labor leader Peter Beattie is elected Premier

The Government launched their Coalition Tax Reform Package on 13 August that included a 10 per cent GST with the by-line: Tax Reform – Not a New Tax, A New Tax System”. Just over two weeks later on 30 August Howard calls an election for 3 October.

Despite exit polls predicting a loss for the government, John Howard wins a second term at the 3 October election, however his majority was reduced to 12 seats after it suffered a 4.6 per cent swing. One Nation attracted just under one million votes but Hanson did not win the new House of Representatives seat of Blair.

On 19 December Howard intervened in the East Timor/Indonesian self-determination debate by writing to Indonesian President, B.J. Habibie, suggesting he “negotiate directly with the East Timorese and consider the option of an act of self-determination after a substantial period of autonomy”.

1999

The year started with a focus still on East Timor, and the announcement that the Indonesian Government was concerned and ‘deeply regrets’ the Howard Government’s policy shift on East Timor, on 12 January. Later in January the Indonesian President agrees to a United Nations supervised ballot on independence for East Timor in August 1999. The resulting violence and upheaval in the country saw calls for Howard to install a peacekeeping force that would supervise the election ballot.

In May negotiations to secure the safe passage of the Government’s Tax Package, including the GST, finally succeeded. Independent Senator Brian Harradine refused to support it, but on 28 May Democrats Leader Meg Lees agrees to the tax package as long as basic food was exempt from the 10 per cent tax. Howard agrees to this demand.

John Howard, 26 August, introduced his ‘Motion of Reconciliation’ into Parliament, but refuses to offer a national apology, instead using the term “deep and sincere regret” for past injustices to Aborigines.

The East Timor situation flared up again after the 30 August vote for independence, after 21.5 per cent voted for autonomy and 78.5 per cent effectively voted for independence. Violence and carnage erupted. After Howard discussed a UN peacekeeping force for East Timor with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and US President Bill Clinton, on 12 September, Indonesia accepted a multinational peacekeeping force in East Timor. Australia committed 4,500 troops, and entered and occupying Dili on 20 September. The operation was known as ‘Interfet’ the International Force East Timor. By 4 October law and order had largely been restored.

The Republic referendum on 6 November saw 55 per cent vote against a republic; 45 per cent vote for a republic, thus the status quo remained. Howard had the previous week declared he would vote against a republic; after the vote Malcolm Turnbull, then Chairman of the Australian Republican Movement, said there is only one man to blame: “History will remember him for only one thing. He was the Prime Minister who broke a nation’s heart”.

263
2000

The Corroboree 2000, Reconciliation convention was held at the Sydney Opera House on 27 May 2000. The ‘Peoples Walk for Reconciliation’ across the Harbour Bridge, held as part of the event attracted 250,000 people, including Treasurer Peter Costello. Prime Minister John Howard opted not to walk across the bridge, and the media reported the PM directed his Cabinet not to walk also.

The GST legislation came into effect on 1 July 2000 amid anti GST protests.

John Howard also raised the issue of his retirement, suggesting to the ABC’s Phillip Clark that he could consider retiring when he was 63 or 64 causing leadership speculation to again become a major media issue for the Party.

Good news also came on 4 December with a report that a productivity lift on the waterfront had seen workers achieving 25 crane lifts per hour.

2001

February saw two state elections, with Labor taking Government in Western Australia and One Nation achieving 10 per cent of the popular vote, while in Queensland Labor increased its majority. The Liberals were under attack over the GST, the introduction of Business Activity Statements (BAS), One Nation’s growing influence and rising petrol prices. The Ryan by-election in Queensland on 17 March 2001 saw Labor take the seat formally occupied by former Defence Minister, John Moore.

Embarrassment for the Government on 1 May when a memo from Shane Stone, the Federal President of the Liberal Party, was leaked to Channel Nine’s Laurie Oakes. The explosive internal correspondence suggested the Liberal Party was out of touch, not listening and mean.

On 14 July the Liberal Party retained the seat of Aston in a Victorian by-election, with the Prime Minister suggesting his team is “back in the game”.

The Tampa issue erupted on 26-27 August 2001 when 438 Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers were rescued from a sinking Indonesian fishing vessel by a Norwegian container ship, MV Tampa. John Howard announced Australia would not accept these asylum seekers, and the SAS took control of the ship. This issue became a central focus of the 2001 election. On 29 August the Prime Minister then
introduced the Border Protection Bill giving Australia the right to ‘remove to the high seas those vessels and persons on board that have entered the territorial waters under Australian sovereignty contrary to our wishes’. As Labor opposed the Bill Opposition Leader Kym Beazley was accused of ‘having no ticker’, a damming label that haunted him through until the election.

The controversial Operation Relex began on 3 September 2001, with Royal Australian Navel vessels able to intercept and force asylum seeker boats back to their port of origin. The Pacific Solution then came into force after a deal brokered on 10 September between the Prime Minister of Nauru, Rene Harris, and Australia, was reached to house 1,000 asylum seekers on Nauru, including those on board the Tampa.

John Howard met US President George W Bush for the first time in Washington, on 10 September 2001, and signed a joint statement reaffirming the strength and the vitality of the bilateral relationship. The following day, 11 September 2001 Al-Qaeda attacked New York’s twin towers, and the Pentagon in Washington. Howard was one of the first allied leaders to pledge military support to the U.S. The events of that day had a major impact on the Prime Minister. Howard returned to Australia immediately and on 14 September 2001 invoked Article IV of the ANZUS Treaty for the first time in Australian history. Howard declared the terrorist strikes an attack on Australia, and the invocation of the treaty “demonstrates Australia’s steadfast commitment to work with the United States”.

Ansett Airlines collapsed on 14 September 2001, and on 18 September the Amended Border Protection Bill was reintroduced into Parliament with the Opposition supporting the amended Bill, and Kym Beazley then being accused of Flip Flopping.

Defence Minister Peter Reith announced his retirement on 27 September saying he would step down at the next election, which the Prime Minister announced on 5 October, would be held on 10 November.

The “Children Overboard” controversy began on 7 October 2001. As part of Operation Relex, HMAS Adelaide intercepts a boatload of asylum seekers. Information was communicated from Defence to the government that children had been thrown overboard. Over the coming days, dispute arose over the existence of photographs showing children being thrown overboard. On 10 October
Peter Reith released photographs purportedly showing children being thrown overboard but on the same day, Peter Reith’s office was advised there were doubts about the accuracy of the photos.

Prime Minister Howard was telephoned by US President George Bush on 17 October seeking Australia’s commitment to war in Afghanistan. Prime Minister committed ships, aircraft, an SAS detachment, and 1,550 military personnel were deployed. The deployment included two 707 aircraft refuellers, a 150-man SAS squadron, and an Orion aircraft. Twenty-six other countries also contributed forces.

On 18 October SIEV X sank (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel), drowning 352 asylum seekers. Forty one adults and 3 children survived.

John Howard travelled to Shanghai to attend APEC summit on 20-21 October 2001. He enjoyed photo opportunity with US President, George W Bush, while Indonesian President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, refused to meet him. John Howard also held discussions with PNG Prime Minister, Sir Mekere Morauta, to expand the PNG Manus Island camp to deal with the ever-growing number of asylum seekers.

The Liberal Party held their election launch on 28 October where John Howard made the statement “We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come”. This became the de facto slogan for the 2001 election campaign.

Acting Chief of Defence Force Angus Houston telephoned Peter Reith on 7 November, advising him there was nothing to suggest that women and children had been thrown into the water. Peter Reith did not take further action on the advice, and the government went to the polls defending the claim that children had been thrown overboard.

10 November 2001 – John Howard won an historic third term with a 14-seat majority and a 2.01 per cent two party preferred swing to the government.
Third Howard Term: 2001–2004

2002

In January detainees commenced hunger strikes and protests at the Woomera Detention Centre. This led to increased criticism and debate about the government’s mandatory detention policy. On 27 February Admiral Chris Barrie, Chief of the Defence Force, finally admitted there was no evidence that children were thrown overboard from a vessel in waters off Christmas Island on 7 October 2001.

David Hicks was interviewed along with Mamdouh Habib on 28 May at Camp X-Ray, Guantanamo Bay by ASIO, Federal Police and foreign affairs officials. Both men were suspected of al-Qaeda links.

Eighty Eight Australians were killed when bombs were detonated on 12 October 2002 at the Padi Bar and Sari Club in the tourist district of Kuta. On 17 October the Prime Minister attended a Memorial service at Kuta Beach.

The Senate Committee Inquiry into “A Certain Maritime Incident” (the 2001 Children Overboard controversy) released its report on 23 October and found, in a majority report, that then-Defence Minister Peter Reith “deceived the Australian people during the 2001 election campaign concerning the children overboard claims… The question of the extent of the Prime Minister’s knowledge of the false nature of the report that children were thrown overboard is a key issue in assessing the extent to which the Government, as a whole, wilfully misled the Australian people on the eve of the federal election”.

2003

Prime Minister Howard announced on 10 January that Australia would send troops to the Middle East for training with US and British forces, ahead of a possible war with Iraq. On 22 January the PM released details of the troop pre-deployment to the Persian Gulf: transport ship HMAS Kanimbla; two frigates; HMAS Anzac and HMAS Darwin; a 150 member Special Forces task group and a RAAF reconnaissance team - codenamed “Operation Bastille”. An AC Nielsen poll showed 62 per cent of respondents believed Australia should be involved in a conflict with Iraq only if approved by the UN.
Following a trip to the USA for discussions on the war in Iraq, Howard returned to huge anti-Iraq war marches held around Australia on 14-16 February. The next month the USA asked Australia to be formally part of the “coalition of the willing” in military operations against Iraq. On 17 March Cabinet authorised Australian military action as part of the International Coalition in Iraq, and on 19 March 2003 the War in Iraq began, with 2,000 Australian naval, air and ground fighters sent to war. The commitment included navy frigates; a Special Forces Task Group; a squadron of F/A-18 aircraft and C-130 Hercules aircraft. Around six weeks later US President George Bush declared “Mission Accomplished on 1 May 2003 and on 2-4 May John Howard visited President George W Bush at his Crawford ranch in Texas.

Governor-General Peter Hollingworth resigned after months of attacks and scandal regarding sexual abuse in the Anglican Church on 26 May 2003. The Howard Costello leadership issue arose again on 3 June 2003 when Howard told colleagues he intended to stay on as PM and would fight the 2004 election.

On 24 July Australia sent 2,000 strong military and police contingent to take control of the Solomon Islands, after years of violence and lawlessness. The commitment (RAMSI) was the biggest military mobilisation in the South Pacific since WW2. U.S President George W Bush and Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Australia and addressed Parliament on consecutive days on 22-24 October.

The year finished with Mark Latham elected the new leader of the Labor Opposition on 2 December, gave the party an immediate lift in support.

2004

The first quarter of 2004 saw Labor, under Mark Latham increase in popularity and on 9 March Newspoll put Latham in front as preferred leader over John Howard, with Labor attracting 55 per cent of the two-party preferred vote. There was growing discontent in the Coalition over the Howard Government’s treatment of asylum seekers, particularly children held in detention centres, and Howard’s stance on Iraq. This unease resulted, on 22 June 2004, with the “Not Happy, John” campaign spearheaded by John Valder, ex-President of the Australian Liberal Party, who mounted a campaign to oust John Howard from his Bennelong seat.
In July the Government was exonerated of political interference in intelligence assessments regarding the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), particularly relating to the Iraq war. On 22 July the Report by former diplomat, Philip Flood, however, did find that Australia went to war on the basis of intelligence that was “thin, ambiguous and incomplete and there was an intelligence failure on weapons of mass destruction”.

On 29 August 2004 the Prime Minister announced a federal election to be held on 9 October with the Liberal Coalition campaigning on the issue of trust. Just over a week later, on 9 September the first-ever terrorist attack on an Australian diplomatic mission occurred in Jakarta, killing 10 Indonesians and injuring more than 200 people.

As the election campaign grew in intensity, John Howard received a hero’s welcome at a rally in Launceston Tasmania on 6 October, announcing a forestry package that would save the jobs of thousands of timber workers. Two days later Howard and Latham met outside an ABC radio studio and the television cameras caught an aggressive handshake between the two leaders, initiated by Latham, that became one of the most memorable images of the campaign.

On election day, 9 October, the Howard Government was returned with an increased majority in House of Representatives, and the first working majority for a government in the Senate for 24 years. The Coalition won 46.72 per cent of the primary vote. Two party preferred vote of 52.68 per cent – swing to the government of 2.07 per cent. Marking the party’s worst result in 98 years, Labor won just 37.63 per cent of the primary vote.
Fourth Howard Term: 2004–2007

2005

Labor leader Mark Latham announced his resignation on 18 January, citing ongoing pancreatitis. Kim Beazley took over as Opposition Labor leader.

In February the Cornelia Rau saga emerged, with the story of this Australian citizen having been held unlawfully in an immigration detention centre. An inquiry was immediately initiated by Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone on 8 February.

On 16 February the Kyoto Protocol came into effect, and despite the Protocol being signed by 140 countries, John Howard reaffirmed the government's opposition to the pact.

The growing unrest within the ranks of the Government on Howard’s asylum seeker policy was brought to a head on 25 May when backbenchers attempted to overturn the government’s detention policy. The move was initiated by MP’s Petro Georgiou, Bruce Baird and Judi Moylan, to overturn the government’s detention policy and push a vote on the release of all long-term detainees amidst growing concern by experts regarding the mental health of detainees. Howard remained defiant, confirming he would not be changing the policy, nor allowing a conscience vote. These backbenches succeeded in forcing changes to the government’s mandatory detention policy on 17 June, guaranteeing parents and children would be released from immigration detention and the fast-tracking of temporary protection visas.

WorkChoices was introduced into Parliament on 26 May, a major initiative to reform Australia’s industrial relations system. The changes included the formation of a new Australian Fair Pay Commission. Within two weeks, a union campaign against WorkChoices began. (Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Kevin Andrews, introduced the WorkChoices legislation to the House of Representatives on 2 November).

The Coalition officially took control of the Senate on 1 July with a working majority of one, for the first time in 24 years. Key legislation for the Senate to pass included the privatisation of Telstra and the IR reforms. Later that month, on 28 July, the Government, along with the US, signed the Asian Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate at the ASEAN regional forum. John Howard still refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.
Terror hit Bali again on 1 October when 20 people were killed, including four Australians, following a coordinated terrorist attack on tourist restaurants on the island. A turning point on the detention of asylum seekers on Nauru occurred on 14 October when Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone announced 25 of the 27 remaining asylum seekers being held at the Offshore Processing Centre on Nauru would be relocated to mainland Australia. Following the Bali bombings the government introduced wide-ranging anti-terrorism measures, the Anti-terrorism Bill 2005, to parliament on 3 November.

Another issue to dominate the media was the inquiry into Certain Australian Companies in Relation to the UN Oil-For-Food Programme, announced on 10 November known as the Cole Inquiry. The Australian Wheat Board (AWB) was accused of paying $300 million in kickbacks to Saddam Hussein’s government in order to sell Australian wheat to Iraq through the UN Oil-for-Food Programme.

There was a push on 12 November by Coalition backbencher Danna Vale for the Prime Minister to ask US President George W Bush to either free David Hicks or send him home to be tried. At that stage David Hicks had been detained at Guantánamo Bay for almost four years. On 15 November hundreds of thousands of Australians attended public rallies around the nation to protest against the WorkChoices legislation, and on 11 December racial tensions exploded between Muslim groups and other locals in southern Sydney, with thousands involved in violent clashes at Cronulla beach.

2006
The year began with the Bureau of Meteorology declaring 2005 was Australia's hottest year on record, prompting renewed fears about global warming.

Australia and East Timor signed a treaty on 12 January to share billions of dollars in revenues from disputed oil and gas fields (The Greater Sunrise Fields), ending a marathon dispute over the area, which at one point saw Australia denying accusations it was bullying its tiny neighbour. Also in January the Cole Inquiry into AWB commenced its first public hearings on 16th of the month.

John Howard celebrated his tenth anniversary of his prime Ministership on 2 March, a milestone that refocused attention on leadership succession planning, and a possible handover to Peter Costello. That same month, on 27 March, WorkChoices laws came into effect across Australia.
With growing leadership speculation, John Howard paid tribute to Peter Costello on 10 April, describing him as the “principal architect” of the Government’s economic policies. On 21 April Australia experienced the first Australian defence personnel casualty of its involvement in the Iraq campaign. The media reported Private Jacob Kovco died after accidentally discharging his gun, but this reason was later changed to skylarking with his pistol.

Leadership issues skyrocketed to new heights on 9 July when News Ltd reported that in 1994, John Howard made a secret deal with Peter Costello in the presence of former Defence Minister Ian McLachlan, to hand over the leadership after serving two terms as PM. John Howard denied this constituted a deal. Two days later Cabinet held a meeting in Sydney, followed by a private meeting between Howard and Costello, where Costello asked Howard to stand down now, to which the PM refused.

The world's biggest economic evaluation of climate change, The Stern Report, was released on 30 October, translating the effects of climate change into economic terms: $9 trillion. The following day John Howard downplayed the findings of the Stern Report, telling Coalition MPs not to be “mesmerised” by just one report.

On 27 November the Cole Inquiry cleared government ministers of any knowledge regarding AWB kickbacks to the former Iraqi regime. It also found no evidence of illegality by government officers, or that the Foreign Affairs Department knew AWB paid kickbacks through transport fees. As the year drew to a close Kevin Rudd was elected Leader of the Opposition on 4 December, with 49 votes to Kim Beazley’s 39. Julia Gillard was elected unopposed as Deputy Leader of the Labor Party. The David Hicks affair was propelled into the media again on 9 December when rallies across the nation were held in support of terrorism suspect David Hicks, who had then spent five years detained in Guantánamo Bay without being tried. Pressure was mounting on the Federal Government to bring David Hicks home or bring him to trial.

2007
The year commenced with John Howard announcing a ministerial reshuffle on 23 January. Malcolm Turnbull became Environment and Water Resources Minister in Cabinet, while Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone was dumped. Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews stepped into Immigration portfolio and Joe Hockey took over Industrial Relations. Following this reshuffle, John Howard unveiled a $10 billion water plan to take control of Australia’s water resources on the eve of
Australia Day, declaring water management as the country’s biggest challenge. The centrepiece of the ten point plan was to take control of the Murray-Darling river system from the states.

On 26 February 2007 Maxine McKew, former ABC journalist and presenter, announced she would run against John Howard in his seat of Bennelong, which had been held by the PM since 1974. Just a few days later on 2 March Howard celebrated 11 years in power, and became the second-longest serving Australian Prime Minister after Sir Robert Menzies.

A turn of events occurred in the David Hicks saga when on 26 March Hicks pleaded guilty to a charge of providing material support for terrorism before a U.S military commission in Cuba. Five days later, on 31 March, Hicks was sentenced to nine months in Adelaide’s Yatala jail, to be released after the 2007 federal election. As part of a plea bargain, David Hicks was gagged from speaking to the media for 12 months, and withdrew allegations of abuse by U.S military forces at Guantanamo Bay. (Hicks returned to Australia on 20 May).

Australian troop numbers were boosted by 300 personnel in Afghanistan on 10 April, with Labor Opposition leader Kevin Rudd promising to pull troops out of Iraq by mid-2008 if elected.

On 1 June the Government’s climate taskforce, headed by Prime Minister and Cabinet departmental head Peter Shergold, released its report recommending Australia implement an emissions trading scheme by 2012. On 21 June the Prime Minister declared child abuse and domestic violence in Indigenous communities a “national emergency”, following the release of the damning Little Children are Sacred report. John Howard announced a Northern Territory Intervention package consisting of a raft of measures to deal with the crisis.

Doctor Mohamed Haneef was arrested at Brisbane airport on 2 July 2007 on suspicion of being involved in the Glasgow International Airport attack. The 27-year-old Indian physician was the first person to be arrested and detained under the 2005 Australian Anti-Terrorism Act. Haneef’s detention of 12 days became the longest without charge in recent Australian history, and caused a huge public outcry both in Australia and India. The high profile case saw the Director of Public Prosecutions drop all charges against Dr Haneef on 27 July, with the prosecutor citing “no reasonable prospect of a conviction of Haneef being secured”. The saga continued on 21 August when the Federal Court overturned the government’s decision to cancel the visa of Dr Haneef on character grounds.
John Howard’s Indigenous communities intervention package, the ‘Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007’, was rushed through the House of Representatives on 7 August. The APEC annual leaders meeting was held in Sydney from 2-9 September, bringing the city to a standstill. Halfway through the forum, on 5 September, the Prime Minister and U.S President George W Bush held a joint press conference to reiterate their commitment to the Iraq occupation. The leadership issue again arose on 12 September when John Howard survived a party room meeting without a leadership challenge. This followed Alexander Downer (at the request of the PM) canvassing the possibility of a change in leadership amongst senior colleagues. The following day Howard announced that if re-elected, he would retire next term and most likely hand over the leadership to Peter Costello within 18 months to two years.

On 14 October Howard called a federal election for 24 November 2007. The campaign was derailed on 21 November by a scandal when Members of the Liberal Party are caught letterboxing the electorate of Lindsay (held by PM-favourite Jackie Kelly) with pamphlets from a bogus Islamic organisation praising Labor for its support of the Bali bombers.

After eleven and a half years in power and four election victories, John Howard was defeated by Kevin Rudd on 24 November, with a swing against the Coalition of 5.7 per cent. John Howard became only the second Prime Minister in Australia’s history to lose his seat in an election, with Maxine McKew officially declared Bennelong a Labor seat on 1 December, ending John Howard’s 33-year stint. It is the first time Labor has held the seat since its creation in 1949.

(Source: ABC television ‘The Howard Years 2008’ produced by Fran Kelly)
Appendix 5

Howard’s Media Interviews: 1997–2007

The tables below are based on media appearances John Howard made from 1997 to 2007. Figures from March 1996 to December 1996 are extremely difficult to verify and are not listed on the official archived website of the Liberal Party of Australia. For accuracy the information contained here is calibrated directly from the Liberal Party of Australia’s website, now archived in the National Library of Australia’s Pandora Archive site: (http://nla.gov.au.arc-10052). Also as a qualifier, every single media appearance may not have been listed on the Liberal Party’s website. The figures here however do provide an excellent overview of the scope of Howard’s media commitments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Radio Interviews</th>
<th>Television Interviews</th>
<th>Doorstops</th>
<th>Press Conferences</th>
<th>Joint Press Conferences</th>
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<td>2006</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>263</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007**</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>300</td>
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**interviews finished in October of 2007 on the website
### Top 15 radio station interviews

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<tr>
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<td>2UE</td>
<td>157</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>ABC AM Program,</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2GB</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6PR</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5DN</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4BC</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5AA</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3LO</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>ABC Radio National</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>ABC Perth</td>
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<td>2BL</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>6WF</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>15</td>
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### Top 10 television station appearances

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<th>TV Stations</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Today Show, Channel Nine</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The 7.30 Report, ABC</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A Current Affair, Channel Nine</td>
<td>44</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Sky News</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sunrise, Channel Seven</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nightline, Channel Nine</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>60 Minutes, Channel Nine</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sunday Program, Channel Nine</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Today Tonight, Channel Nine</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Meet the Press, Channel Ten</td>
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## Top 20 radio commentator interviews

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Neil Mitchell 3AW Melbourne</td>
<td>168</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Alan Jones 2UE/2GB Sydney</td>
<td>119</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>John Laws 2UE Sydney</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Jeremy Cordeaux 5DN Adelaide</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Catherine McGrath ABC AM Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jon Faine 3LO Melbourne</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Matt Peacock ABC AM Program</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Liam Bartlett 6WF/ABC radio/6PR</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Paul Murray 6PR Perth</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Howard Sattler 6PR Perth</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>John Miller 4BC Brisbane</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Steve Price 4TO/2UE/3AW</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>John Miller/Ross Davie 4BC Brisbane</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Fran Kelly ABC Radio National</td>
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<td>Ray Hadley 2UE Sydney</td>
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<td>Tim Cox ABC radio Tasmania</td>
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<td>Philip Clarke 2BL Sydney</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Alexandra Kirk ABC AM Program</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>John McKenzie 746/846/4CA Cairns</td>
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## Top 10 television presenters interviews

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<th>Rank</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Steve Liebmann Channel Nine</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Kerry O’Brien ABC The 7.30 Report</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Tracey Grimshaw Channel Nine</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>David Speers Sky News</td>
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<td>Ray Martin Channel Nine</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Paul Lyneham ABC television</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Mike Munro Channel Nine</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Karl Stefanovic Channel Nine</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Glenn Milne Channel Seven</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Laurie Oaks Channel Nine</td>
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Appendix 6

Timeline of Technological Advances and Media Changes

1969: The Internet first established with interactive features including newsgroups
1971: The first ARPANET email was sent in the USA
1976: The Internet network linked to Europe
1989: World Wide Web invented by Tim Berners 20 years after the Internet was established
1990: The Internet became publicly available moving from Government and research institutions
1991: The web developed with the first browser (Macnamara, 2008)
1991: The first website was put online on 6 August on a royalty free basis
1992: Parliament passes a bill permitting ABC to provide subscription television services (27th Nov)
1993: The ABC's ‘Australian Television International’ is launched
1994: Swarthmore College student USA is recognised as one of the first ever bloggers
1994: ABC News Radio launched in August (originally the Parliamentary and News Network (PNN)
1994: Yahoo founded
1995: Foxtel commences distributing its services on cable, with 20 channels
1995: Foxtel launches in Australia in October with 19 channels
1995: Microsoft introduces Windows95
1995: Amazon.com and ebay.com launched
1995: Galaxy launches Australia's first subscription television service on MMDS
1995: The Drudge Report launched
1995: Australia's first cable TV provider Optus vision begins broadcasting (20 September)
1995: State editions of the 7.30 report merged into a single national programme (4th December)
1996: The Palm Pilot went on sale
1996: Sky News Australia commences 24-hour news service on 19th February (2)
1996: WebTV using a television to access the Internet is launched
1996: Prime television expands into Mildura and purchases the Golden West Network
1997: AOL Instant Messenger was launched
1997: First recognisable social network site launched called sixdegrees.com. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007)
1997: First news blogs are introduced in the USA, Weblog used for ‘logging the Web’
1997: 1 July telecommunications industry in Australia opened up to full competition
1998: Larry Page and Sergey Brin found Google while at Stanford
1998: Galaxy was closed on 20 May
1998: MP-3 Technology (compressed sound files)
1999: Peak of the dot.com financial bubble
1999: Foxtel began offering its own satellite service to new customers in February
1999: Foxtel expands its offering to 45 channels
1999: The name ‘weblog’ shortened to ‘blog’, and first USA free blog creation service introduced
1999: TIVO digital video recorder launched (the first DVR on the planet)
1999: Microsoft launches its MSN TM Online Instant Messaging Service
2000: Rise of cell phone use and cellular technology
2000: The Camera Phone is invented
2000: Computer glitch, Y2K expected with new millennium
2000: Google begins selling advertising based in search words
2000: Crikey.com launched by Stephen Mayne on 14th February (acquired by Private Media in 2005)
2001: 1st January, digital terrestrial television is introduced to audiences in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth
2001: ABC television launches its first digital-only multi-channel. The ABC kids channel.
2001: Wikipedia, an online encyclopaedia is launched
2001: ABC News Radio introduced live audio streaming of its 24 hour news format
2001: Standard TV changes to digital
2002: The SBS World News Channel is officially launched on 22 June
2002: In 2002 Foxtel completed an agreement with Optus on content supply (3)
2002: Satellite radio is launched
2003: MySpace is created by eUniverse employees
2003: LinkedIn commences in the USA
2004: Zuckerberg begins developing Facebook
2004: Broadband is in half of American homes
2004: Foxtel Digital service was launched (3)
2004: Sky News launches Sky News Active on 24 March, providing access to news on demand 24/7
2005: YouTube is launched in February
2005: News Limited bought MySpace for $US580m
2005: Foxtel IQ, a fully integrated personal digital recorder was launched
2005: ABC2 is officially inaugurated (10th March)
2006: Wikileaks began through the efforts of Julian Assange (BBC News World)
2006: Google Inc. acquires YouTube for $1.65 billion
2006: Facebook is open to everyone aged 13 and over with a valid email address (26 September)
2006: The first “tweet” was sent via Twitter in March by Jack Dorsey
2006: Foxtel on Mobile launched on Telstra’s NextG Network
2007: United States presidential debate on YouTube
2007: iPhone became available on 29 June 2007 in the United States
2007: At 30 June an estimated 1.17 billion people use the Internet (Internet World Statistics)
2007: The Ten Network announces Ten HD (14 September)
2007: The Seven Media Group launches Seven HD on 15th October
2007: Federal Minister for Communications announces switch off of analogue television signals will take place between 2010 and 2011, on 18th December
Appendix 7

Changes in Magazine and Newspaper Readership 1993–2003

### Readership Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROSS AND NET READERSHIP OF NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figures in '000</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sep-93</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sep-98</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sep-03</strong></td>
<td><strong>% change 1993 - 1998</strong></td>
<td><strong>% change 1998 - 2003</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FILTER: 5 Mainland States</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population of 5 mainland states</td>
<td>13,581</td>
<td>14,471</td>
<td>15,565</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>2,512</td>
<td>2,947</td>
<td>3,038</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>1,262</td>
<td>1,217</td>
<td>1,193</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Review</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>1,415</td>
<td>1,735</td>
<td>1,542</td>
<td>-20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Sat and started in Oct 1997)</td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Telegraph (NSW)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>9,329</td>
<td>9,337</td>
<td>8,924</td>
<td>-2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>2,253</td>
<td>2,565</td>
<td>2,353</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald (NSW)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>7,557</td>
<td>7,424</td>
<td>7,215</td>
<td>-1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>2,438</td>
<td>2,450</td>
<td>2,391</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun (VIC)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>10,863</td>
<td>10,931</td>
<td>10,490</td>
<td>-4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>2,300</td>
<td>2,319</td>
<td>2,453</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (VIC)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>5,525</td>
<td>5,152</td>
<td>5,048</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>1,541</td>
<td>1,437</td>
<td>1,375</td>
<td>-6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courier Mail (QLD)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>5,885</td>
<td>5,367</td>
<td>5,472</td>
<td>-11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>1,896</td>
<td>1,729</td>
<td>1,846</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertiser (SA)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>4,553</td>
<td>4,446</td>
<td>4,441</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>1,038</td>
<td>1,044</td>
<td>1,037</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Australian (WA)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>4,523</td>
<td>4,319</td>
<td>3,972</td>
<td>-4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>1,094</td>
<td>1,144</td>
<td>1,178</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Times (WA)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>874</td>
<td>910</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>874</td>
<td>910</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Newspapers</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>53,515</td>
<td>51,502</td>
<td>51,056</td>
<td>-3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>10,704</td>
<td>11,028</td>
<td>11,359</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-F Newspapers</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>35,796</td>
<td>34,542</td>
<td>33,860</td>
<td>-6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>8,164</td>
<td>7,867</td>
<td>7,962</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday Newspapers</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>8,028</td>
<td>8,562</td>
<td>8,444</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>2,020</td>
<td>2,095</td>
<td>2,008</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Newspapers</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>8,410</td>
<td>8,794</td>
<td>8,749</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>2,479</td>
<td>2,888</td>
<td>2,994</td>
<td>-2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Magazines (excl. inserts)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>46,524</td>
<td>47,447</td>
<td>64,986</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>11,389</td>
<td>11,522</td>
<td>12,379</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FILTER: Total Australia**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Sep-92</strong></th>
<th><strong>Sep-98</strong></th>
<th><strong>Sep-03</strong></th>
<th><strong>% change 1993 - 1998</strong></th>
<th><strong>% change 1998 - 2003</strong></th>
<th><strong>% change 1993 - 2003</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>14,026</td>
<td>14,539</td>
<td>14,048</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Magazines (excl. inserts)</td>
<td>Gross</td>
<td>47,995</td>
<td>48,696</td>
<td>66,546</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net</td>
<td>11,747</td>
<td>11,890</td>
<td>12,763</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 8

Time Spent Listening Trends 1991/2010. Five Capital City Weighted Average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5 CITY</th>
<th>hrs:min</th>
<th>hrs.min</th>
<th>POT. (10+)</th>
<th>AVERAGE TIME SPENT LISTENING</th>
<th>POT. (10+)</th>
<th>AVERAGE AUDIENCE &amp; CUME AUDIENCE</th>
<th>POT. (10+)</th>
<th>AVERAGE TIME SPENT LISTENING</th>
<th>POT. (10+)</th>
<th>AVERAGE AUDIENCE &amp; CUME AUDIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Note: Due to non-surveyed markets CRA were unable to provide a national radio listening figure. The table therefore is a Time Spent Listening report which tracks time spent listening and weekly cumulative audience since 1991 but only for the five metropolitan capital cities. These are not “annual listening” but average listening by week.
Appendix 9

Internet Usage in Australia 1995–2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Internet users</th>
<th>% of the Aust Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>600,000</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>3.30m</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>5.77M</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>7.72m</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>8.96m</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>10.22m</td>
<td>52.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>11.31m</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>11.83m</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>12.36m</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>12.89m</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>13.44m</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>14.3m</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>15.17m</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(data from World Bank, World Development Indicators 2011)

Roy Morgan Research July 1999 found that about 50% of people 14 and over had ever accessed the Internet. See Smith (1999, p. 4). Morgan asked people what they mainly use the Internet for and the top five responses are:

1. Email 24%
2. Browsing/surfing 13%
3. Searching for academic information 10%
4. Searching for personal information 8%
5. Academic research 8%

The top five growth uses for the Internet are:

1. Purchasing products or services/shopping
2. IT information
3. Selling products or services
4. Email
5. Business related research (equal fifth)
5. Making social contacts (equal fifth)
## Appendix 10

### Functions of Party Websites and Dates of Establishment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Date website established</th>
<th>Information Provision</th>
<th>Resource Generation</th>
<th>Participation / Interactivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parliamentary parties</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberals</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationals</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Nation</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-parliamentary parties</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Democratic Party</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Action</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Mean</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Score range</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>0 – 13</td>
<td>0 – 9</td>
<td>0 – 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gibson and Ward, ‘Virtual campaigning’

(See also Chen, 2006, p. 15)
Appendix 11

Politicians’ Adoption of New Media

Politicians who had the highest total of new media uses and interactive features as at 20 November 2007:

Kevin Rudd (ALP)
- MySpace site had 22,296 friends and 5,017 comments
- Facebook site had 53 discussion topics and 391 ‘Wall’ posts – the highest of any politician in the sample
- Links to Del.icio.us and Digg and included YouTube videos critical of John Howard which attracted 4,264 views

Peter Garrett (ALP)
- MySpace site had 4,348 friends and 293 comments (including three duplicates)
- blog had 61 comments posted, all positive from supporters

Malcolm Turnbull (Liberal)
- MySpace site had 281 friends and 54 comments and was the only politicians’ online presence to allow critical comments to be posted
- Facebook site and a blog titled ‘Dog Blogs’ which was noteworthy for its personal approach

Bob Brown (Greens)
- Posted 44 videos on YouTube gaining 4,411 views
- MySpace site has 2,316 friends and 258 comments
- Facebook site had 2,472 friends and 140 ‘Wall’ posts

Joe Hockey (Liberal)
- Posted three videos on his personal website
- Extensive blog with 68 comments (albeit all positive)
- MySpace 1,012 friends
- Facebook 843 friends
Brendan Nelson (Liberal)
- posted seven videos on his personal website
- three surveys and an e-newsletter with an RSS feed and ‘comment’ section (but it required visitors to log-in to comment)

Bob McMullan (ALP)
- Personal website had links to ALP YouTube videos
- Links to a useful video encouraging people to enrol to vote and showing how
- MySpace site had 208 friends and 50 comments

Peter Costello (Liberal)
- MySpace had 228 friends in and 72 comments

Lindsay Tanner (ALP)
- Facebook site had 451 friends and 22 ‘Wall’ posts
- Used YouTube extensively to distribute speeches and ALP commercials

Pat Farmer (Liberal)
- MySpace site auto-loaded the song ‘Straight Lines’ by Silverchair on opening and had 669 friends and 57 comments

Sharon Grierson (ALP)
- MySpace site opened with the song ‘Straight Lines’ by Silverchair. She had 213 friends and 22 comments (two from one person)
- MySpace blog, but with only seven posts and two comments

(Source: Australian Centre for Public Communication, Macnamara (2008, pp. 25-26))


Colvin, M. (Director). (2001). Beattie goes on the attack over road funding [Radio Broadcast]: ABC


Neilson. (2007). Online 10th Australian Internet and Technology Report


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