From ‘watchdog’ to ‘spin-doctor’:

An examination of the transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back again

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Submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

University of Canberra

Faculty of Arts & Design

February, 2014
Abstract

This thesis examines the under-explored career transition between two roles at the centre of political communication – the journalist and the parliamentary media adviser. They are two roles commonly portrayed as antithetical to each other, locked in a power struggle over the control of information. This oppositional framing is most easily recognised in the ubiquitous binary stereotypes of the ‘watchdog’ journalist scrutinising government, seeking truth and informing in the public interest; and the manipulative ‘spin-doctor’ engaged in advocacy, persuasion, obfuscation and lying. Inspired by the researcher’s own experience, this inductive qualitative study draws on the traditions of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism to examine the individual journey of twenty-one journalists who sought to make the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again. Via the unique comparative insights of the interviewees, this doctoral study sheds light on key issues arising from the transition through these two pivotal roles. Firstly, this thesis reveals the inadequacy of the blunt, dualistic conceptions of the journalist and parliamentary media adviser in the literature and popular culture. Secondly, this thesis offers insights into the interaction between reporters and parliamentary media advisers and reveals how the actors’ perceptions of the others’ behaviour can influence trust and ultimately the free flow of information to the public via the media. Thirdly, this thesis draws attention to the complex issues of partisanship, conflict of interest and bias that a journalist can face if they seek to return to political reporting once they have been a parliamentary media adviser. Based on the expert perceptions of communications professionals who have worked in both roles, this thesis argues it is time to rethink the blunt, black and white ethical distinctions between the journalist and the parliamentary media adviser and adopt a more nuanced interpretation of these two key roles at the heart of political communication that better reflect the diversity of contextualised individual practitioner experience.
Acknowledgements

I want to thank each of the twenty-one journalists who generously gave their time and personal reflections to this study. Each one of you made a valuable contribution to the exploration of this topic and without which the research would be the poorer. Your ideas and candid reflections have challenged, stimulated and sustained me throughout. Your willingness to be frank in the discussion of sensitive issues has provided rich material for reflection and debate. I hope you all find the discussion in these pages as valuable and thought provoking as I have. I thank each of you for your collaboration.

I also wish to thank my supervisor Assoc. Professor Kerry McCallum for her valuable insights and support. I wish to add special thanks to my primary supervisor, Dr Adam Dickerson, whose generosity, encouragement and belief in this project helped contain my feelings of self doubt and got me through to the end.

Lastly I want to acknowledge the contribution of Anna Bligh and thank her for her friendship, mentorship and courage in exploring the issues central to this thesis – “To thine own self be true” – Thank you.

Dedication

To my darling husband Matthew Franklin for his courageous decision to leave a successful career in political journalism and carve a new path for himself. It not only gave him new freedom but it also allowed me to devote myself to the completion of this thesis while he took over the care of our two beautiful children. I would not have got to the end without him. It has been an amazing gift. Thank you. To my daughters Hana and Margot, who rarely complained about my absent mindedness while I mulled over this thesis. Thank you for your patience. If this PhD achieves nothing more than to show you both that perseverance pays, then it will have all been worth it.
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Foreword

This research project grew out of my own experience of crossing-over from journalism to parliamentary media advising and later returning to journalism. It was a career transition that presented me with ethical challenges. Given the role of the journalist and the role of the parliamentary media adviser operate at the centre of political communication, I believed exploring those personal challenges would not only be of interest to me, but would have broader public interest. Borrowing from C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) I felt my “private troubles” were also “public issues” worthy of exploration and discussion. I wanted to discover whether other journalists who had revolved through the roles of journalist and parliamentary media adviser had confronted similar ethical challenges. To help explain my motivation for this research I have provided a brief autobiographic sketch of my experience and some of the “personal troubles” that arose out of it.

In 1994 I joined the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in Queensland as a cadet television news reporter and spent the first two years working in the Brisbane newsroom. This was followed by a two-year posting to Townsville where I worked as the North Queensland correspondent. It was a fascinating and fulfilling job covering stories from the Torres Strait to Mount Isa. However, for a range of personal and professional reasons I wanted to return to Brisbane and the only way I could do that was to leave the ABC. I had always been interested in politics. News and current affairs were the staple of conversation around my dinner table as I grew up. My mother had been active in the peace movement in the 1980s and ran for the Senate for the Nuclear Disarmament Party and I also had friends who worked for political parties. While I was in Townsville I was approached by a federal politician to work for him, but turned down the opportunity. However, a few months later when the Beattie Labor government was elected in 1998 the timing and circumstances were such that I made the leap and joined the staff of Anna Bligh MP, as her Senior Media Adviser. After three exciting and exhausting years I took a much needed six month break before gradually making my way back to the ABC in a mixture of producing and reporting roles at Radio National and ABC News.
Each stage of my transition between reporting and parliamentary media advising presented me with issues of conflict, beginning with my decision to cross over to the ‘dark-side’ as it is commonly referred to by journalists. To explain further how these issues of conflict manifested themselves I have provided a more detailed outline below.

*Conflicting nature of the roles and goals:*

When I made the transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser the central values of balance and fairness enshrined in the journalists’ code of ethics were no longer required. As a ministerial media adviser I was employed to present just one side of the story. In the first few months of joining the minister’s office I approached media inquiries with the journalists’ interests at heart trying to provide as much information as possible, but gradually that changed. The more access I had to sensitive information and internal government processes, the more I realised there was information that could not be released and often for good reasons. When pressure from the media was at its most intense my commitment to openness was strained by relentless media inquiries. Over-time, my former journalistic goal to scrutinise government activity was gradually replaced by a protective loyalty to my minister. After three years as a ministerial media adviser my views of journalism had begun to change and my respect for certain individuals in the profession had plummeted.

*Ethical conflict:*

While I was proud of many of the policy reforms the government had achieved and the small role I had played in helping to reach those goals, certain decisions were being taken about the presentation of information that made me feel ethically uncomfortable. During my three years as a ministerial media adviser I faced innumerable ethical decisions – some big, some small – about the release and presentation of information. Though some of those decisions were difficult, I was comfortable in the end with the choices that were made. However, there was one incident

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1 The term ‘dark-side’ is regularly used by the interviewees in this study in reference to comments made by other journalists about their transition to parliamentary media advising. The term is also used to refer to public relations generally (Macnamara, 2012).
that did make me reconsider my employment and that was over the representation of funding for a particular election commitment. As a former ministerial adviser I am bound not to reveal the details of political decisions made during the time I was employed in the minister’s office, however, without divulging too much detail I will paint a general picture of the scenario at the heart of my dilemma. I was required to prepare a press release about the government’s election commitment in a particular portfolio area. Though the total amount of funding that appeared in the media release was correct it did not reveal the accurate breakdown of those funds. The government had promised that a certain amount would be recurrent (ongoing) funding, and the rest would be capital (one-off) expenditure. By lumping the total funds together, the government attempted to hide that it was not delivering the promised amount of recurrent funding. To the media and the broader public this omission of accounting detail was not important and my concern would have likely been deemed petty, but to the sector concerned, the way in which those funds were to be allocated was of real significance. Up until this point our office had been meticulously transparent in its communications of funding commitments because there was a strong sense of pride in the fact that much-needed money was being injected into a long neglected system. Because of this track record of transparency, the exclusion of the relevant funding detail in this announcement felt like a significant departure. It was not a lie – the total funding amount was correct – but it was not the truth either. For the first time we had ‘spun’ the numbers and I felt very uncomfortable about it. To place this small incident in some broader context, the decision not to reveal the actual breakdown of funds occurred during the 2001 Queensland state election when the Labor government’s re-election chances were clouded by the investigations of the Shepherdson Inquiry into allegations of electoral fraud in the Queensland branch of the Australian Labor Party. It was a serious issue that dogged the government for months. Three sitting Labor MPs were forced to resign including the Deputy Premier, Jim Elder, which lead to the Premier, Peter Beattie, famously donning a wet suit and swimming with sharks to illustrate the precarious situation the government was in. As a result of this high-stakes election context, the decision was made in our ministerial office to ‘spin’ the numbers. At the time I made my discomfort with the tactic known and with the agreement of the minister I refused to answer any media inquiries about the matter and arranged to put all questions about it straight through to the minister. In doing so, I effectively temporarily renounced my role. As it
turned out, the minister’s office did not receive a single call from a journalist or the sector about the funding figures. Over subsequent budgets all of the money that had been initially promised to the sector was delivered. However, they were not outcomes that I could have foreseen at the time. A few months after the election I was exhausted and my personal life was disintegrating. Combined with the fear that I would have to face more of these situations in the future, I decided to leave parliamentary media advising behind, but not without a heavy heart.

Conflict of interest & bias:

After six months’ rest, my first attempt to re-enter journalism was painful. I was told by a news director “you’d be lucky” to get a job because I had worked as a parliamentary media adviser and he would only be prepared to employ me on a trial basis. It shook my confidence and I declined the offer. After a few months I found employment in a role that valued my political experience and insights rather than seeing them as a handicap. My time as an adviser had taught me how the political, parliamentary and party processes worked, but it came at a price and that was the loss of my objectivity in relation to my minister. I had a clear conflict of interest when it came to her. After three years of defending and promoting Anna Bligh, I simply was not able to turn around and begin scrutinising my former boss who had also become my friend. I just could not be neutral about her. Instead I took a long and circuitous route back to news reporting. It was not until I had moved interstate and several years had passed before I felt confident that I would no longer face a conflict of interest if I was required to report on politics.

In the years since I left the newsroom I have reflected on the two roles I performed at the heart of political communication. Outwardly I managed to move from journalist to parliamentary media adviser with relative ease, but inwardly I grappled with issues of ethical conflict surrounding them. This doctoral study has been an attempt to explore some of those issues by examining the experience of other journalists who followed the same career path.
1. **Introduction**

Throughout the course of this doctoral research the often-heated relationship between politicians and the media has been a feature of public debate both in Australia and overseas. During the 2013 Australian federal election campaign, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd drew attention to the antagonistic and partisan headlines of the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, which called on its readers to reject the Labor government on polling day and “Kick this mob out” (Editorial, 05/08/13). A few weeks prior, journalists were accused of unfairly “stalking” Australia’s first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, out of office. A former press gallery journalist, Kerry-Anne Walsh (2013), argued constant stories about a possible leadership challenge and ongoing negative coverage of the government’s policies conspired to bring an end to Gillard’s prime ministership. Eighteen months earlier, the Gillard government and the Murdoch-owned newspapers were on a war footing following the establishment of the Finkelstein Inquiry into the media. This inquiry was triggered by the telephone hacking scandal in the United Kingdom which had engulfed the *News of the World* tabloid newspaper as well as local concerns about biased and aggressive reporting by *News Limited* newspapers toward the Labor government generally and on a range of specific issues, such as climate change. The nature of the anti-government coverage lead to renewed concerns about the concentration of media ownership in Australia and the dominance of Rupert Murdoch. The relationship between the Murdoch press and the government had deteriorated to such a low level that the Australian Greens Party began to refer to the Murdoch owned newspapers as “the hate media”. Over the past three years, the tension between journalists and politicians has at times been so high it was as if the “marriage de raison” had ended, the partners had filed for divorce and the “marital quarrels” were being “fought out openly” (de Beus, 2011, p. 19). Amidst the tumult and tension of this relationship between the media and politicians, it is easy to overlook that there is a third person in this marriage. That third person is the communications professional – the parliamentary media adviser – employed by politicians to act as an intermediary between

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2 For more on the Australian media landscape see (Tanner & Economou, 2008; Finkelstein, 2012)
themselves and journalists. It is the relationship between the parliamentary media adviser and the reporter that lies at the heart of this doctoral thesis.

The journalist and the parliamentary media adviser are pivotal actors at the nexus of political communication. Together, and individually, they play a central role in shaping, interpreting and filtering political information for public consumption and therefore influencing political discourse and the democratic process. In popular culture, and the academic literature, these two communications roles are commonly portrayed as adversaries and are defined as antithetical to each other. This polarisation of the two roles can be seen in the ubiquitous stereotypes of the ‘watchdog’ journalist as truth seeker and defender of democracy and the Machiavellian ‘spin-doctor’ as a manipulator of truth, whose tactics undermine democracy. As this thesis will show, this binary opposition is just one set of dichotomous conceptions that have come to characterise the role of the journalist and the parliamentary media adviser as being antithetical to each other. Based on the insights provided by twenty-one journalists who have made the transition from reporting to parliamentary media advising and back again, this thesis exposes the inadequacy of the blunt oppositional portrayals of these two roles that permeate popular culture and the scholarship. In their place, this thesis offers the thoughtful and frank contributions of practitioners who are experienced in both fields and whose unique comparative insights point to the failure of these generalised conceptions to reflect the diversity of contextualised individual experience.

The role of this introductory chapter is to highlight some of the big themes and key literature that appear throughout this study. At the micro level, this thesis presents a small-scale subjective phenomenological study, examining the under-explored career transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again. However, this inductive, qualitative study does much more than that. Via the reflections of twenty-one journalists, this thesis explores conceptions of adversarialism and ethical conflict that surround the two roles, including concerns about partisanship and conflict of interest. This study engages with broader abstract themes such as the presence of moralism and idealism in the discourse surrounding the two roles; debates about the state of political discourse; and, the importance of trust to truth and disclosure in democracy. It also contributes to ongoing debates in academic politics about the location of
journalism within the broader field of communications and the internal tug-of-war over the emphasis on theory and practice within journalism education (Turner, 2000; Windschuttle, 1998; Zelizer, 1998). This study also speaks to a recognised virtual silence in the journalism scholarship regarding commonalities and overlap between journalism and public relations generally (Dodd, 2012; Macnamara, 2012), and journalism and parliamentary media advising specifically. Each of these broader themes appears throughout the thesis. Before taking a closer look at some of those themes, it is important to firstly make some introductory remarks about the location of this thesis within the literature; the structure of the thesis and the role of the interviewees in this study.

1.1 Location of thesis in the literature

In order to study the career transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back, it was necessary to follow that experience across different fields of scholarship. As the interviewees in this study show, human beings do not neatly conduct their lives according to academic silos. Human experience leaks across academic boundaries ignoring the artificial lines of demarcation used to separate one discipline from another. As a result this qualitative study cuts an arc through the disciplines linking between the fields of journalism, public relations, political communication, philosophy, ethics, and social psychology. In doing so, the study of the career transition between journalism and parliamentary media advising forces connections between these diverse but related academic areas and provides a rich contextual environment to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon under examination.

The type of interdisciplinary, contextual approach to understanding human experience taken in this project is not new. It was championed by C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) in his influential work, *The Sociological Imagination*, more than fifty years ago to encourage social researchers to take a more holistic contextual approach to their work. Rather than examining fragmented slices of human experience in isolation from external and internal influences, Mills (1959/2000) argued

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3 See the Australian Journalism Review, vol 35 (1), July 2013 and the articles therein for contemporary contributions to this debate.
social scientists needed to take a contextual approach linking biography, social structure and history. In doing so, this would enable the researcher to effectively pursue the connection between “private troubles” and broader “public issues”. As Mills (1959/2000) explained,

imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another ... It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two. (p.7)

By shifting between the personal perceptions of the twenty-one interviewees and linking them to broader public issues, this study has attempted to build a richer understanding of the ethical experience of moving between journalism and parliamentary media advising.

Because the transition between journalism and parliamentary media advising lies at the intersection of different disciplines, there has been very little focussed work on this particular career transition which crosses the fields of politics, public relations and journalism. Instead, what is found is a range of literature relevant to particular aspects of the transition. The following list of works is by no means exhaustive. For instance there is a range of research into the role of the parliamentary media adviser in general (Downes, 1998; Kimber, 2004; Miller, 2005; Parker, 1990; Phillipps, 2002; Savva, 2010; Tenscher, 2007; Warn, 1996) and the role of the ministerial adviser specifically (Anthony, 1975; Eichbaum, 2010; Forward, 1975; Maley, 2002b; Tiernan, 2007; Walter, 1986). There is a substantial body of scholarship on media-source relations (Berkowitz, 2009; Ericson, 1989; Gans, 1979/2004; McQuail, 2010; Sigal, 1973; Tiffen, 1989; Tuchman, 1978) and on the relationship between reporters and politicians specifically (Blumler, 1981; Brants, 2011, 2010; Davis, 2009; Mancini, 1993; McNair, 2011; Sanders, 2009; Sigal, 1973; Stanyer, 2007). There is a breadth of work about the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners (Aronoff, 1975; Charron, 1989; Kohenhaver, 1985; Neijens, 2006; Sallot, 2006; Shaw, 2004; Sinaga, 2008; Swartz, 1983; White, 2010), and scholarship focussed on the relationship between the parliamentary media adviser and the journalist specifically (Davis, 2009; Downes, 1998; Ericson et al., 1989; Jones, 2006; Louw, 2010; Parker, 1990; Richardson, 2002; Savage & Tiffen, 2007; Stockwell, 2007; Tiffen, 2012). There is also scholarship about the shift from journalist to politician (Errington, 2009; Savage, 2005). However, to the best of my knowledge there is no thorough contemporary analysis of the
transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back again. The closest work in this area that I have found is that of Derek Parker (1990) whose book *The Courtesans* examines the role of the federal parliamentary press gallery during the Hawke government in Australia. Within this text, Parker (1990) reflected on the phenomenon of the “revolving door” between press gallery journalists and the Hawke Labor government (p. 32). Phillipps’ (2002) PhD *Media Advisers – Shadow Players in Political Communication* also made reference to the movement of journalists in and out of parliamentary media advising. Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007) also briefly referred to issues of perceptions of bias that can arise when a political staffer returns to journalism. However, none of these texts are phenomenological examinations of the career transition itself. Thus, this research makes an original contribution to the field of knowledge about the transition between the role of the journalist and the parliamentary media adviser and will help fill gaps in a number of areas identified in the literature (Pearson & Patching, 2008; Phillipps, 2002; Stockwell, 2007; Turnbull, 2007; Ward, 2007; Young, 2007; Zelizer, 2004). Those gaps include, but are not restricted to: government communications generally; the transition between journalism and parliamentary media advising; the Australian experience of being a parliamentary media adviser; the intersection between the fields of journalism and media relations; the professional ethics of parliamentary media advising; tactics of parliamentary media advisers; issues of partisanship, conflict of interest and the perception of bias associated with the parliamentary media adviser’s re-entry to journalism; and the issue of post-separation employment restrictions for ministerial advisers.

1.1.1. Thesis structure

It should also be noted that this doctoral study does not follow a traditional thesis structure in that it does not contain a stand-alone literature review. Given the breadth and range of literature that this career phenomenon cuts through, a single separate literature review would have been unwieldy. Dealing with the literature separately would have also restricted the desired level of contextualization able to be achieved by weaving the personal experiences of the interviewees and analysis of the broader themes and literature together. Instead of a separate literature review, I have chosen to intertwine the complex multi-disciplinary literature in and around the data to embed the personal experiences of the interviewees in their multi-faceted contexts. By weaving
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the discussion of the literature throughout the thesis I have tried to achieve a rich interpretative environment to deepen the reader’s understanding of the interviewees’ experiences of the career transition under examination. Most importantly, this approach allows the twenty-one practitioners to talk back to the literature and inject some balance to the wealth of academic theory. As a result, the interviewees’ reflections interact with the abstract theories and ground them in the realism of practice.

The inspiration for combining the literature and practitioners’ contributions in this way comes from the insightful qualitative research of David Karp (1996), in particular, his study on depression, *Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection and the Meanings of Illness*. There are two key reasons why this work has remained an ambitious exemplar for this thesis. Firstly, Karp (1996) gracefully manages to interweave the individual “unique stories” into the broader framework of contextual issues and draw out the “common themes” (p. 12) so that the different threads come together to form a rich narrative whole. In this way, the personal stories, broader debates, analysis and theory blend and keep the reader engaged. While I might not have replicated the cohesion of David Karp’s work, it offered an inspiring model of how to combine the interview data with broader contextual material and discussion, in a way that – I hope – has kept the overall discussion meaningful for the reader.

Secondly, I am also interested in Karp’s (1996) position as participant researcher and author. In the introduction to *Speaking of Sadness*, Karp (1996) declares his personal experience of depression and then incorporates this in the broader context and motivation for his research. This declaration of honesty builds a connection with the reader and a sense of trust that carries the reader through the examination of the issues without the narrative becoming self-indulgent, both of which I have also tried to achieve. It is important though, to distinguish the approach taken in this thesis from auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography is “usually written in the first person voice of the researcher” and at times “distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond recognition” (Ellis, 2000, p. 739). For example, this is clearly demonstrated in the very personal work of Carol Ronai (1992) about her experiences as an erotic dancer. While the experiences of this researcher did act as the catalyst for this study it was not the focus of the research. Instead, this study has been intent on exploring the diversity of
the experiences recounted by the twenty-one communications professionals who agreed to share their stories about the transition from reporting to parliamentary media advising and back.

1.1.2. Interviewees as theorists

As mentioned earlier, one of the features of David Karp’s (1996) work that has influenced my approach to this study is the respectful way in which he treated the contributions made by the interviewees. As individuals who have experienced depression, Karp treated them as experts in the topic under investigation. The same approach is taken in this study. Each of the twenty-one contributors to this doctoral research is seen as an expert on the career transition under investigation, whose reflections are worth listening to. Each of the interviewees is an experienced journalist and political communicator whose personal insights into this under-explored phenomenon are helping to break new ground at the intersection of journalism, public relations and political communication research. Susan Herbst (1998) calls contributors with this type of high-level experience of the issue under investigation as “political professionals” or “sophisticates” (p. 31). Drawing on the work of Adrian Furnham (1988), Herbst (1998) says while these “sophisticates” were not social scientists, they are “lay people with lay theories” based on their “intense experiences” of the issue (p. 30). As a result of the expertise gained through these “intense experiences”, Herbst (1998) argues, that the stories and reflections contributed by these expert practitioners contain valuable insights that amount to “theories” in their own right. This study has adopted the same view toward each of the interviewees and their theoretical contributions. However, rather than describe the twenty-one journalists as “lay” theorists – which has hierarchical overtones – I prefer to see the interviewees in this study as fellow theoretical contributors offering an alternative perspective to the academic abstract theory. As Herbst (1998) says in her study Reading Public Opinion, “scholars may not agree” with what these people have to say or the theoretical contributions they make, but these “sophisticates” were “key operators” in the area under investigation and as a result their insights are worth listening to (p. 31). (Further justification of this approach appears in the Methodology chapter that follows).
1.1.3. Location of the parliamentary media adviser in the field of public relations

It is also important to define the location of the parliamentary media adviser within the field of public relations. The role of the parliamentary media adviser is located in the field of media relations which is categorised as a sub-field of the discipline of public relations (Stanton, 2007). Within that sub-field, parliamentary media advisers – formerly called press secretaries – comprise one small group of media relations practitioners. Though media relations activities and ‘spin’ tactics receive a lot of attention, public relations academics stress that media relations “is like the tip of an iceberg – the most visible part, but certainly not all there is” (Shaw & White, 2004, p. 494).

Stanton (2007) described the field of media relations as being concerned with the building of relationships between media relations practitioners, a client and the media as well as the communications processes that bypass the media and go straight to stakeholders. Though well understood as a central function of public relations, there is room for confusion around the nomenclature used to describe media relations that occurs within the context of politics specifically. Stanton (2007) made a distinction between “political” media relations, which deals with the strategies used during election campaigning, and “government” media relations which he defined as the strategies used once the politician was elected to government or opposition (p. 139). For the sake of clarity, the term parliamentary media adviser has been adopted throughout this thesis to denote media advisers who have been employed to provide media advice to elected MPs in government and opposition parties as opposed to communications specialists within public service departments, or media strategists employed by political parties during election campaigns. The term “ministerial media adviser” has also been used on occasions when it was important to distinguish between parliamentary media advisers generally and media advisers employed on the staff of government ministers.
1.2. Conceptions of tension between the two roles

As mentioned at the beginning of this introductory chapter, the journalist and the parliamentary media adviser are commonly portrayed in opposition to each other. This dualistic presentation is clearly demonstrated in the stereotypes of the ‘watchdog’ and the ‘spin-doctor’. The conception of tension between the two roles manifests itself on different levels. As will be discussed below, the conception of tension appears at an institutional level due to the nature of the media-source relationship. It also appears at an ethical level due to: i) journalism’s ‘watchdog’ role in democracy; ii) the history of the relationship between journalism, public relations and propaganda; and (iii) the dominance of the ‘spin-doctor’ caricature. Each of these will be considered here briefly in turn and in greater detail in chapter 3. It must be noted that a range of contemporaneous contextual factors also influence conceptions of tension between the two roles, such as the issue at hand, the political climate etc. These contextual issues are considered later in this chapter and throughout the thesis.

1.2.1. The nature of reporter-source relations

As mentioned previously, because of the location of the parliamentary media adviser in the field of politics and public relations; and the intermediary role of the parliamentary media adviser as the interface between politicians and journalists, this study draws on a range of literature regarding media-source relations to paint a fuller picture of the dynamics at play. This thesis includes discussion of scholarly work regarding reporter-source relations generally, plus literature on the specific relationships between politicians and journalists; parliamentary media advisers and journalists; and public relations practitioners and journalists. In doing so this thesis does not claim that the relationship between politicians and reporters is directly substitutable for the relationship between parliamentary media advisers and journalists; however, the literature does reveal similar dynamics and antithetical framing in each variation of the reporter-source relationship.

Traditionally, the goal of the reporter has been to access information from a source to write a story no-one else has and to publish it first. The goal of the source has been to get the message
out to the public via the reporter through the media. I say traditionally, because the landscape within which reporters and sources operate has changed significantly over the past fifty years and continues to evolve rapidly in response to changing communications technologies. However, despite these changes, the underlying fluctuating tension in the relationship between reporter and source has endured.

In his study of *Reporters and officials: the organization of politics and newsmaking*, Leon Sigal (1973) characterised the relationship between reporter and source as one of “trading partners” exchanging information (p. 43). On the beat, Sigal (1973) said, this exchange involved a mixture of conflict and cooperation “with reporters and their official sources being both allies and adversaries” (p. 84). In their work on media-source relations, Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1989) described the relationship as one of “negotiating control” over the presentation of information. This tension has been evocatively characterised as a “dance” (Gans, 1979/2004), a “danse macabre” (Ross, 2010) and even a “tense tango” (Sanders, 2009). The constantly changing nature of that tension, led Strömbäck and Nord (2006) to ask “who is leading the tango?”

Whether describing reporter-source relations generally, or specific iterations of that relationship – such as that between journalists and parliamentary media advisers or reporters and politicians – elements of tension, ambivalence, antagonism and co-operation are common to all of the theoretical discussions of the dynamics between the two actors. At the heart of this tension in each configuration of the relationship is journalism’s normative role of the democratic ‘watchdog’, which is examined below.

### 1.2.2. The journalist as democratic ‘watchdog’

The idealised role of the journalist as democratic ‘watchdog’ harks back to the 1700s and the emergence of liberal representative democracies in England and America. Central to the foundation of these fledgling democracies was the principle of the “liberty of the press” as extolled by John Stuart Mill in 1859 in his treatise *On Liberty*. Mill argued that the free flow of information via a free press was essential to keep the public informed and to protect the citizenry against corrupt or tyrannical government (Louw, 2010, pp. 37-38). In 1791, the ideals of a free press and freedom of speech were included in the First Amendment of the constitution as part of
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the Bill of Rights of the nascent American democratic state and adopted by Congress. By the late eighteenth century in England, when journalists began reporting on the proceedings in the House of Commons, the ideal of the journalist acting as a check on government led to the creation of the media’s metaphorical institutional status of the Fourth-Estate\(^4\) (Hampton, 2010; Schultz, 1998).

The importance of journalism’s Fourth-Estate function gained prominence in the 1950s with the emergence of Siebert, Peterson & Schramm’s (1956/1973) *Four Theories of the Press*. Two of the four theories described by the authors stressed the importance of a free press to democracy and journalism’s responsibility to the public. They were the “libertarian” and “social responsibility” models of the media which served to further entrench journalism’s role in liberal democracy and its function as ‘watchdog’. Twenty six years later the ‘watchdog’ conception of the journalist took on mythic proportions (Louw, 2010, p.52). Louw (2010) argued the journalistic reporting of the Watergate scandal in 1972 (which revealed the attempted cover-up by President Nixon and his staff of a break-in at the Democratic Party headquarters) became a “myth-making event of global importance – entering journalistic folklore across the entire Anglo world, and transforming the professional ideology of liberal journalists everywhere” (p.52).

In popular culture, the image of the ‘watchdog’ journalist was immortalized on the big screen by the heroic portrayal of journalists Woodward and Bernstein in the movie about the scandal, *All the President’s Men*.

Despite the dominance of the ‘watchdog’ stereotype it needs to be acknowledged that less flattering labels of “lapdog” and “junkyard dog” (Sabato, 2000), “jackals, sharks, reptiles, liars, whores and rat bags” (Hurst, 1994, p. vii) are also applied to journalists. However, the ‘watchdog’ ideal and its associated values have become deeply ingrained in the occupational ideology for journalists in western liberal democracies (Deuze, 2005a, p. 7) and embedded in the journalism codes of ethics in those countries (C.A.J., 2011; MEAA, 1998; NUJ, 1936; S.P.J.,

\(^4\) Edmund Burke reportedly coined the term Fourth Estate for the press gallery to conceptually mark its importance against the other three realms of power - the Monarchy, the House of Lords and the House of Commons (Hampton, 2010, p 3).
1996). For example the *Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance – Journalists’ Code of Ethics* (1998) states the role of journalism is to “inform citizens and animate democracy” and declares that “respect for truth and the public’s right to information are fundamental principles of journalism”. This is echoed in books on journalism practice such as Kovach and Rosenstiel’s (2007) guide to the *Elements of Journalism* which states journalism’s first “obligation is to the truth” and its “first loyalty is to citizens” to “serve as an independent monitor of power” (p. 5). In the academic literature, Zelizer (2012) argues that journalism’s professional identity has become so wedded to its relationship with democracy and the role of the ‘watchdog’ that it has dominated journalism scholarship almost to the exclusion of other aspects of the practice.

Journalism’s strong ideological identification with the ‘watchdog’ role did not emerge in isolation from other communications roles. As will be discussed below, journalism developed in tandem with public relations and grew to define itself against the propagandistic practices used by the early public relations practitioners at the time of the First World War (Schudson, 2012; St. John III, 2010). Those anti-democratic practices continue to be associated with the contemporary role of the political ‘spin-doctor’ and serve to fuel journalism’s oppositional conception of the public relations role.

1.2.3. The stereotype of the ‘spin-doctor’

The political ‘spin-doctor’ has been satirised in film and television around the world. The satirical television series *The Hollow Men* produced for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation portrayed the inner workings of the Prime Minister’s office as a reactive, media-driven secretive cabal of party hacks serving every vested interest other than the public’s. The recent Danish political drama *Borgen* depicted the role of the Prime Minister’s ‘spin-doctor’, Kasper Juul, as someone who prided himself on not taking ethical issues into account when dealing with the media and focussing solely on tactics instead. In the United Kingdom, one of the most memorable satirical interpretations of a parliamentary media adviser was that of Malcolm Tucker in the British sitcom *The Thick of It*. The character was rumoured to be loosely based on Alastair Campbell, the Director of Communications in the Blair Government who exerted unprecedented control over government dealings with the media. Malcolm Tucker was portrayed as a control
freak and bully with a talent for swearing who abused his role with the media, the bureaucracy and members of parliament. He has come to be seen as “the evil personification of spin” (McNair, 2007, p. 94), a “political Mephisto” who “orchestrates the manipulation of both the press and the public” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 43). The very fact that the role of the evil ‘spin-doctor’ has made it in to popular culture, McNair (2007) argues, is a sign of how contested issues surrounding the role are.

The emergence of the ‘spin-doctor’ stereotype can be traced back to the appearance of the “press agent” and “publicity man” in the 1920s, documented by Walter Lippmann (1921/2010) in his influential book *Public Opinion*. Lippmann (1921/2010) saw this new role acting as “censor and propagandist” who would save the reporter a lot of trouble by “giving shape” to facts and improve the level of information being supplied to the media (p. 229). As a consequence, James Carey (1997c, p. 24) stated Lippmann had “legitimised a democratic politics of publicity experts”.

The appearance of the “press agent” also played another role. As mentioned in 1.2.2. (above), the emergence of the “press agent” served as a major catalyst for the professionalization of journalism and further development of the journalist’s ideological world view of the democratic ‘watchdog’ (Schudson, 2012; St. John III, 2010). Michael Schudson (2012) contends that the unethical practices of “press agents” around the time of the First World War, such as the use of stunts, bribes and gifts, generated so much opprobrium that journalists moved to actively define themselves against this new class of communications professional. Having also been complicit in the spread of government propaganda there was a move to “rehabilitate journalism’s credibility” by working to establish its own distinctive value system (St. John III, 2010, p. 23). Journalists did this, Schudson (2012) says, through the development of the ‘objectivity norm’ which emphasized the importance of verifiable, fact based reporting. As the ranks of public relations practitioners began to swell, Schudson (2012) says journalists felt a need to “close ranks” and “disaffiliate from the public relations specialists and propagandists who were suddenly all around them” – the bulk of whom were former print journalists (p. 162). As a result, the journalist’s professional sense of identity grew out of defining public relations anti-
democratic practices as *other* to journalism’s quasi-scientific approach to truth and its Fourth Estate role.

Negative conceptions of public relations, which stem from its historic links to propaganda, and the associated derogatory labels of “flacks”, “propagandists” and “fakers” (Delorme, 2003, p. 106) have been hard to shed. Recent surveys show, that public relations continues to be portrayed in the media as “damage control, publicity, an attempt to hide or disguise the truth” (White, 2010, p. 319). Delorme and Fedler (2003) argue that the sense of antagonism between public relations and journalism, which has come to dominate conceptions of the relationship, began to emerge from these early practices in the 1920s. St John (2010, p. 19) adds, the emergence of the press agent also signalled the start of the symbiotic, mutually dependent nature of journalism’s relationship with public relations. As the numbers of public relations practitioners has grown, so has the resentment of journalists who have become increasingly reliant on PR sources for their stories (Delorme & Fedler, 2003; Macnamara, 2012).

Since the arrival of the “press agent” in the 1920s the number of public relations professionals has risen rapidly. By the 1980s and 1990s, Mayhew (1997) said the trend toward employing public relations practitioners “exploded” with political consultants, media specialists, public opinion pollsters, professional grassroots organizers, specialised lobbyists, focus group organisers and demographic researchers assuming increasingly influential roles (p. 4). Deacon & Golding (1991; 1994) argued governments became wise to the advantages of being able to use tax payer funds to promote its policies, which lead to the emergence of what has been coined the ‘PR State’ (Deacon & Golding, 1994; Ward, 2003; 2007) or what Mayhew (1997) described as *The New Public*. In this new era of discourse, communication is dominated by “professional specialists” who employ “techniques of persuasion” that were developed in the fields of advertising, market research, and public relations in the 1950s and systematically applied to political communication (Mayhew, 1997, p. 4).

This trend to the professionalization of political communication was one of several factors, identified by Jürgen Habermas (1989) as contributing to the demise of the idealised “public sphere”. The rise of the privately owned mass media, increasing commercialisation and the
influence of advertising and public relations on public discourse, meant the state had to “address” its citizens like consumers” and compete for publicity (Habermas, 1989, p. 195). For Habermas (1964, 1989) “the public sphere” is the realm for public discourse about political and social affairs where citizens can join to form public opinion in a rational way. This concept has had a strong influence on the ideals of participatory democracy and defining the normative role of the media. Across the communications literature – particularly evident in the scholarship of political economists (Chomsky, 1988; Davis, 2002; McChesney, 2008), critical theorists (Louw, 2010; Moloney, 2006) and journalism practitioners (Davies, 2008; Jones, 2000) – concern about the commercialisation of the mass media and the use of professional public relations techniques or ‘spin’ in politics contributed to a sense of ‘crisis’ in political communication. In this new world marked by the rise of public relations, emphasis had shifted away from policy deliberation to a pre-occupation with media presentation, political marketing and packaging (Franklin, 1994; Gaber, 2007; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Lloyd, 2004; Meyer & Hinchman 2002). This in turn lead to concern about the impact ‘spin’ and media management employed by political media advisers was having on political journalism (Jones, 2009; Davis, 2002; Tiffen, 2012).

These concerns were reinforced by high profile examples of ‘spin’ behaviour where political communications specialists were seen to be lying, obfuscating and manipulating the truth. The most notorious example of such behaviour was that displayed by the Director of Communications for the Blair Government in the UK, Alistair Campbell, who was implicated in “sexing up” claims of evidence of Weapons of Mass Destruction to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the Coalition of the Willing. This type of behaviour fuelled journalists’ suspicions about ‘spin’ and ‘spin-doctors’ who they saw as a threat to their traditional role as the Fourth Estate. As Brian McNair (2004) explained it, “to many journalists Labour’s spin doctors formed an unwelcome fifth estate, whose very existence undermined their editorial independence and integrity” (p. 332).

The sort of covert tactics used by Alistair Campbell and his colleagues were not quarantined to the United Kingdom. There have been several high profile examples much closer to home. Most recently under the newly elected Abbott government, the immigration minister announced the government would no longer provide information to the public about the arrival of each
asylum seeker boat. This was met with concerns about increased government secrecy and attempts to avoid media scrutiny. Prior to that, perhaps the most notorious Australian example was the *Children Overboard Affair* in 2001. On the eve of calling the 2001 Australian federal election, government ministers, including the Prime Minister John Howard, claimed in the media that asylum seekers on board a vessel off Christmas Island had threatened to throw their children into the sea if they were not taken to the Australian mainland. A Senate Inquiry into the events surrounding the affair later proved this claim to be untrue and trained a spotlight on the manner in which federal ministerial staff handled the information and executed their power. However, more than a decade earlier in Queensland, the *Fitzgerald Inquiry* (1989) into police corruption raised concerns about the potential for government media units and press secretaries to “control and manipulate” information they supplied to the media. In his report to the government, Commissioner Fitzgerald (1989) warned that:

> Although most government generated publicity will unavoidably and necessarily be politically advantageous, there is no legitimate justification for taxpayers’ money to be spent on politically motivated propaganda. *The only justification for press secretaries and media units is that they lead to a community better informed about government and departmental activities. If they fail to do this then their existence is a misuse of public funds, and likely to help misconduct flourish.* (Section 3.6.3. Media Units and Press Secretaries, p. 160. Emphasis added)

More recently, in 2012, questions were raised about the role of a junior prime ministerial press secretary in sparking the ‘Australia Day riots’. Comments made by the then Opposition leader, Tony Abbott, about the legitimacy of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy were taken out of context and passed on to indigenous protestors at the site who were directed to a restaurant next door, where then Prime Minister Gillard and the Opposition leader were attending an award presentation. As the glass walls began to shake under the pressure of angry fists, the former Prime Minister was bodily carried by security guards into the back of car for a fast get-away. The riot also raised

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5 The *Children overboard affair* also pointed to broader concerns about the impact of ministerial advisers on the impartiality of the public service. An examination of the relationship between media advisers and the bureaucracy is outside the scope of this thesis, however for more on this topic see (Head, 2007; Tiernan, 2007; Fleming & Holland, 2001; Ward, 2003)
questions about the involvement of Prime Minister Gillard’s “hard-nosed” communications adviser, John McTernan, in the day’s events (Bryant, 2012). McTernan had been a key staffer in the Blair government and was portrayed by British journalist, Nick Bryant (2012), as renowned for being ruthless and “for being a hater” (p. 27). During his time working for the Australian government McTernan attracted considerable publicity and criticism for the handling of media matters and broke with the Australian tradition of media minders being anonymous backstage players (Grattan, 1998b; Phillipps, 2002; Tiernan, 2007).

It is important also to note that not all political communications literature portrays the activities of political public relations in such a negative light (McNair, 2004; 2007; Norris, 2000; Scammell, 1999). In reaction to the rise of spin, McNair (2004; 2007) argues a journalism of political process emerged intent on exposing the political public relations techniques of government. As a result, this journalism of process served to educate the public and render the government’s spin practices transparent. This is a view also shared by (Stockwell, 2007) in his work on Spin doctors, citizens and democracy. Scammell (1999) contends that the use of political marketing techniques has the potential to increase community representation and involvement in the political process. While, Norris (2000) asserts that citizen disengagement and cynicism has less to do with the practices of political public relations techniques and news media reporting standards, and more to do with the nature of representative government.

Nonetheless, because of high profile examples of ethically dubious ‘spin’ behaviour, described earlier, parliamentary media advisers in particular and public relations practitioners generally have come to be portrayed as purveyors of ‘spin’ (Jones, 2000; Kurtz, 1998a; Pitcher, 2003) involved in the ‘dark-arts’ of political media advising (Oakes, 2013; Sanders, 2009). In contrast to the democratic Fourth Estate role of the journalist, the parliamentary media adviser is described as a Machiavellian, anti-democratic “secret, manipulative force” (Phillipps, 2002, p. 5) of “control freaks” (Jones, 2001), even as “consigliere” – advisers to criminal outfits (Crook, 2013) – who pedal lies and deceit in a role that is almost “universally reviled” (McNair, 2011, p. 140). In the “academic and journalistic literature about political PR”, McNair (2004) says political public relations practitioners are portrayed as “enemies of democracy, pathological liars, communication perverts and pornographers” (p. 337). However, the reflections of the
interviewees in this study highlight the inadequacy of the ‘spin-doctor’ stereotype to describe the role of the parliamentary media adviser, which is captured by the term. The caricature of the ‘spin-doctor’ is revealed to be inadequate because it fails to recognise the diversity of individual experience in context.

1.2.4. The role of the parliamentary media adviser

Underneath the hyperbole of the stereotypical ‘spin-doctor’ lies the role of the parliamentary media adviser. The role is acknowledged as a legitimate and necessary one to help ministers – and politicians in general – deal with the enormous workload and demands of the 24-hour news cycle (Grattan, 1981; Henderson, 2009; McNair, 2011; Negrine, 2008; Tiernan, 2007; Walter, 1986; Weller, 2010). To understand the nature of the role a brief description of its function and history is useful.

Historically, the parliamentary media adviser has been employed to provide media advice to an elected politician, liaise with journalists, seek answers in response to media inquiries and promote the policies of the government or opposition party. In his study of Australian parliamentary media advisers Phillipps (2002) described the role this way:

The advisers (once called press secretaries) put out press releases; stage news conferences; coach and train their masters in the finer points of presentation; they are minders, in the wings at every …encounter with the media; they try to stay one step ahead of what journalists need and provide it in time to make the hourly and daily deadlines. (p. 1)

It is a demanding role without job security and a high turn-over. A federal review of government staffing in 2009 revealed that ministerial media advisers worked the longest hours of all ministerial staff at around 80 hours per week (Henderson, 2009). The demands created by digital social media and the 24-hour news cycle mean the pressures faced by parliamentary media adviser continue to increase. Despite the heavy workload the individuals who take on the role generally describe it as being a satisfying, exciting and challenging experience (Phillipps, 2002), a perspective shared by the interviewees in this study.
The first parliamentary media adviser appeared on the Australian political landscape during the First World War around the same time as the “press agent” emerged in the United States. In 1916, Labor Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, requested the temporary recruitment of a parliamentary press gallery journalist from *The Argus* newspaper, Lloyd Dumas, to help with promoting the failing campaign for conscription (Walter, 1986, p. 41). At that time the parliamentary press gallery in Canberra was small enough for Prime Ministers to provide personal press briefings in their office. Prior to the advent of television, Prime Minister John Curtin was renowned for giving twice daily face-to-face briefings to the media (Grattan, 1998a), an intimacy no longer possible with the arrival of mass media and 24-hour digital communications. By the Second World War the employment of prime ministerial media advisers in Australia had become common place, but not so for ministers. It was not until the early 1970s under the Whitlam government that the trend of employing ministerial staff – including ministerial media advisers – began in earnest. In a bid to counter expected antipathy from a bureaucracy that had served the conservative Menzies government for twenty three years, the freshly elected Labor administration introduced a new ministerial staffing system (Anthony, 1975, p. 124). Veteran journalist Kerry O’Brien, who was a reporter at the time and an interviewee in this study, recalled the change in ministerial staffing arrangements under the Whitlam government this way:

*Kerry O’Brien:* You’ve got to remember that in ’72 there were only about four or five press secretaries in the whole parliament. The leader had one and I think the Senate leader had one on each side...but it blossomed under Gough. Each minister had a media minder and partly that was reflecting the deep inexperience of that ministry because they had been in opposition for 23 years. No one in that government had ever been a minister before. Secondly Gough’s programme was the single most ambitious agenda ever put to an election campaign in this country. Because it was such a massive reform agenda, the judgement was obviously made that the ministers were going to need help to get the message out. But by that it doesn’t mean manipulation and “blah blah”, it simply meant they needed technical advice and how to deal with the media and to be effective communicators of policies that were largely unknown. (O’Brien, 2012)

Since the 1970s, the role of the parliamentary media adviser has become entrenched in the Australian political landscape. Despite the acknowledged legitimacy of the role, it is difficult to ascertain how many parliamentary media advisers are employed by Australian state and federal governments. This is partly due to the way communications functions across government are
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classified. Ian Ward (2007) has theorised these roles in four tiers – media minders (such as ministerial media advisers); media units (which coordinate overall government messaging); public service communicators employed in every government department; and whole-of-government co-ordination of government information activities (p. 6). Depending on the information made available, it can be difficult to determine actual numbers of staff and/or distinguish a public servant engaged in departmental communications tasks from a parliamentary media adviser employed by an MP (Pearson & McLean, 2010, p. 25; Pearson & Patching, 2008, p. 8; Turnbull, 2007, p. 119). This obscuring of communications roles across government has resulted in misleading coverage about the number and cost of parliamentary media advisers. This can be seen in a series of articles in News Limited papers on the cost of ‘spin’ to the Australian taxpayer (Crouch, 2010; Editorial, 2010; Lion, 2010) which fail to distinguish between media advisers employed to work for parliamentarians and those working within the departments. However, the 2011/12 annual report of the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984, under which all federal parliamentary political staff are employed, shows there was a total of 371 ministerial staff engaged by the Gillard government, 29 of whom were denoted as ministerial media advisers, while the Opposition was listed as having employed six specialist media advisers (Government, 2011). This lack of transparency around the role adds to the perception of parliamentary media advisers generally, and ministerial media advisers specifically, as being backstage operators or “shadow players” (Phillipps, 2002) who have “power without responsibility” (Tiernan, 2007).

What the overlapping histories of these two different but interrelated roles of the parliamentary media adviser and journalist reveal, is the polarisation of values attached to each of the roles. On the one hand, is the anti-democratic ‘spin-doctor’ whose practices grew out of the traditions of propaganda and the unethical tactics of the “press agents”. On the other hand, is the ‘watchdog’ journalist whose professional ideology not only grew out of its central role in democracy, but also out of its opposition to the propagandistic practices of the early “press agents”. From these divergent historical backgrounds grew not only a sense of tension, but also a conception of ethical opposition between the two roles. This conception of antithesis is particularly observable in the journalism and critical theory literature, and is explored directly below.
1.3. **Journalist & parliamentary media adviser as antithetical roles**

The oppositional characterisation of the journalist and parliamentary media adviser is not limited to the stereotypes of the ‘watchdog’ and ‘spin-doctor’. This study explores a range of binary pairs that appear in the literature relating to the different goals of journalism and parliamentary media advising: journalism and public relations generally; and journalism and politics. A useful example of this ethical opposition appears in *Media, Markets and Morals* by Spence, Alexander, Quinn & Dunn (2011). In their analysis of the ethical compatibility between journalism, public relations and advertising, the authors argue each of the roles treats information differently. Spence et al. (2011) contend the central purpose of journalism is to “inform” truthfully and fairly in “the public interest”; whereas the primary goal of public relations is advocacy – which is a form of “persuasion” – and requires “presenting the client in a favourable light” (pp. 97, 99):

> Unlike journalism, which, in principle, is committed to informing the public truthfully and objectively on matters of public interest, independent of any other commercial interests, public relations, as an advocate for its clients, is primarily committed to informing the public only on matters pertinent to client’s interests. Moreover it does so in a manner that is partial and favourable to its clients. (Spence et al., 2011, p. 99)

By ignoring the complex reality of the two roles in their reasoning, Spence et al. (2011) place journalism and public relations in distinct and separate categories and conclude that journalism and public relations (and advertising) are “inherently incompatible both epistemologically and ethically” with each other (p. 96). The authors say they reached this conclusion based on reasoning that the role morality of each position is constrained by “universal public morality” (Spence, 2011, p.17). To understand this reasoning a more detailed examination of the concepts of role morality and universal public morality follows.

The concept of role morality suggests that professional practice in a given role is defined by a set of principles, rules and values prescribed to it. As a result Gibson (2003, p. 17) says: “individuals may adopt a different morality depending on the roles they undertake” and thereby effectively “wear two ‘moral hats’ — one for work and one for everywhere else”. This theory is often applied to the legal profession to help explain how barristers can defend serious criminals and thereby “abdicate moral responsibility when acting in a role” (Gibson, 2003, p. 17). If we
relate this concept of role morality back to the job of parliamentary media advising, the
suggestion being made by Spence et al. (2011) is that the public relations goal of advocacy and
representing a client’s interest might cause conflict with “universal public morality”. By
universal public morality, the authors mean a set of values and principles that apply to “everyone
without exception in all places at all times under relevantly similar conditions because of our
common humanity” (Spence et al., 2011, p. 18). For example the authors state that:

Deception by the media through disinformation is morally prohibited by universal public
morality, even if the ‘role morality’ of a particular media, such as public relations, for
example sanctions or allows covert deception for maximum persuasion of its media
messages. (Spence et al., 2011, p. 18)

The authors explain that “disinformation is morally prohibited” (p. 18) because under universal
public morality “deceiving people is generally morally wrong since it violates their basic rights
to freedom and well-being” (p. 19). A full critique of this argument would take us too far into
the field of philosophical ethics which is beyond the scope of this study but a few points need to
be made. Firstly, the argument relies on a grossly over-simplified view of what the roles of
journalism and public relations are; and secondly, it ignores the tension between journalism
theory and the reality of practice. For instance, the authors say journalism is committed to
informing the public “truthfully”. At the abstract level of ideals that might be the case, but at the
level of practice the reality reveals a much more complicated picture. It is a picture that includes
ethical practice as well as corrupted practice of “falsehoods and distortions” (Davies, 2008, p. 2),
et al. (2011) also frame journalism as reporting in the “public interest”. Again, this might be the
case in many instances, but the public interest is not the only interest journalists take into
consideration when they are reporting. For journalists working for a commercial news
organisation he or she will be aware of the proprietor’s commercial interest and understand that
news is a commodity to sell papers and advertising space, which can have an influence on
editorial content (Hamilton, 2004). The journalist will also be motivated by a degree of “self
interest” (Richardson, 2002, p. 170) in wanting to write the catchiest story possible to further his
or her career. As a former journalist and parliamentary media adviser, Greg Turnbull (2011),
wryly expressed it: “Well, sometimes [it is] self-interest and ego masquerading as the public
interest”. In which case, a reporter’s motivations are much more complex and fractured than the singular ideal of serving the public interest would suggest. This tension between idealised journalism theory and the realities of practice was also perceived by the interviewees in this study and appears throughout the thesis.

The perception of the roles being antithetical is also present in other literature relevant to journalist-parliamentary media adviser relations. For example, Karen Sanders (2009) portrays the dichotomy between journalists and politicians as a tug of war between the “release” and “control” of information (p. 36). The primary goal of the journalist is to seek the “release” of information while the goal of the politician (and thereby the media adviser) is to “control” information. In Louw’s (2010) text on political communication he sharply segregates journalists, who he calls “media workers”, from the “spin industry”. The “spin industry” Louw (2010) says, is full of “hype makers” who are regarded as “confidence tricksters” who are “aware they are creating publicity that is somehow ‘false’, a ‘bluff’, or a ‘con-job’” (p. 13); whereas journalists are generally defined by their role as democratic ‘watchdog’. In Moloney’s (2006) separation thesis he conceptually distinguishes the work practices of public relations from journalism by saying although they share common skills, “their professional motivations (advocacy for interests as opposed to scrutiny of interests) are antithetical” (p. 162). A simple list of the dichotomous pairs used to describe the two roles, might prove useful:

**Table 1: Dichotomous conceptions**

(Source: the author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journalist</th>
<th>Parliamentary Media Adviser (PR/Politics)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘watchdog’</td>
<td>‘spin-doctor’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>Lies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Manipulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Release</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform</td>
<td>Advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scrutiny</td>
<td>Advocacy/Persuasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Anti-democratic/Propaganda, ‘dark-side’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public interest</td>
<td>Client’s interest/Commercial interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Drawing these stark lines of differentiation between the two roles might be a useful organisational tool, but what this study reveals is these points of segregation fail to acknowledge the areas of overlap and similarity between the two roles. From the perspective of the interviewees in this study the attribution of these oppositional goals to distinguish journalism from parliamentary media advising was seen as too simple. Questions to the interviewees about the polarised ethical depictions of the two roles, such as ‘truth’ versus ‘spin’, ‘informing’ versus ‘advocacy’, ‘release’ versus ‘control’, invoked responses from them describing the oppositional framing as: “black and white”, “crude”, “simplistic”, “false dichotomies” and “sanctimonious”.

*Tom, who had worked as a parliamentary media adviser at the federal level and chose to remain anonymous, expressed frustration at the antithetical portrayal of the two roles:

*Tom: I find that so sanctimonious. I mean if you have been a press secretary you know that journalists’ commitment to the truth and public interest is a highly subjective and qualified thing. There are good journalists and bad journalists and there are ethical and unethical journalists as there are ethical and unethical PR people and ethical and unethical advertisers. So for anyone to say that, I think it is just wrong, inaccurate, jaundiced and sanctimonious frankly. I think you can do those jobs and do them ethically, every single one of them. I think the public knows the difference...I don’t think the public views journalism as being as special as it views itself. I don’t think the public has the faith in journalism that journalists think they have. I don’t think the public sees such a big difference between journalism, PR and advertising as journalists would like to think, either. If you accept a job you do it to your best ability and with your ethics and integrity. And it doesn’t matter in which of these silos it’s in. (*Tom, 2011)

*Tom’s frustration stemmed from what he perceived as an idealistic and inaccurate framing of journalism and a moralistic and judgmental view of public relations and parliamentary media advising. Based on his experience in both roles he perceived discordance between the idealised theoretical principles of journalism and the reality of practice. Based on his recollections of his time as a parliamentary media adviser and being on the receiving end of what he perceived to be poor reporting practice, *Tom did not believe that journalism deserved to occupy the moral high ground. This sense of idealism around the role of the journalist and moralism or judgmentalism toward the role of the parliamentary media adviser permeates the dichotomous portrayal of the two roles in the literature and popular culture. As will be discussed below, the reliance on oversimplified and de-contextualised idealistic and moralistic framing of the two roles fuels the conception of tension between them.
1.4. Moralism, idealism & realism and the importance of context

In order to explain the use of the terms moralism, idealism and realism in relation to journalism and parliamentary media advising I have drawn on Coady’s (2008) work, *Messy Morality: the challenge of politics*. In his book, Coady (2008, p. 17) says, the problem with moralism stems from a sense of judgmentalism from others who do not understand the contextual complexities of a particular circumstance. As a consequence of this lack of contextual understanding the moralizer can assume a position of moral superiority which can lead to the use of generalised stereotypes. The use of moralism can be clearly seen in the oppositional stereotypes of the ‘watchdog’ journalist and manipulative ‘spin-doctor’ and the associated assumptions of journalism’s ethical superiority over parliamentary media advising and public relations generally. This sense of moralism or judgmentalism can also be observed in *Media, Markets and Morals* (Spence et al., 2011) and the antithetical portrayal of the goals of journalism and public relations as “informing” versus “advocacy”.

This sense of moralism is also supported by studies of journalists’ attitudes towards public relations. Delorme & Fedler (2003) explain reporters have traditionally treated public relations and its practitioners with contempt. Journalists, they say, accuse public relations professionals of being “unethical, manipulative, one-sided, and deceptive” and serve special interests rather than the public interest (Delorme, 2003, p. 99). In turn, public relations practitioners have criticised journalists for having “a narrow and self-righteous view of their work” and for not understanding the role of public relations, nor its ethical base (Delorme, 2003, p.100).

Another example of moralism can be seen in the common use of the term “dark-side” (Macnamara, 2012; Savva, 2010, p. 108) by journalists in relation to parliamentary media advising and public relations in general. By virtue of public relations being on the “dark-side” it implies that journalism must lie on the side of ‘light’ and righteousness. Journalist John Lloyd (2006) bluntly equated journalists’ view of public relations to that of “a dog to a lamp-post” (p. 136), again giving expression to a sense of moralism and judgmentalism on the part of reporters towards public relations and PR practitioners.
As mentioned earlier, Coady (2008) said, one of the problems with moralism – and idealism – is that it invites the use of stereotypes and ignores the individual and his or her circumstances. Taylor (2005a) argued that people rely on stereotypes or shorthand caricatures because they are “easy” (p. 158) and by doing so, “moralists place themselves above human frailty and the messy business of life” (p. 159). The consequence of this, Taylor (2005a) said, is that the moralist denies the variety of individual experience. For instance, Taylor (2005a, p. 158) said, it is much easier to think of all public officials “as corrupt, than as real, conscientious people in a hard place”. That is not to say that public officials should be immune from criticism, but Taylor (2005a) said “if we are not to descend in to moralism we need to ask ourselves honestly what a morally responsible person should do in their situation” (p. 158). In the context of this study, it is “easy” to rely on the stereotype of the manipulative ‘spin-doctor’ and dismiss all parliamentary media advisers as liars, rather than seeing them as individuals with their own morality making decisions about the release information in an adversarial political context.

The same problems occur when one relies on idealistic stereotypes, such as the ‘watchdog’ reporter, because it ignores the multiple roles that journalists perform. Those roles range from providing information in the public interest to providing entertainment to interest the public. In a provocative article On the Shelf Life of Democracy in Journalism Scholarship, journalism academic, Barbie Zelizer (2012, p. 11) argues, it might be time for the journalism academy to consider “retiring” democracy’s “exclusionary” and “elitist” relationship with journalism. Zelizer (2012) argues that continuing to place journalism up on a morally righteous pedestal is un-sustainable. She contends that the traditional reliance on the nexus between democracy and journalism needs to be questioned, because hitching journalism’s central purpose to the idea of democracy has:

undermined the capacity of journalism scholars to speak reliably about the world of journalism practice. Instead many existing discussions of journalism have become insular, static, exclusionary, marginalizing, disconnected, elitist, unrepresentative and historically and geographically myopic (Zelizer, 2012, pp. 11-12).

Zelizer (2012) argues, that if fulfilling a democratic role continues to be seen as journalism’s main function then it will deny the reality that much of journalism practice is driven by values other than democratic, such as entertainment, conflict and commercial interests. As Sabato
(2000) and Zelizer (2012) both point out, journalists have not always performed a ‘watchdog’ role. During the McCarthy era in the United States and the “lapdog” era of the Second World War journalists took on a much more subservient approach to reporting. Beyond western liberal democracies, Zelizer (2012) argues, the notions of a free press and the public’s right to know have little currency. Zelizer (2012) argues that idealised conceptions of journalism also ignore regular breaches of journalism ideals. For example, the high-profile incident involving a former New York Times journalist, Jayson Blair, who in 2003 was found to have fabricated and plagiarised information in his stories. Even the famed coverage of the Watergate break-in, which is held aloft as an exemplar of “heroic” ‘watchdog’ reporting, used some information gathering methods that Hirst & Patching (2007) describe as being “far from heroic” (p. 20). Hirst & Patching (2007) point to the fact that the reporters, Bernstein and Woodward, misrepresented themselves by not revealing they were reporters when making their inquiries and thereby breached the journalists’ code of ethics. The reporting duo also broke the law by making contact with jurors during the hearings into the scandal. Hirst & Patching (2007) argue these sorts of examples demonstrate “the very real contradiction between the theory and practice of ethics in journalism” (p. 1).

What these examples from the literature highlight is the inadequacy of stereotypes. They are inadequate because they can only ever represent “at best a partial truth” (Tiffen, 1999, p. 207). Whether journalism is characterised as the democratic ‘watchdog’ or submissive “lapdog” either label can only ever be partially true. It can only be partially true because it cannot reflect all of the actions of the individual journalists who are collectively labelled by it, nor the contexts in which those individuals operate. However, there is enough evidence of reporting that does perform the Fourth-Estate function of scrutinising power for the ‘watchdog’ stereotype to continue to have resonance and thereby remain partially true. Similarly, there is ample evidence of negative and aggressive reporting for the label of “junkyard dog” (Sabato, 2000) to also represent a partial truth. The important point is that neither stereotype can be true of all journalism all of the time.
The same can be said in relation to the moralistic framing of the parliamentary media adviser. There are enough high-profile examples of political manipulation and lying to give currency to the stereotype of the manipulative ‘spin-doctor’. However, Esser & Tenscher (2005) argue, the few high-profile figures that attract the spotlight “are not representative of the group of political communication experts as a whole (who are predominantly very restrained)” (p. 18). As one of the interviewees in this study, Vivienne Wynter, expressed it:

**Vivienne Wynter: I think the controlling press secretary is a minority stereotype. It’s like the inaccurate or sensationalising journo.** (Wynter, 2012)

However, the few high-profile spin-doctors:

intensify the myth of the all-powerful spin doctors active in every nerve centre of political marketing. The result is a distorted professional image that is fuelled by self-positioning efforts of a few exceptional spin doctors. (Esser & Tenscher, 2005, p. 18)

Esser & Tenscher (2005) argue, that these atypical high-profile figures continue to dominate the public imagination because of the “invisibility” of the role of the political communicator. As a result there are no other high-profile positive role models to challenge the dominant negative stereotype.

Not only are the role conceptions of the journalist and parliamentary media adviser simplified along blunt, binary lines, but the communication contexts in which these two roles perform have also been abstractly idealised. Take for instance Habermas’s theory of “the public sphere”, an idealised communication space where individuals communicate as equals without the exertion of power. In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas (1984) draws clear distinctions between three levels of speech. The first is “communicative action” which is oriented to understanding and is achieved in the absence of egocentric motives and force. The second is the realm of “strategic action” in which communication is geared to achieving success by influencing the action of others; and thirdly, the level of “manipulation” which is a type of deception (Klemp, 2012, pp. 29-37). The problem with these idealised speech situations is that they do not reflect complex reality. People’s motivations are not so clearly segmented. More than one of those levels of communication – communicative, strategic and manipulation – can be present at the same time. As Philosopher Bernard Williams (2002) explains, it is not possible to
have a conversation that arrives at a result without the presence of at least some “persuasive power” or “force of argument” (p. 226). Rather than this sort of abstract simplified view of communication, Williams (2002) argues, as does this researcher, that a more realistic contextualised approach is needed.

By realistic or realist I do not mean the extreme form of realism championed by Machiavelli in 1532, which argued there is no place for morality in politics and the ends justify the means. On the contrary, the term realist is used here in a more tempered way, which argues the need for morality to be viewed in context so as to understand the way circumstance “conditions what is possible” (Coady, 2008, p. 20). This doctoral research is an attempt to move beyond the partiality of the simple moralistic and idealistic stereotypes of the two roles by injecting the more complex realist view of the practitioner.

It must be stated that in placing an emphasis on the importance of context, this thesis does not attempt to excuse or justify unethical behaviour on the part of the interviewees. However, it needs to be clearly understood that this thesis is not a project in the researcher’s moral judgement. It is a project in understanding what impact, if any, moving through the roles of journalist and parliamentary media adviser had on the twenty-one individuals’ conceptions of journalism values and practice. The importance of context to ethical decision making is discussed below.

As mentioned above, the problem with the dominance of moralism and idealism in the portrayal of the role of the parliamentary media adviser and the journalist is that they encourage reliance on “easy” generalised stereotypes that ignore the individual in context. As will be discussed below, the presence of moralism and idealism in the academic literature and popular culture fails to recognise individual variation of experience and the application of ethics in context.

The term “context” is very broad and is virtually limitless. In considering the context of a person’s actions and ethical decision making a wide range of factors can contribute to the particular circumstances that lead to a person’s behaviour in a given situation. As Tetlock et al. (1996) said, “people do not make decisions in a social vacuum” (p. 35). Every day people make decisions about what course of action to take in particular circumstances. Some of those choices
might involve striking compromises or “value trade-offs” between “pragmatic pressures and moral ideals” (Tetlock, 2003, p. 324). Those “value trade-offs” might be over:

obligations to others versus self-interest...work versus family versus leisure, and the common dilemma of accountability to conflicting constituencies (in order to please this person...I must anger this other one). (Tetlock et al. 1996, p. 25)

Whether working as a journalist or as a parliamentary media adviser many of the interviewees in this study recognised that they were required to weigh up pragmatic pressures and moral ideals in relation to the use of information. As journalists they faced deadline and other institutional pressures that have an impact on editorial decision making (Gans, 1979/2004; Tiffen, 1989; Tuchman, 1978). In the role of parliamentary media adviser, the interviewees perceived a range of contextual factors that influenced the way in which they responded to enquiries from the media. The transcripts revealed the interviewees faced daily questions about what information to release to particular journalists, and when? As chapter 4 shows, answering those questions required the interviewees to navigate the tension between the pragmatic requirements of parliamentary media advising and the moral ideal of truth. Each of the interviewees approached these daily questions differently according to the context of the situation. A range of responses was adopted by the interviewees from the straight provision of accurate information through to the use of more manipulative tactics. What became clear is that each situation was managed differently. One of the key contextual factors to emerge from the interviews that had a bearing on individual responses was the importance of trust. Several of the interviewees revealed that their perception of trust toward a particular reporter or the media in general, influenced the level of candour they used in responding to a journalist’s enquiry. The interviewees’ reflections showed a link between perceptions of trust and levels of truth and disclosure with journalists. This finding does not apply to all of the twenty-one interviewees, but it did apply to one third of the contributors and has implications for political discourse and democracy. The relationship between trust and truth is explained below.
1.5. **The importance of trust to truth & disclosure**

In order to understand the importance of context to truth and disclosure I have drawn on the work of philosopher Bernard Williams (2002), whose book *Truth & Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* elegantly describes the connection between the two. In his examination of truth and its preconditions, Bernard Williams (2002) explains that truth cannot occur without the virtues of both accuracy and sincerity being present. By accuracy and sincerity Williams (2002) means the person providing the information must not only provide correct and accurate information, but they must also be sincere in their intention to do so. In other words, the act of sincerity requires a lack of calculation or deliberation on the part of the individual. However, Williams (2002) says, in order for an individual to be sincere in their desire to provide truthful information to another, there needs to exist a level of trust between them. Without trust, he says, one cannot expect people to be truthful and open with each other. This is particularly so, he argues, in the combative world of politics where trust and total openness between opponents is unrealistic.

From the point of view of this study, the description provided by Williams (2002) is very useful. His explanation of the importance of trust to truth directly applies to the statements made by the interviewees in this study regarding issues surrounding truth that they confronted in the role of parliamentary media advising. As chapter 4 of this thesis shows, several of the interviewees explained that they were likely to be more candid with journalists they trusted than with reporters they did not trust and who they deemed to be unethical and unfair in their reporting. Those interviewees also revealed that their perceptions of poor journalism practice and loss of trust in certain reporters led them to reconsider their commitment to the key journalism principle of the ‘public’s right to know’. Chapter 4 includes a list of thirteen tactics described by the interviewees around the management of truth and disclosure and the circumstances in which those tactics were used.

These candid admissions about the tactics adopted by the interviewees are important because they demonstrate a connection between the interviewees’ perceptions of trust and the free flow of information to the public via the media. In the context of recent debates both here and in the United Kingdom over poor reporting standards and the state of political discourse, these insights
are important. They are important because they provide an opportunity for both journalists and parliamentary media advisers to increase their understanding about the pressures faced by the other and reflect on the contribution of their own behaviour to the level of trust or distrust between them.

Though perceptions of trust were seen by several of the interviewees to have had a direct impact on his or her commitment to the disclosure of information whilst in the role of parliamentary media adviser, it must be stated that it was not the case for the majority of the individuals in this study. While it is not possible to identify all of the varying contextual factors that may have contributed to this variation in individual experience, several key influences did emerge from the interview transcripts and analysis of the literature that appeared to have had an impact on the interviewees’ perceptions of trust in the media. They included: the tactical nature of the reporter-source relationship; workplace ethical culture; the interviewees’ personal values; and perceptions of the individual ethical behaviour of the journalists that the interviewees interacted with. The interviews also revealed the amount of pressure the interviewee was under shaped their perceptions of particular situations and how best to respond to them. This pressure was influenced by a range of circumstances such as the interviewee’s perception of: the fortunes of the politician and party they worked for; the issue at hand, i.e. whether it was a contentious issue or not; whether the interviewee worked for a government minister or backbencher, the Opposition or a minor party; and the size of the jurisdiction. Examples of each of these contextual influences are provided in chapters 3 and 4.

Another factor that appears to have had an impact on perceptions of trust in the media was the era in which the interviewee worked as a parliamentary media adviser. The interview data revealed a rough distinction between those journalists who had worked as parliamentary media advisers prior to the mid 1990s and those who worked from the mid 1990s to the present. The interviewees who performed the role in the 1970s and 1980s – (David Barnett for Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser 1975 - 83; Kerry O’Brien for Opposition leader Gough Whitlam in 1977 and Deputy Opposition leader, Lionel Bowen 1978-80; Dennis Shanahan for NSW Attorney General, John Dowd, 1988; Dennis Atkins for Senator Nick Bolkus 1981-83 and Mick Young 1983– 85; and Barrie Cassidy for Prime Minister Bob Hawke 1986-91) – did not express strong views
about poor media standards and a resultant loss of trust. In contrast, more than half of the interviewees who worked as parliamentary media advisers from the mid 1990s to the present had stronger views about poor media practice. Several of them said this led to a reconsideration of their commitment to the key journalism value of the ‘public’s right to know’. This issue is explored further in chapter 4.

Though a fractured pattern did emerge from the interview data roughly along historical lines, further quantitative research needs to be done to confirm whether or not there is a genuine trend in rising levels of distrust between parliamentary media advisers and journalists or whether the issue of trust between them has remained stable. If there is a trend it would be interesting to determine whether it follows a similar timeline to the wealth of political communication literature concerned with the demise of the “public sphere” and growing sense of antagonism between the media and politicians (Brants, 2011; Cappella, 1997; Carey, 1997a; de Beus, 2011; Gurevitch, 1995; Habermas, 1964; Lloyd, 2004; McNair, 2006; Sabato, 2000; Schlesinger, 2006; Tanner, 2011). Regardless of the era in which the interviewee worked as a parliamentary media adviser, chapter 4 of this thesis reveals that trust was seen as a key consideration by each of them when it came to dealing with individual reporters.

1.6. Conclusion

As this introduction has demonstrated, at one level this thesis is a phenomenological examination of the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again. At a more abstract level this thesis points to the larger debate about the state of contemporary political discourse, as well as broader abstract themes of moralism, idealism and realism; the influence of context on individual ethics; and the relationship between trust, truth and disclosure.

This thesis does not offer any neat and final theories about the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again, nor does it reveal one uniform experience of the career phenomenon under examination. If it did, it would not be true to the aims of this study and what it has found, which is the complex variety of individual contextualised experience. The strength of this targeted qualitative study lies in its very ability to move away from the dominant
generalisations and highlight the diversity of the interviewees’ experiences. Though this study has attempted to maintain its focus on individual lived experience, it has not been possible to avoid all generalisations. Commonalities have emerged from the research that offer valuable insights into the transition experience between journalism and parliamentary media advising and in such instances those links and generalisations have been made. However, a significant attempt has been made to identify the unique experiences as well.

Just as this thesis challenges the inadequacy of the stereotypes surrounding the role of the journalist and the parliamentary media adviser, so too does it challenge the academic disciplinary silos within which these two roles are placed. As previously stated, this thesis is an exploratory project at the intersection of politics, journalism and public relations. Rather than confirm distinctions between the fields this study reveals areas of overlap and continuum. Rather than reinforce the dichotomies, this study throws open the borders between these fields and challenges the rigid divisions. By failing to recognise the areas of overlap between them, the separate academic treatment of these roles serves to perpetuate the moralistic and idealistic view of the journalist and the parliamentary media adviser.

In response to the valuable insights provided by the twenty-one journalists who made the transition from reporting to parliamentary media advising, this thesis argues for a more nuanced discussion about these two important roles at the centre of political discourse. By drawing on a rich selection of interdisciplinary literature and the unique comparative insights of twenty-one practitioners this qualitative study sheds light on the interaction between reporters and parliamentary media advisers and how perceptions of that behaviour can influence trust and ultimately the free flow of information to the public via the media. In demonstrating the variety of individual contextualised practitioner experience, this thesis challenges us to rethink the oppositional stereotypes of the ‘watchdog’ journalist and the manipulative ‘spin-doctor’ that have come to define them.
2. **Methodology**

This chapter outlines the aims, philosophical underpinnings and methods used in the conduct of this doctoral research, which examines the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again.

2.1. **Research aims and questions**

The goal of this research has been to gain a greater understanding of the individual lived experience of the career transition described above. By drawing on the experiences of twenty-one journalists who had followed this career path, the researcher sought to understand whether the shift from reporter to the new role of parliamentary media adviser did or did not have an impact on the interviewee’s conception of journalism values and practice. In essence, this research aimed to discover whether the journalists who moved between these two roles experienced any sense of conflict with their journalism values.

2.2. **Philosophical underpinnings**

This is an inductive qualitative research project which falls under the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and draws on the theoretical traditions of hermeneutic-phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. In contrast to the positivist paradigm based on the foundational work of Auguste Comte (1975) that promotes the use of natural science methods to the study of the social world, an interpretivist epistemology sees the study of human behaviour as something separate from the natural sciences and is focussed on generating understanding of human behaviour rather than a causal explanation of it (Bryman, 2008, p. 15). In contrast to an objectivist ontology which contends that there is a verifiable reality external to the interpretations of social actors (Bryman, 2008, p. 18), a constructivist ontology is based on the view that reality is inseparably linked to human interpretive action (Marvasti, 2008, p. 316) and is in a constant state of social change.

The broader philosophical roots of symbolic interactionism lie deep in the heritage of phenomenology. Put simply, phenomenology is the study of phenomena, or how things appear
to us (rather than how they ‘really are’). It does not attempt to compare that experience by prejudging its rationality or testing the veracity of an individual’s perceptions through a process of triangulation. Instead, phenomenology is a study of perceptions of experience, which tries to treat the first-person perspective of that experience on its own terms. In the work of its originator, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology embodied the idea that there could be a purely descriptive, pre-suppositionless (pre-interpretative, essential or fundamental) account of first-person experience. As Husserl (2002) himself put it:

Pure phenomenology is pure consciousness. This means that pure phenomenology draws upon pure reflection exclusively, and pure reflection excludes, as such, every type of external experience and therefore precludes any copositing of objects alien to consciousness. (p. 129)

The idea that there could be such a pre-suppositionless description of lived experience was rejected by later hermeneutic-phenomenologists such as Heidegger (1927/2008) and Schutz (1970). The term hermeneutics means interpretation and was first introduced to philosophy in Ancient Greek times by Aristotle in his work *On Interpretation*. In the context of Heidegger’s philosophical writings *Being and Time*, hermeneutics suggests that our relationship to experience (both our own, and that of others) is always interpretative and thus cannot be purely descriptive in the way that Husserl imagined. As Heidegger argues, there is no meaning without interpretation and therefore “the meaning of phenomenological description as method lies in interpretation” (Heidegger, 1927/2008, p. 61. Orig. italics).

Hermeneutic-phenomenology based on Heidegger’s thesis that all description is interpretive, influenced a generation of American social theorists such as George Herbert Meade and the Chicago School, which lead to the development of symbolic Interactionism. Both hermeneutic-phenomenology and symbolic interactionism recognise that all situations, events and objects acquire meaning based on people’s interpretation. As the leading proponent of symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer (1969/1998), explains it: “human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (p. 2). Symbolic interactionism also recognises how contingent those meanings are on circumstances and context and are therefore subject to change in response to the shifting demands of everyday life. As Blumer (1969/1998) says: “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the
person dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 2). This perspective is very useful in helping to understand the variety in the interviewees’ experiences as they each made of their transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back again.

As will be shown in chapters 3 and 4, the perspective of symbolic interactionism is also very useful in understanding the importance of tactics and strategic thinking in a political context in which alliances shift and the political climate changes. For this reason a constructivist view – rather than structuralism or critical theory – was best suited to the reflexive and interpretive nature of this research project which focuses on individual experience of a particular career phenomenon rather than an analysis of social or political/economic structures. Borrowing from Ericson et al.’s (1989, p. 3) study of media-source relations, Negotiating Control: A Study of News Sources: “This study focuses on culture more than on structure, on microanalysis and agency more than on macro-analysis and institutional architecture”.

Because this study focuses on the experience of shifting between the role of journalist and parliamentary media adviser, it might be thought that the specialised field of role theory would be more appropriate to use than the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. For the following reasons role theory was not deemed appropriate for this study. As way of providing a brief background, role theory emerged in the 1960s following the appearance of Erving Goffman’s (1990) influential book The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Both role theory and Goffman’s work draw on the metaphor of dramaturgical performance to describe the way people adapt their character to various professional and personal aspects of social life. Traditionally role analysts have focussed on studying the real-life behaviour of individuals in terms of “social determinants” rather than focussing on individual experience and differences (Biddle, 1966, p. 4). For that reason role theory was considered too blunt an instrument to adequately explore the variation in the individual interpretations of the interviewees’ experiences of moving through the roles of journalist and parliamentary media adviser.

The works of two researchers in particular have provided inspiration for this study, both of whom also happen to be influenced by the theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism. The life history work of Ken Plummer (2001) and the qualitative research of David Karp (1996) in
his study *Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection and the Meanings of Illness*. Using in-depth topic-centred interviews and grounded theory strategies, Karp tells both the “unique story and reveals the *common* themes in the lives of depressed people” (1996, p. 12. Emphasis added). Though the human experience at the heart of this thesis differs from that studied in Karp’s work, the same goal of revealing the unique story and the common themes applies.

### 2.3. Location of project within inductive approaches to qualitative data analysis

One of the general characteristics of qualitative research is an inductive approach to theory generation. That means the focus of inductive reasoning is on generating concepts and theory out of the research data rather than conducting research to test theory as in the case of deductive reasoning (Bryman, 2008, p. 366; Ritchie, 2001, p. 156; Thomas, 2006, p. 238). Put simply:

> In a sense, deductive researchers hope to find data to match a theory; inductive researchers hope to find a theory that explains their data. (LeCompte and Preissle in Ritchie, 2001, p. 156)

There are several specific approaches to qualitative analysis that employ inductive reasoning, such as narrative analysis, discourse analysis, phenomenology and grounded theory, which all have distinctive analytical features. However, there are some characteristics of inductive analysis that can be described as generic and which bear a strong resemblance to strategies used in grounded theory (Bryman, 1994; Thomas, 2006). An outline of this general inductive approach has been usefully described by Thomas (2006), who lists a range of common steps taken in inductive analyses. These steps include: multiple close readings of the data; identifying categories, key themes, commonalities and differences in the material; linking categories and themes; interpreting and reducing the data by making key selections; and, embedding the themes and data in broader discussion of theory and literature. In comparison with the other qualitative analysis strategies of discourse analysis, phenomenology and grounded theory, Thomas (2006, pp. 239-241) said, the general inductive approach most closely resembled that of grounded theory. Because of the similarity of techniques used in a general inductive approach and
grounded theory, it can be said that this doctoral thesis falls within the bounds of grounded theory approaches.

To help locate this inductive study in relationship to grounded theory it is useful to first sketch a brief history of the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory was first defined by Glaser & Strauss (1967) in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. In its original form grounded theory provided a strict and detailed approach to the coding and analysis of data designed to ‘legitimate’ qualitative research in the face of criticism that it lacked the ‘validity’ of objective quantitative methods.

However, many adaptations to this original approach have occurred since then, particularly the development of “constructivist grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2009a, p. 469). Constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz (2009a) explains, has made significant departures from the traditional version outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) by encouraging researchers to get as close to their research as possible and acknowledge the influence of prior knowledge. In her account of the development of grounded theory, Charmaz (2009a) says the original approach and its two founders ended up splitting along positivist and pragmatist lines. This division, she says, grew out of the positivists’ emphasis on the scientific approach of working with data and a knowable external world, and the pragmatists’ acknowledgment of multiple realities and perspectives. Constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz (2009a) says, belongs to this latter camp and differs from the traditional approach in significant ways. Rather than encouraging distance between the researcher and the researched, Charmaz (2009b) explains that constructivist grounded theory aims to “get as close to empirical realities as possible” and “enter the liminal world of meaning and action in ways classic grounded theorists do not” (p. 131).

Charmaz (2009b) cites David Karp’s work *Speaking of Sadness* – which also draws on the philosophical tradition of symbolic interactionism and is an exemplar for this study – as an example of this latter approach taken by constructivist grounded theorists. In doing so, Charmaz (2009b) says constructivist grounded theory acknowledges the contingency of meaning to context and that together: “Symbolic Interactionism and grounded theory make a powerful theory-methods package” (p. 134). Charmaz (2009b) also argues that Karp’s personal
experience of the topic of depression and his disclosure of his experience casts him as “a double expert – an insider who has lived the studied experience and the social scientist who analyses it” (p. 133).

Although Karp (1998, 2009) does identify himself with grounded theory he says he does not follow the detailed coding protocols laid out by Glaser & Strauss (1967). Instead, Karp (2013) explains his alignment with grounded theory stems from his commitment to the “discovery of theory from carefully collected qualitative data” (Personal email correspondence 10/02/13). In a similar vein to the approach taken by Karp (2009) the interview data in this doctoral study was not subjected to a rigid level of detailed coding. Like Karp (2009), the commonality of the approach taken in this doctoral study with grounded theory lies in a commitment to emergent concepts and theory through the continual interplay between working with the interview data, the literature, extant theory, concepts and ideas in an ongoing process of creating a richer understanding of the experience under investigation.

Although the research approach taken in this study has key similarities to that taken by Karp (2009) in Speaking of Sadness, our approaches diverge at the point of definition for the following reason. Given the variation in approaches to grounded theory, the term ‘grounded theory’ is deemed by some scholars to have become quite vague in its application and not that distinguishable from a “general inductive approach for qualitative research” (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). Therefore, for the sake of clarity, I have chosen to describe the methodological approach taken in this study as a “general inductive approach” that draws on grounded theory strategies. Further discussion of the process of analysis used in this study appears in point 2.6.4.

Before moving to a detailed discussion of the methods used in this research, it is important to firstly outline the position of the interviewees within the study; and secondly, the position of the researcher. Both are dealt with in turn below.

2.4. Treating interviewees as theorists

One of the notable features of David Karp’s (1996) work is the respect with which he treats the contributions made by the interviewees in his research. By that I mean, Karp seeks to honour the
experience of each interviewee and treat them as equal, fellow contributors to the debate. Because of their personal experience of the issue under investigation Karp sees them as experts in that topic, whose reflections make a valuable theoretical contribution to understanding that particular phenomenon.

Susan Herbst (1998) takes a similarly respectful approach to the contributions made by the interviewees in her study Reading Public Opinion, which is informed by the work of Adrian Furnham (1988) and his concept of “lay theory”. Lay theories, Furnham (1988) explains, are theories – or stories – generated by people in an “attempt to make sense of the social and physical world...” and thereby “…arrive at explanations for phenomena salient to their lives” (p. 19). He calls them ‘lay theories’ because they are theories developed by everyday people who are experts in their own lives, rather than social scientists or other scholars whose knowledge is based on theory rather than personal lived experience. Diverging from the term of ‘lay theorist’ Susan Herbst (1998) says, she prefers to see the interviewees in her study as “professionals” or “sophisticates” who are expert in the issues under investigation (p. 31). As a result of this expertise, she says their reflections about that topic amount to “theories” in their own right. Herbst (1998) says the interviewees in her study were specifically chosen because they had been “key operators” in the area under investigation and as a result she believes their theoretical contributions are worth listening to. Another example of this approach is evident in the qualitative research of Robert E. Lane (1962) Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does, in which he conducts semi-structured interviews with fifteen ordinary Americans to uncover their political ideology. In this study, Lane (1962) refers to the interviewees as “political authors” whose theories make a valuable contribution to understanding his topic of study (p. 5). A similar approach to that taken by Herbst (1998), Karp (1996) and Lane (1962) has also been taken toward the thoughtful and candid contributions made by the interviewees in this study.

The twenty-one participants in this study were also specifically chosen for their direct experience – and therefore expertise – of the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again. They were chosen because they are knowledgeable insiders of both journalism and parliamentary media advising. Given the paucity of research of this phenomenon, their
theoretical contributions to knowledge of this under-explored career transition are enormously valuable. Like Herbst (1998), I do not view the contributions of the interviewees as “lay theory”. Instead, I see their contributions as theoretical reflections that are as worthy of consideration as the ideas offered by scholars and deserve to be heard and tested in the same way.

This respectful approach to the contributions of the interviewees is also consistent with the traditions of phenomenology. As previously mentioned, phenomenology is concerned with people’s perceptions of human experience, rather than positivist fact checking and the event itself. To honour that perspective no single narrow form of analysis, such as discourse analysis, has been employed here because I am interested in what people said about their experiences rather than how and why they said it. I shall explain this further. Discourse analysis is focused on the study of text, including the spoken word, and seeks to identify the underlying influences that lead to the use of those particular words. As Potter (1997) describes it, discourse analysis “emphasizes the way versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in text” (in Bryman, 2008, p. 500). In order to be true to the phenomenon I have deliberately avoided doing that type of interpretative analysis. Instead, I have focussed on what each of the interviewees had to say and considered their reflections as rational and worthy of inclusion alongside the contribution of scholarly theorists. By bringing the expert practitioner and scholarly theories together I have sought to create a more nuanced and complicated debate about the issues associated with the phenomenon of the transition between journalism and parliamentary media advising, which to date has largely remained un-explored.

2.5. Position of the researcher & reflexivity

Just as David Karp (1996) had experience of the topic at the centre of his study, I have experienced the phenomenon of making the career transition from reporting to parliamentary media advising and back to journalism. As other researchers have found (Charmaz, 2009b; Ellis, 1992; Karp, 1996; Ronai, 1992) the role of the participant researcher presents many opportunities. Being a participant-researcher means one has both personal experience of the topic under study as well as having developed deeper knowledge through the process of further research. In the context of this study my personal experience of the career transition under
examination has been essential in understanding the different contexts in which the journalist participants have worked and the different pressures that are present in each role. As Herbert Blumer (1969/1998) said:

To study them intelligently one has to know these worlds, and to know these worlds one has to examine them closely. No theorizing, however ingenious, and no observance of scientific protocol, however meticulous, are substitutes for developing familiarity with what is actually going on in the sphere of life under study. (p. 39)

The insights gained from my personal experience of being a journalist and parliamentary media adviser gave me that “familiarity” with the transition between the two roles, which Herbert Blumer said, was essential in order to study a phenomenon “intelligently”.

While a positivist framework would reject the position of the participant-researcher as not being objective, it has been argued by qualitative researchers (Grbich, 2008; Ritchie, 2001) that being reflexive about one’s practice is a form of rigour and discipline being imposed by the researcher on themself about the impact of their influence on their work. By reflexivity I mean “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 182) and acknowledging “the influence that the relationship among the researchers, the research topic and subjects may have on results” (Grbich et al. 2008, p. 245). Ritchie (2001) considers the use of reflexivity as a method for establishing “soundness” of the research (p. 156). By documenting reflections on the research process through the use of memos and journals it can enhance “self-awareness” about the researcher’s relationship to the research and the researched.

While the dual role of participant researcher offers these advantages it can also create potential problems. They are problems to do with the researcher imposing his or her own beliefs and assumptions onto the research. Tufford & Newman (2012) said this process is hard to avoid in the subjective endeavour of qualitative research as it “entails the inevitable transmission of assumptions, values, interests, emotions and theories...These preconceptions influence how data are gathered, interpreted, and presented” (p. 81).

As a result, the researcher needs to be mindful of his or her own assumptions about that experience and be careful not to impose those assumptions on to the research.
For instance, as a participant researcher my voices and pre-conceptions about the experience of making the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising are many. I am a researcher, author, participant (journalist/media-adviser/journalist). I am a woman in her mid-40s, a mother, white, tertiary educated and privileged. I have deliberately only worked as a journalist in public broadcasting – never in the commercial media – and I chose to work for a Labor politician rather than a conservative one; for a government minister and not for the Opposition. My experience is also at state level not federal, ministerial rather than prime ministerial. I have never joined the Australian Labor Party but I did become a member of the Australian Greens Party for two years, however for reasons of disenchantment with that party my membership has not been renewed. All of these factors inevitably impact on my world view, but in relation to this research, the concern is whether any of these experiences have coloured my approach to it.

As mentioned above, the way to deal with these potential problems is through reflexivity which requires an acknowledgment of the influence that the researcher’s relationship with the topic might have on the study’s results and vice versa. Influenced by Karp’s (1996) elegant approach in Speaking of Sadness I have included an account of my own experience in the Foreword to this thesis to establish my position, experience, and orientation to the research and the reader.

In terms of the influence this researcher had on the research, there are many examples. In the beginning, my experience of the transition between journalism and parliamentary media advising did colour my approach to this project, primarily in the framing of the research questions and the focus on the issue of ethical conflict. As described in the foreword, I did experience ethical conflict during my time as a parliamentary media adviser caused by tension between my journalism ethics and the pragmatic realities of representing the interests of a politician. Based on that personal experience I assumed that all of the interviewees in this study would have faced similar ethical dilemmas, but to my surprise they did not. None of the twenty-one interviewees recalled reacting to ethical considerations in the same way I or the other study participants did. The research process revealed that my experience of facing a pivotal ethical dilemma was a minority experience and that an absence of such dilemmas was the common perception amongst the interviewees of their time as parliamentary media advisers. The discovery of the difference
between my experience and that of each of the twenty-one interviewees clearly revealed to me how strongly my own experience had influenced the genesis of this research project and the assumptions I had brought it. This important insight became a rich source of reflection not only about my own pre-conceptions, but also about the importance of context to an individual’s ethical decision making. This reflexive insight also forced me to change direction in subsequent interviews and reshape the orientation of the study. It shifted the central focus of the study away from being an exploration of expected ethical conflicts between the interviewees’ journalism values and pragmatic requirements of parliamentary media advising, to an understanding of how the interviewees perceived the differences between journalism and parliamentary media advising and managed areas of potential ethical conflict.

As the complexity and variety of the participants’ experiences began to dominate my thinking, the project became less and less about my own experience moving through these two roles and more about the participants. This occurred to the extent that I was able to separate myself from the topic in a more observant manner without constantly referencing my own experiences. This could be described as the process of bracketing, which can commence prior to the study as well as develop during the course of qualitative research. Tufford & Newman (2012) described bracketing as “a method used by some researchers to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigour of the project” (p. 81).

The concept of bracketing stems back to the traditions of phenomenology and the concept of the “phenomenological reduction” or “epoche” developed by Edmund Husserl around 1906 (Beyer, 2013). In simple terms bracketing means the stripping away of preconceived theory, assumptions and generalizations around the human experience under examination to look to its “essence” (Tufford, 2012; van Manen, 1990). As mentioned earlier in the methodology, the ability to uncover the essence of something without acknowledging the role of context and interpretation was rejected by Heidegger and others as impossible and the notion of bracketing remains contested. However, in qualitative research the term continues to be used to refer to ways in which qualitative researchers manage their own assumptions or preconceptions of the phenomenon under investigation. Starks & Trinidad (2007) describe bracketing as a process
whereby researchers “recognise and set aside (but do not abandon) their a priori knowledge and assumptions, with the analytic goal of attending to the participant’s accounts with an open mind” (Starks & Trinidad 2007 in Tufford, 2012, p. 83). It is in this broader definition of the term that I use the word “bracketing” to help describe the ongoing process of reflexivity that resulted in the suspension of my own assumptions about the transition between journalism and parliamentary media advising to focus more clearly on the experiences of the interviewees.

2.6. Method

2.6.1. Semi-structured interviews

My research approach (as discussed above) is centred on the importance of individual human experience and how it is through the telling of personal narratives or stories that people make sense of their lives. As Oliver Sacks (1986) wrote in The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat:

If we wish to know about man, we ask ‘what is his story – his real inmost story?’ – for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us – through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not different from each other; historically, as narratives, we are each of us unique. (as cited in Plummer, 2001, p. 185)

Therefore, in order to uncover the uniqueness of individual human experience the researcher needs to facilitate the telling of those individual stories. Thus the method of semi-structured interviewing was chosen to draw out the variations of experience of the career transition between journalism and parliamentary media advising.

In order to understand that transition experience from one role to another, this study follows a necessarily chronological logic with one event leading on to the next – namely moving from the role of journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back again. To support the story telling process of that transition I adopted a life history approach to interviewing which helped lend a chronological structure to the interviews. Interestingly, without prompting, many of the of study participants tended to naturally to tell their stories in a chronological way and thereby build a sense of coherence (Linde, 1993) through a temporal ordering of events. However, rather than carry out a detailed full life history from birth to the present – though some of the participants
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did tell their entire life story – I took a topic-centred, life history approach (Plummer, 2001, p. 26) to the semi-structured interviews focussed on a particular life event. In the case of this study that event was the interviewee’s experience of making the transition through the role of the reporter and parliamentary media adviser and back again.

While ordering events in a chronological way helps the storyteller to make sense of the connections between events, the process of interviewing is not a neat linear process. By that I mean that in the course of a semi-structured interview – as in everyday conversation – connections are made between ideas that might lead the interviewee to refer to relevant events that occurred in another period of time; or the interviewer might seek more information by asking a follow-up question which then breaks the chronological sequence of the storytelling. To accommodate the need for this type of flexibility, I used a prompt or “aide memoire” (Minichiello, 1995, p. 83) to steer the conversation rather than a prescriptive list of questions. This ensured the interview covered the topics relevant to the study without losing direction (Appendix 4.).

At the beginning of each interview I gave a brief outline of the project and the issues under exploration. I also explained that my interest in the topic stemmed from my own personal experience. To begin the interview I would use an open or introductory question (Kvale, 2007) asking the participant to explain their transition experience in their own words with as little interruption as possible from the interviewer. This often resulted in a clear narrative description of the transition which then allowed for follow-up questions asking the interviewee to elaborate on certain aspects. While I did steer the direction of the interview it was a collaborative process at times more closely resembling a conversation. Ellis & Berger (2003) describe this as “reflexive dyadic interviewing” where in addition to the researcher asking specific questions and the interviewee responding, the researcher also shares his or her own experience in a more conversational exchange: “In this case, the researcher’s disclosures are more than tactics to encourage the respondent to open up; rather, the researcher often feels a reciprocal desire to disclose” (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 472). The sharing of my own experience about the transition between journalism and parliamentary media advising helped the interviewees reflect more closely on their own. By way of example, I asked the interviewees whether they perceived a
shift in their attitude towards journalists once they became parliamentary media advisers. To clarify what I meant, I explained that when I first began in that role working for Anna Bligh I was open and facilitating in my handling of all media enquiries. Over time, I developed what I described as a ‘siege mentality’ which led me to become more defensive toward the media and more protective of my minister. This description resonated strongly with some of the interviewees who laughed and sighed in recognition of having had a similar experience. For others, my recollection had no resonance and instead it prompted them to articulate their own different perception of their experience.

Each interview varied in length from one to four hours depending on the time each of the participants had available. As the interviewees were mostly working journalists, or still working for a politician, time was precious. I endeavoured to conduct all of the interviews face-to-face in a location chosen by the participant. However, due to logistical issues three of the interviews were eventually conducted over the phone. There have been few comparative studies of telephone versus in-person interviewing, but there are documented benefits and pitfalls of both methods (Shuy, 2003). In-person interviewing is considered to be the optimum approach as it allows the interviewer to read the contextual situation, get a sense of mood, facial expression and body language, all of which provide useful cues for the interviewer (Bryman, 2008 pp. 198-199). In contrast, telephone interviewing is seen to be inferior particularly for studies dealing with complex or personal issues, or conducted with hearing impaired, aged, or marginalised people (Shuy, 2003, p. 180). Despite this, I found the telephone interviews just as revealing as those conducted in-person. This was partly due to the fact that I was already acquainted with the three people concerned and therefore had some sense of rapport with them. Had I never met them before, I would not have taken this approach to speak with them for the first time.

During the process of interviewing I was conscious of three types of bias or influence that both the interviewer and interviewees might have introduced to the process. Firstly, I was mindful of the fact that I was a (former) journalist interviewing journalists who had followed the same career path from the newsroom to parliamentary media advising and back again. Though I had not met or worked with the majority of the interviewees in this study, we did share a common experience. As a result I was engaging in a form of “peer” interviewing based on our joint
membership of a particular cohort (Adler, 2003; Platt, 1981). This situation has its many advantages, such as the interviewer possessing invaluable insight into the topic under investigation rendering them a “double expert” on the topic (Charmaz, 2009b). This common experience can also facilitate access to potential interviewees and help build rapport and trust which can facilitate openness and greater richness of the reflections during the interview process (Adler, 2003; Platt, 1981). It can also have its difficulties, particularly if the interviewee and interviewer are acquaintances. These difficulties can arise from self-consciousness between the two parties and concern on the part of the interviewer about being seen to pass judgment on his or her peers (Platt, 1981, p. 78). A familiarity with the topic might also result in a thinness of data because of a shared short-hand that does not require the interviewee to elaborate (Platt, 1981, p. 79). That is something I became aware of and learned to guard against as I became more experienced in interviewing. I encouraged the interviewees to elaborate even though we both understood what he or she had meant. Interviewing peers can also increase the level of accountability the researcher feels towards the material collected in the sense that the researcher might feel he or she does not have as much licence to interpret the data of people known to them (Platt, 1981, p. 79). That is certainly the case for me with this research. However, rather than seeing this as a problem I saw it as an enforced element of rigour on my research that required me to remain true to what the interviewees said and not mistreat their words.

Interviewing journalists can also introduce another issue derived from the fact that journalists are usually in control of the interview process. Because of this, Bowd (1998, p. 118) says, being in the interviewee chair might make the journalist/interviewee uncomfortable and seek to control it. During this study, none of the interviewees sought to wrest control of the interview. The situation more resembled a conversation between equals or what Herbst (1998) calls “elite interviewing” (p. 76) where the participants involved were articulate about the topics under discussion. Despite this, there were occasional signs of hesitancy around certain questions which I interpreted to be unease about answering personally reflective questions about their values and ethical behaviour rather than them being uncomfortable about the interview process itself.

Secondly, interviewing certain participants – particularly senior male journalists – also presented challenges for me. When people I had looked up to as a young reporter, like Kerry O’Brien and
Barrie Cassidy, agreed to be interviewed for this study I was thrilled but also intimidated. I was nervous walking into the *Four Corners* office in Ultimo – a programme I had done work experience for at Gore Hill twenty years earlier – to interview Kerry O’Brien. Similarly, having coffee with Barrie Cassidy in the cafeteria of the Melbourne ABC was nerve wracking. It was a major news day in politics and he kept looking at his watch to get back to the story. Wild wind rattled windows and peacocks honked loudly throughout my interview with Malcolm Fraser’s former press secretary, David Barnett, who regarded me suspiciously as he explained that he had been burnt by interviewers in the past. In these situations I confess I was less likely to push hard on delicate ethical issues than with people I was more familiar and comfortable with. However, what was revealed in those interviews accorded with experiences of other participants who did provide fuller descriptions on these issues.

Thirdly, given the exploration around people’s ethical values and behaviour in the role of parliamentary media adviser – a role dominated by negative perceptions of unethical behaviour – I was aware that the participants might feel defensive and attempt to re-invent their story to justify their decision making. As mentioned above, I did find some of the interviewees to be more guarded with their reflections than others which I interpreted as being associated with concern about being judged by the researcher and by future readers. Despite this concern the interviewees were often surprisingly frank in their responses which I interpreted as being partly attributable to their perception of me as an insider by virtue of the fact that I shared the experience of making the transition between journalist and parliamentary media adviser. For instance, the majority of the interviewees were quite candid in relation to their behaviour during their time as media advisers, many of whom gave detailed descriptions of the types of ‘spin’ tactics they engaged in while working for politicians. However, while I was finding my feet during the first two interviews with *Adam and Greg Turnbull*, I was concerned that I did appear to be judgmental. I had approached those two interviews from the viewpoint of my own experience and expected them to reveal that they too had felt ethically conflicted during their time as parliamentary media advisers. The fact that they did not deeply challenged my own assumptions and laid bare my own ethical biases. It was a pivotal experience at the beginning of the interview process that opened my mind to the variety of individual experience and ended up playing a major role in the interpretation of this study. I am grateful to them both.
The twenty-one interviews resulted in thirty-one hours of digital recording which were then transcribed in full by me. It was a process that required approximately four hours of transcription per hour of interview and resulted in more than 180,000 words of transcript. While it was a long and sometime arduous task I found transcribing each interview myself enormously beneficial. I became very familiar with the interview content and retained excellent recall of each discussion, the mood of the interview and the participant’s responses. It was an invaluable, and in the end, a time-saving process. Other researchers have found similar advantages to transcribing the interviews themselves. As Rebecca Barnes expressed it:

> whilst it is an arduous and very time consuming task, it offered great benefits in terms of bringing me closer to the data, and encouraging me to start to identify key themes, and to become aware of the similarities and differences between different participants’ accounts (Barnes in Bryman, 2008, p. 456)

As well as transcribing the interviews myself, I wrote notes in a journal after each encounter documenting my impressions, emerging themes, future areas of inquiry and connections to literature. This type of note taking is in the tradition of ethnographic approaches and is a feature of grounded theory research and general inductive qualitative analysis.

### 2.6.2. Sourcing interviewees

To find the most relevant interviewees for this project I used purposive and snowballing methods (Bryman, 2008, pp. 458-459). The sampling method was purposive in that I was seeking a specific cohort of people relevant to understanding a particular lived experience – namely journalists who had become parliamentary media advisers and then returned to reporting. The fact that the interviewees had begun their careers in journalism was central to the examination of whether their commitment to journalism values changed as a result of this career transition. This meant media advisers who had not trained as journalists were disqualified as possible interviewees.

It is difficult to quantify how many people have made this specific transition in and out of journalism via parliamentary media advising. There is no known number or central data base of journalists who have done so. However, former political staffer and journalist Stephen Mayne
has attempted to compile one via his website *The Mayne Report* (2010, 2011a, 2011b), which lists former political staffers and their post-political employment. Though it is incomplete, it is a useful public resource and one upon which I drew. I also approached journalists who had made public comments or written about their experience such as Niki Savva (2010) who had written a memoir about her time in journalism and politics. Other references in the literature to this transition can be found in Parker’s (1990), *The Courtesans*, which examines the workings of the federal parliamentary press gallery during the Hawke era and in which he talks about the “revolving door” (p. 32) between the press gallery and Labor ministerial offices at that time. However, it would appear from other studies that the majority of journalists who become press secretaries make the transition to public relations, lobbying or stay in politics rather than return to reporting (Phillipps, 2002). This is an area that requires future quantitative research.

As well as approaching individuals on *The Mayne Report* lists, I also drew on my own knowledge of journalists and parliamentary media advisers and the knowledge of former journalism and press secretarial colleagues. Given the relatively small world of journalists who have crossed over to parliamentary media advising and returned to reporting it was unavoidable – in fact necessary – for me to draw upon people I had previous direct, or indirect, connections with. The need to draw on personal networks when studying elite subjects who are difficult to access is acknowledged in the literature (Adler, 2003; Burgess, 1991; Hoffmann, 1980; Platt, 1981). Adler (2003) states that ethnographers argue they will have greater success in securing interviews with people they have taken time to establish relationships with in order to build rapport and trust. In the case of acquaintances, that rapport and trust has already been established. Of the twenty-one participants interviewed I was acquainted with eight prior to the study. At different stages in my career I had worked for the same news organisation with three of the interviewees while I was a journalist in Canberra or Brisbane, one of whom also worked as a ministerial media adviser in the Beattie Government and is also now an academic. Through my professional and personal network of reporters and parliamentary media advisers I also had limited past contact with four of the interviewees. The remaining nine participants I knew only by reputation and had never met, though they were known by members of my professional contact network.
From a positivist perspective the fact that I had a form of association – whether direct or indirect – with some of the interviewees prior to commencing the research might raise concerns about potential bias in the interviews. It was a potential I was mindful of and tried to counter through questioning and challenging their responses. Given the subjective nature of the research and the constructivist perspective of co-creation of meaning between the interviewer and interviewee, the inclusion of some participants I was acquainted with did not present as a difficulty. However, it did raise the issue of unease associated with peer interviewing discussed above in 2.6.1. Rather than presenting as a difficulty, in many respects I found my experience of the topic under investigation and prior acquaintance with some of the interviewees to be an advantage because there was an existing rapport which facilitated candour in the interviews. As Blumer (1969/1998), Charmaz (2009a) and Karp (1996) attest, having personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation can offer the researcher many advantages, such as greater insight and understanding of the issues as well as access to potential interviewees. To repeat the view of Herbert Blumer (1969/1998), to study a social group “intelligently one has to know these worlds”:

No theorizing, however ingenious, and no observance of scientific protocol, however meticulous, are substitutes for developing familiarity with what is actually going on in the sphere of life under study. (p. 39)

In order to counter any concerns about familiarity introducing pressure on people to agree to be part of the study, it was made clear to each of the individuals approached that his or her participation was purely voluntary. In response, one person who initially agreed to take part in the study later changed his mind. Despite prior connection with some of the individuals who were approached, they also simply said “no” to the invitation to participate. On the whole, I found most of the people approached to be part of this study were genuinely interested in the topic and keen to talk about their experiences.

The initial contact with each of the potential interviewees was made via email. I wrote an introductory message asking whether they would be interested in participating in the project with the information sheet and consent form attached (see Appendices 2 & 3). If the person said they were happy to be involved I then asked them to suggest a time and place where they would feel
most comfortable for the interview to take place. On three occasions the interviewees suggested other people to approach for interview, which I did and thereby added ‘snowballing’ to the methods of sourcing interviewees. In total, I approached twenty-six people in Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. Of the twenty-six people approached, twenty-one agreed to take part in the study. Four people rejected the request to participate and I did not receive a response from one other. While I was seeking a specific cohort of people with a particular life experience I endeavoured to balance the sample along gender, jurisdictional and party political lines. As the table below indicates, the overall outcome was eight female and thirteen male interviewees – twelve of whom worked for federal parliamentarians; six for state parliamentarians and three worked for both. Two thirds of the interviewees worked for government ministers; one third for opposition members or a minor party MP; and three of the interviewees worked for both government and opposition members of parliament. The majority of the interviewees were employed on the staff of Labor politicians, while six worked on the staff of Liberal politicians and one worked for a senator from the Australian Democrats.

**Table 2. Employment of interviewees by party and jurisdiction**  
(Source: the author)

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There were also some other minor variations. For example, three of the interviewees worked initially as media advisers and then moved on to policy roles; and two of the interviewees worked as policy advisers but were also involved in media strategy and the supply of information to journalists. However all five of these interviewees were working journalists before they made the move to politics and each of them returned to journalism after their time working as an adviser. A more detailed breakdown of the sample is featured in Appendix 5. A brief biographical outline of each of the twenty-one interviewees appears in Appendix 1.

2.6.3. Sample size

There is no single or simple answer to the question: ‘How many interviews is enough?’ In the literature about qualitative interviewing there is a wide range of views about this. When it comes to life history interviews with people who have shared certain experiences, Minichiello (1995, p. 116) says the researcher usually aims for five or six interviews. Whereas other researchers have found they reached “data saturation” after twelve in-depth interviews (Guest, 2006, p. 74). “Data saturation” means the point at which the researcher ceases to learn new information. Ultimately, the number of interviews required depends on the study. Kvale & Brinkman (2009) say the answer to this frequently asked question is simply: “Interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know” (p. 113). If the study is seeking to understand the experience of one person, then Kvale & Brinkman (2009) say one interview subject is enough. However, it is common in interview studies for the number of interviews to be more than fifteen or less than ten (Kvale, 2009). In the case of this doctoral research, the number of twenty-one interviewees was reached by the process of data or theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2008; Guest, 2006; Ritchie, 2001). While each interview contained individual nuances, a number of key themes kept recurring, particularly in the central areas of exploration around ethical conflict, changing values and conflict of interest. As a result I felt it was time to cease interviewing.

2.6.4. Analysis

Analysis for this project began long before I commenced interviewing participants. As Potter (1996) explains, the process of analysis in qualitative research begins in the pre-fieldwork
planning stages with the formulation of the problem, development of hunches, ideas and procedures and continues throughout until writing is complete. Analysis also happens in the field, during and after interviews, which triggers new areas of inquiry requiring further analysis. That is true of this project. The process of analysis for this project began more than ten years ago as I reflected on my experience of the transition at the heart of this study. Once deciding to embark on this doctoral research the analysis continued during a wide exploration of the literature which helped refine the problem, determine and re-determine what questions were to be asked. Consistent with both general inductive and grounded theory approaches, data collection and analysis happened simultaneously. Moving back and forth between the two the data collection and analysis continually informed each other (Bryant, 2010; Thomas, 2006).

As mentioned above, this study departs from grounded theory at the level of coding. This was a conscious choice because I was interested in the broader themes surrounding the transition experience between journalism and parliamentary media advising, rather than breaking down the individual interviewee’s experiences line by line in to abstract categories. Instead, I adopted a thematic approach to the analysis. Thematic analysis was considered the most appropriate strategy to employ for this study for three key reasons. Firstly, because I was interested in the content of what people said about their experiences rather than “how” they said it or for “what purpose” (Riessman, 2008, p. 59). Secondly, I did not want to de-contextualise the comments by breaking them up in to isolated fragments through detailed coding. In order to be true to what each of the interviewees said I did not want to lose sight of their comments within the context of the broader story and thereby misrepresent their words. Thirdly, I wanted to ensure that I did not lose sight of the interviewees as real people by focussing on their words as dislocated pieces of data. By returning to their comments within the context of their surrounding words I was transported back to the interview process and was able to recall the location, atmosphere and mood of the interview as well the interviewee’s voice and intonation.

For similar reasons to those given above, I also chose not to use the Nvivo computer software programme for data analysis. Though Nvivo and other computer-based analysis systems are seen to be helpful in organising large amounts of data (Ritchie, 2001, p. 167), I opted to use a manual process. Having transcribed all thirty-one hours of interview myself I was very familiar
with the content of the transcripts, which aided the manual sifting and arrangement of the data into broad categories and themes. Because I was so familiar with the material I was able to recall the conversations readily and locate particular comments within the files.

This thematic approach to analysis also resembles that undertaken by Karp (2009) in his study *Speaking of Sadness* during which he conducted basic coding without the use of computer-assisted programmes. Using a manual process of analysis Karp (2009) focussed on identifying the recurring themes and creating “data books” (p. 42) by systematically collating all relevant excerpts into the emerging categories and themes. I took a similar approach in this study by closely reading the interview transcripts and breaking them down into categories and themes. Rather than create “data books” I compiled computer files of related data. After that initial sorting was complete Karp (2009) then described a period of constant contemplation and “living” with the data, working the themes, new ideas, drawing connections with relevant literature and theories and asking himself: “How will I do theoretical justice to these materials?” (p. 42). In summary, Karp (2013) eloquently expressed his approach this way:

> In the end though, there is one simple approach for me. It is to become as intimately familiar with the data as possible, to look for persistent themes (and departures from them), and to constantly ask, “What are the compelling conceptual stories that can be told from these data?” (Personal email correspondence 10/02/13)

That is what I have endeavoured to do in this study. I have immersed myself in the interview material to digest the similarities and differences in each of the experiences and tease out the “compelling conceptual stories”. Combined with a range of literature and extant theories, those compelling stories reveal new insights into the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again.

### 2.6.5. Trustworthiness

As referred to earlier in the methodology, in the positivist paradigm the role of analysis is to reach a truth which is seen as being verifiable through observation and independent of the researcher. In this objectivist paradigm it is therefore essential to use a method which eliminates as much of the subjective influence of the researcher as possible – such as the researcher’s
preconceptions, feelings and values – and thereby makes the research results impersonal, replicable and thus objective. However, from a constructivist perspective, this positivist approach to establishing the rigour of qualitative research makes little sense. Instead of applying the traditional criteria used for evaluating quantitative research, such as “validity”, “reliability” and “empirical generalizability”, Grbich (2008) explains that qualitative researchers have sought a new set of criteria that better reflect its general aim of understanding human experience. Those terms include:

- **rigour** (thoroughness and appropriateness of the use of research methods),
- **credibility** (meaningful, well presented findings) and
- **relevance** (utility of findings) are used to judge the quality or “trustworthiness” of a study. (Grbich, 2008, p. 243)

A study conducted by Grbich & Kitto (2008) of varying approaches to evaluating the rigour of qualitative research revealed more than twenty-two different check-lists of criteria, all of which contained similarities. For instance, in 1985, Lincoln & Guba suggested that “trustworthiness” could be judged in four key ways, by establishing:

Credibility: through multiple accounts of the phenomenon under investigation and techniques such as negative case analysis and member checking.

Transferability: through the adaptability of the research to contexts beyond that of the original study.

Dependability: through a process of peer auditing; and

Confirmability: through peer auditing and debriefing to ensure the researcher has acted in good faith and not allowed their pre-conceptions to influence the process or the outcomes.

Some of these criteria compiled by Lincoln & Guba (1985, pp. 301-319) are also common to lists developed by other qualitative researchers, such as Grbich (2008) and Ritchie (2001). Firstly, “respondent validation” (or “member-checking”), which provides interviewees with an opportunity to view and amend their transcripts, appears in all three lists of trustworthiness criteria. Secondly, “transferability”, which “refers to how useful the findings are to the context and phenomenon under study” (Grbich, 2008, p. 243), also features in each of the approaches. Thirdly, “triangulation” of data through the use of multiples accounts of a phenomenon; multiple
sources of evidence such as documents and interviews; multiple methods such as interviews and surveys; and multiple theoretical and conceptual frames to enhance insights into the phenomenon (Grbich, 2008, p. 243), is also included by the three researchers. In addition to these common criteria, Ritchie (2001) and Grbich (2008) also include “reflexivity” on the part of the researcher as an important criterion for establishing the “trustworthiness” of qualitative research.

Because of the phenomenological nature of this qualitative doctoral research, only some of the above listed criteria are relevant in evaluating its trustworthiness. For instance the criterion of triangulation was not relevant to this study. As mentioned previously in this chapter, phenomenology is the study of phenomena, or how people perceive things to be, not how they really are. The perspective of phenomenology tries to treat the first-person perspective of experience on its own terms rather than testing a person’s perceptions through a process of triangulation and verification. However, some of the other criteria commonly mentioned, such as member-checking, transferability and reflexivity were seen as useful to establishing the trustworthiness of this research and are explained below.

2.6.5.1. Member-checking

Throughout this study different levels of “member-checking” or “respondent validation” were engaged in to establish not only the trustworthiness of the research but to establish trust between the researcher and the participants. As soon as each interview was transcribed, a copy was sent to the participant for his or her records and for checking. Several returned their transcript with suggested changes which I was happy to accommodate and one participant changed the status of her interview from being identifiable to anonymous. As I began writing in earnest, I sent each participant an individual outline of the major themes that had emerged, the likely direction of discussion and the excerpts from the interview I was likely to use. This resulted in one person asking for certain comments to be withdrawn but no other changes from the interviewees were sought. In the case of one participant the process of member checking will continue up to and beyond the publishing phase of this thesis – indeed for any future use of the interview transcript. All of the participants will be provided with a copy of the thesis.
2.6.5.2. Transferability

The transferability of this research to other contexts has always been an important goal and I have strived to locate the research within its rich and varied contextual influences to highlight the study’s relevance across disciplinary borders. As Lincoln & Guba (1985) explain, it is difficult to establish whether the findings generated in one particular context are going to hold in another and, as a result, the qualitative inquirer can only hope to provide the material necessary “to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (p. 316). Given the layers of contextual information provided in this study, I am confident that aspects of this research will be transferable to other fields of inquiry. This is explained in more detail below in 2.6.7.

2.6.5.3. Reflexivity

Both Ritchie (2001) and Grbich (2008) state that reflexivity is important in qualitative research to openly acknowledge “the complex influences among the researchers, the research topic and subjects on the research results” (Grbich, 2008, p. 243). That process of reflexive acknowledgement has been central to this project. As outlined earlier reflexive practices have been the source of important insights that have changed my understandings and the course of this research. As a participant-researcher it has been fundamentally important to me as an expression of authenticity and honesty about my connection to the genesis of this research. Further discussion of the application of reflexivity and the position of the researcher in this study appears in 2.5. above.

In addition to member-checking, transferability and reflexivity, four other characteristics of this study lend weight to its trustworthiness. Firstly, the phenomenological approach taken to the research; secondly, the role of the interviewees as contributing theorists; thirdly, the comparative perspective of the interviewees; and fourthly, the importance of contextualization of the researcher. The influence of each of these characteristics on establishing the trustworthiness of this research will be explained in turn.
2.6.5.4. The phenomenological perspective

As mentioned previously, the perspective of phenomenology tries to treat the first-person perspective of experience on its own terms rather than dig below the surface of what the interviewees said to some deeper meaning. Two examples of qualitative approaches that attempt this type of interpretation are Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which is closely related to applied psychology (Smith, 2011, p. 5); and Discourse Analysis which “emphasizes the way versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in text” (Potter 1997 in Bryman, 2008, p. 500). Instead of taking that sort of deeply probing interpretative approach, this phenomenological study views the interviewees’ reflections as rational theoretical contributions that are worthy of listening to and testing.

2.6.5.5. Interviewees as theorists

Drawing on the work of Susan Herbst (1998) and David Karp (1996), this study treats the interviewees as experts in their field who have a valid contribution to make to our understanding of the issue under investigation. Their stories or “theories” are based on their “intense experiences” as “key operators” (Herbst, 1998, p. 31) in those areas, and are treated as rational and valuable contributions worthy of being heard and tested. The practitioners’ theories deserve to be heard and tested in the same way as the theories of academics in the scholarly literature deserve to be heard and tested. In this study the practitioners’ theories are brought together with the scholarly theories, as equals, and tested against each other.

2.6.5.6. The comparative perspective of the interviewees

It is acknowledged in social psychology that in order to understand human subjective experience it is “necessary to ‘take the role’ of those whose feelings and behaviour we want to fathom” (Karp, 1996, p. 10). More than sixty years ago, Bowman (1949) said taking on different roles was valuable because it provided us “opportunities to observe the dynamics of others and of ourselves” and offered “the raw material from which the texture of new insight can be woven” (pp. 195-196). That is the opportunity that was afforded to the interviewees in this study as they moved between journalism and parliamentary media advising. That is why the contributions of
the twenty-one interviewees are so valuable and should be treated seriously. Having walked in
the shoes of a journalist and a parliamentary media adviser each of the interviewees possesses a
unique comparative perspective and understanding of both journalism and parliamentary media
advising. They do not offer a blinkered narrow view of one side of the debate. These journalism
professionals provide nuanced interpretations of both roles. They share insights into the
similarities and differences between journalism and parliamentary media advising and the ethical
strengths and weaknesses of both.

Another one of the features of this study that add to its trustworthiness is the fact that the
majority of the interviewees opted for their comments to be identifiable. Only seven of the
twenty-one interviewees requested anonymity. Many of the participants are high-profile well
respected journalism professionals, two of whom are recipients of journalism’s highest accolade,
the Walkley Award. The choice of the interviewees to be identified in this study not only lends
weight to the credibility of their accounts but demands a high level of accountability from the
researcher to remain faithful to their comments and the context in which they were expressed.

2.6.5.7. The importance of contextualisation of the research

The final characteristic of this study that lends weight to its trustworthiness is the multi-layered
contextualisation of the research. Those layers include, reference to: theoretical contexts; a wide
range of relevant literature; different cultural settings; issues of ethics; socio-historical settings;
personal influences; and broader institutional factors. Lucy Yardley (2000) calls this
characteristic in qualitative research “sensitivity to context” (p. 215) and provides a rich
contextual landscape to increase understanding of the phenomenon at hand. This contextual
approach to social research harks back to Mill’s (1959/2000) call for researchers to link
biography, social structure and history in order to gain a fuller understanding of human
experience. This contextual approach is also central to the tradition of symbolic interactionism,
which is one of the philosophical influences underpinning this study. As explained earlier in the
Methodology, from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, individual action is seen to be

6 The Walkley Awards are Australia’s highest national awards for excellence in journalism.
dependent on a person’s interpretation of his or her circumstances. By placing the interviewees’ reflections within this contextual landscape and testing their theories against those expressed in the literature, it allows the reader to evaluate the authenticity of the practitioners’ interpretations.

Putting all of these criteria aside, David Karp (1996) argues that “the ultimate test of a study’s worth is that the findings ring true to people and let them see things in new ways” (p. 202). That is my hope with this research. My hope is that it will ring true to people who have performed in the roles of journalist and parliamentary media adviser and also offer new insights for researchers in both communications and political science about these two roles and the relationship between them. By opening my findings to the participants and then to others via publication and peer review, the credibility of my research will be thoroughly tested.

2.6.6. Ethics, Consent & Confidentiality

Before I could proceed with this project I sought and was granted ethics clearance (HREC 11-117) from the University of Canberra Committee for Ethics in Human Research on 20th October, 2011. In order to address any concerns about confidentiality, each participant was provided with an information sheet about the project (Appendix 2) and a consent form which required his or her signature (Appendix 3). The consent form provided a detailed list of possible uses of the interview material and gave the interviewees the option of being identifiable or anonymous in the study. As noted above, seven of the twenty-one participants opted for anonymity in the study. In order to preserve this anonymity a pseudonym was adopted and all identifiable information was removed from the transcript. In the case of one of the interviewees, his/her gender was also changed. The distinction between the participants who opted for anonymity and those who did not is indicated clearly throughout the thesis. Names that appear with an asterisk (*) are pseudonyms for the interviewees who chose to remain anonymous. When both the first and last names of the participant appear without an asterisk, this indicates that the interviewee elected to have his or her comments attributed to him or herself.

A copy of the transcript was sent to the relevant interviewee for checking, and in response several requests were made for material to be deleted or changed to better protect their own or
another person’s identity. All of those changes were made. The majority of the participants, (fourteen), were happy to have their comments attributed to them; however, around half of the interviewees asked if they could be shown the comments chosen for inclusion prior to thesis submission. As mentioned earlier I prepared a document for each participant containing the possible comments I was likely to use in the thesis for them to approve. Only a few minor changes were requested. While it has been a cumbersome process at times, it has been valuable in helping to build trust with the participants who generously entrusted their views to me. For one of the interviewees, this process of checking will continue beyond the finalisation of this thesis to include any future publications including his words. It is a price I am more than happy to pay for his generous contribution to my study.

2.6.7. Limitations of this study

One of the potential limitations of this study is the reliability of memory. All of the twenty-one interviewees (with the exception of *Scott who was reflecting on his current experience of shifting from journalism to media advising) were relying on their recollections of past experiences, some of which took place up to thirty years ago. As a result some of the detail of those experiences will have been lost. The issue of accuracy is not the only issue connected with memory. It is well documented that the act of remembering is also a selective and interpretative process. Through the act of memory individuals reshape history and might recast events in a different light as a by product of the constant revision of their life story (Linde, 1993 p. 4).
Philosopher Amelie Rorty (1973) explained the process this way:

...every reported memory is an interpretation of the original experience... When we remember, we do not count back to the appropriate bead on a thread; remembering is more like looking at Thai Silk damask, whose colours and patterns shift when the light changes or when we move. Focussing not only selects, it also blurs. Where does the reproduction, the straight report, leave off and the recasting begin? (p. 264)

Without going through an exhaustive process of triangulation it is impossible to establish the veracity of an individual’s recollections because that process of checking will also rely on other people’s interpretations of particular events. As mentioned previously, establishing the factual accuracy of each person’s memories was not the chief goal of this research. Instead, this
phenomenological study was interested in the way the participants made sense of their past experience now.

The findings and discussion in this study will be transferable to a large number of areas in communication research including, but not limited to: explorations of media-source relations; journalism ethics; post employment separation for political staff; career transitions from journalism to politics, public relations and the public service; and the changing nature of the role of the journalist. Though this study will be relevant to wider research contexts, there are also limitations to transferability of this study’s findings. Because of the paucity of literature on the transition of journalists from reporting to parliamentary media advising and back, it might be tempting for other researchers to apply the findings to the experience of press secretaries in general. For instance, many press secretaries do not have a journalistic background and therefore will not have had the experience of being trained in journalism ethics, principles and practice. As a result it would not be possible to transfer the findings in chapters 3 and 4 of this study to media advisers who have come from a party political or public relations background because the findings in those chapters are dependent on the participants having had prior journalism experience and having been taught journalism values.

The size of the sample also limits generalizability of the study. Though many common themes did emerge amongst the twenty-one participants, it is not a large enough sample to draw profession-wide conclusions. That was not the aim of the research. This study was designed and conducted to reflect the experiences of a small number of people in all their variety and not an attempt at a comprehensive social study.

2.7. Chapter summary

This methodology chapter has outlined the aims, method and philosophical underpinnings of this doctoral research. At its core, this is a subjective study designed to explore how twenty-one journalists made sense of the career transition from reporting to parliamentary media advising and back to journalism.
As mentioned in the foreword to this thesis, the genesis of this doctoral research grew out of my own experience of making the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and later returning to journalism. It was born from my “personal troubles” (Mills, 1959/2000) about feelings of ethical conflict between my journalism values and the pragmatic demands of working in politics. It was a “personal trouble” which I felt was also a “public issue” worthy of examination. As a result, this study goes beyond the simple chronological tracking of a transition between two different roles. It attempts to understand the interviewees’ perception of the career transition at an ethical level as well. It seeks to understand whether revolving through the roles of reporter and parliamentary media adviser did or did not have an impact on each of the participant’s professional ethics, perceptions of journalism and journalism values.

This essentially phenomenological study has been informed by the constructivist view that human experience does not come with “meaning built into it” (Karp, 1996, p. 19). From the perspective of symbolic interaction theory, each individual makes sense of his or her experience by interpreting symbols in the social environment, such as the actions of others, and specific events and situations that occur in the constantly changing context within which he or she acts.

In order to reach that subjective interpretation it was necessary to speak with individuals who had undergone that experience. As Oliver Sacks (in Plummer, 2001, p. 105) says, the best way to do that is to facilitate those people to tell their individual stories. Using purposive and snowballing sampling methods, twenty-one journalists agreed to participate in the study and took part in topic-centred (Plummer, 2001, p. 26) semi-structured interviews about their experience.

Drawing on the work of Susan Herbst (1998) and David Karp (1996), those individual experiences have been honoured by treating each of the interviewers as contributing theorists, whose stories make a valuable contribution to knowledge of the phenomenon under examination. By allowing the individuals to speak for themselves this study treats each of the interviewees as an expert in the field, whose ideas deserve to be heard and tested in the same way as theories presented by scholars also warrant respectful consideration.

As discussed throughout the previous section (2.6.), qualitative interviewing can present a range of challenges and has its limitations, particularly in relation to the reliability of the memory of
the interviewees and their statements. For the purposes of this phenomenological research project, which sought people’s interpretations of their experience, semi-structured interviewing was deemed the most appropriate method of data collection to employ. As mentioned at the beginning of the methodology chapter, the perspective of phenomenology does not seek to dig beneath a person’s recollections of events and test their veracity through a process of triangulation. Instead, phenomenology is concerned with an individual’s perceptions of an experience rather than the event itself.

The exploratory nature of this study lent itself to general inductive or grounded theory approaches of investigation and analysis, which allow theory to emerge from the data rather than data to be used to test a theory. As a result this thesis does not offer a final clear cut blanket theoretical explanation of the career transition under investigation. On the contrary, the inductive research process has revealed a great diversity of individual experience which defies neat generalization and tidy conclusions. As the following chapters will reveal, the variety of individual experience is a source of richness in this study and forces us to rethink the stereotypes that surround the role of the journalist and parliamentary media adviser. Together, the constructivist perspective of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, combined with an inductive qualitative research approach, has provided an integrated methodological framework to support the exploration of the lived experience of the career transition at the centre of this study.
3. Adversarial or co-operative?

3.1. Introduction

This chapter begins by charting the first stage of the transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser. It starts by documenting the reasons why the journalists interviewed for this research chose to make the shift from reporter to source. It is a significant shift from being the person who asks the questions to being the person who answers them. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the institutional differences of these two roles in democracy inject a level of tension into the relationship that ranges from adversarial to co-operative. This tension is often expressed in oppositional moralistic and idealistic terms illustrated by the stereotypical and antithetical portrayal of the two actors as ‘watchdog’ and ‘spin-doctor’. This chapter demonstrates how these role conceptions played on the minds of the interviewees during their deliberations about making the transition to parliamentary media advising. The chapter then examines conceptions of the power dynamic between the journalist and parliamentary media adviser from the perspective of the interviewees, and compares their expert practitioner theory based on lived experience against academic theories about the relationship. Rather than perceiving the roles to be in ethical opposition to each other, or locked in either an adversarial or co-operative relationship, the interviewees in this study revealed a range of nuanced interpretations of the two roles and the nature of the dynamic between them. Based on their experience as both ‘watchdog’ and ‘spin-doctor’, the unique comparative insights of the interviewees point to areas of overlap and similarity between journalism and parliamentary media advising. These areas of commonality in turn challenge the rigid divisions that have come to define the two roles as being in opposition to each other.

3.2. The decision to cross-over

The decision to leave journalism and crossover to the “dark-side” (Macnamara, 2012; Savva, 2010, p. 108) of parliamentary media advising was not taken lightly by any of the twenty-one journalists who participated in this study. As will be shown, several of the interviewees expressed concern about making the transition to parliamentary media advising because of the
Chapter 3: Adversarial or co-operative?

negative moralistic conception of the role of ‘spin-doctor’ and the association of partisanship and bias attached to the role. None of the interviewees said they had dreamed of becoming a parliamentary media adviser. It was not a career goal any of them had identified early on in their lives. As veteran political reporter Niki Savva expressed it:

*Niki Savva: I never used to lie awake at night thinking “how can I be a press sec?” All I wanted to do was be a journalist.* (Savva, 2012)

The transcripts revealed that the majority of the interviewees made the leap from journalism to parliamentary media advising because they were restless and looking for a change in direction. Some of the participants made the transition for financial reasons and others saw it as a solution to personal and family issues. Whatever the trigger, it was a sense of curiosity about the inner workings of government and politics that ultimately sealed the decision for each of them.

When Barrie Cassidy began his journalism career writing football columns for a regional Victorian newspaper as a teenager he said he had no interest in politics at all. By the time he had moved up the ranks from court and council rounds to state politics he said he had developed a passion for it and took on the extra burden of night school to learn more. When Cassidy made the move to federal political reporting in Canberra for the ABC he said he was approached twice by Prime Minister Bob Hawke’s office to become the leader’s media adviser. Though he was initially hesitant he said he saw it as an opportunity to quench his curiosity about what happened at the centre of political power which he said had been “burning away” and “needed to deal with it”:

*Barrie Cassidy: I wasn’t driven to work in politics...It was the process that really fascinated me and how it all worked. And I figured, look if I am ever going to experience how it works on the inside there is only one bloke that I could really work that closely with and that would be Bob Hawke, because I knew him well. I liked him.* (Cassidy, 2011)

None of the twenty-one interviewees saw the move to political media advising as permanent and all of them were aware of the possible stigma attached to becoming a press secretary. *Sarah

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7 For a discussion of the issue of partisanship, see Chapter 5.
said she had always been interested in politics and grew up wanting to be a foreign correspondent, but after several years reporting in the federal parliamentary press gallery she gave up her dream of reporting from foreign shores and was content to write about the political machinations of Canberra. When *Sarah was approached to work for a federal minister in the Keating government she said it was a difficult decision to make:

*Sarah: I agonised about it... because I thought ‘what an opportunity’ but I thought it was too early in my career to ruin my career. That is how I viewed it. I thought if I go over to the other side I will taint my reputation as a journalist. (*Sarah, 2012)

As a result *Sarah, like one other interviewee *Helen, sought the counsel of her journalism peers about whether to accept the offer because she was concerned she would not be able to return to reporting if she took the role:

*Sarah: (They) all gave me sage advice. ‘Look, once upon a time it would have damaged your career. It would have been very difficult to come back. You’d always be tainted’. But they said, ‘these days’ – and it was 1993 – ‘these days I don’t think it matters’ was the gist of what they were saying. So I thought ‘Ok, all right, I’ll say yes to the job’. (*Sarah, 2012)

To an extent the advice *Sarah was given was accurate. As her story unfolded, *Sarah revealed she was able to revolve through the roles of journalist and parliamentary media adviser more than once, but that was not the case for many of the journalists in this study, as will be examined in chapter 5.

Contrary to *Sarah’s experience, the stigma of crossing from journalism to parliamentary media advising began on the first day for Alex Wake. Wake had worked as a print and broadcast reporter for thirteen years in Australia and overseas before making the switch to parliamentary media advising. She had grown up in a politically active household and was working in Brisbane for the ABC when the Beattie Labor government was elected in 1998 in Queensland. At the time Wake said she was looking for a career change so when the offer came from a politician she respected she agreed to take on the role as his Senior Media Adviser. However, she said she had barely got her feet under the desk before she was accused of lying:
Alex Wake: It was the most awful experience. I remember my very first day saying to someone: ‘On Friday, when I last saw you, you thought I was telling the truth. Why do you think on Monday I would lie to you?’ I actually said that to someone from the ABC on my first day! There was a whole range of things. There was nastiness from some journalists. I remember thinking after being not long in the job that walking into a party you’d say you worked for the ABC and it would be nice, but if you walked in and said you were a press secretary all of a sudden you were a piece of crap. People treated you so differently. People accused you of lying. It was a really horrible thing. (Wake, 2011)

Though the other interviewees did not describe experiencing the same hurtful incidents recalled by Alex Wake, this type of experience is noted elsewhere by journalists who have crossed-over to public relations. A former British journalist, Simon Walker (2006), wrote in Where Truth Lies: Trust & Morality in PR and Journalism that when he first went from reporting to corporate public relations he was warned by a fellow former journalist that his “social status would plummet”:

As a journalist, he claimed, when you got to a cocktail party people typically look at you as the most important person in the room; when you become a corporate flak, you immediately become the least important. (p. 226)

The comments made to Alex Wake by a former journalism colleague and the initial reluctance that several of the interviewees had about leaving the newsroom for parliamentary media advising highlight the judgmental and moralistic way in which the role can be regarded, particularly by other journalists.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, conceptions of moralism around the role of parliamentary media advising and idealism toward the role of the journalist appear throughout journalism and critical theory scholarship (Louw, 2010; Moloney, 2006; Sanders, 2009; Spence et al., 2011). It is also present in articles written by practicing journalists. A clear example of this is provided by veteran political reporter, Quentin Dempster (2010), in a story he wrote about reporters’ crossing over to politics. In it he said:

Journalists are meant to be independent “pontificators”, objective observers of governance and a key part of the accountability process. What, for some journalists, is the appeal of party politics in Australia, with all its distortions, factionalism, focus-group rhetoric and spin doctoring? (Dempster, 2010, p. 17)
In questioning the decision of journalists to make the shift to politics, Dempster (2010) is implying that journalism is an ethically superior pursuit. In the article, Dempster (2010) described the role of the journalist in idealistic terms of objectivity and “accountability”; whereas politics is framed in moralistic and judgemental terms of “distortion” and “spin-doctoring”.

As the interviewees’ earlier comments demonstrated, this antithetical framing of journalism and parliamentary media advising contributed to an initial reluctance expressed by some to making the transition from reporting to parliamentary media advising. However, this chapter will show that once the interviewees settled in the new role, the simple antithetical conceptions of the two jobs did not necessarily match the reality of practice. Before exploring the individual experiences, it is useful to revisit the historical foundations of the sense of tension that exists between the two roles.

3.3. Historical Context of the relationship between the two roles

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the stereotypical characterisation of the ‘watchdog’ journalist and the parliamentary media adviser ‘spin-doctor’ colour the perceptions of both roles and external expectations of their professional behaviour. The conceptualisation of the role of journalist as democratic ‘watchdog’ and member of the idealised Fourth Estate has captured the ideological imagination of its practitioners (Louw, 2010; Nerone, 2013; Zelizer, 2012) and is clearly articulated in texts explaining the purpose of journalism, such as Kovach & Rosenstiel’s (2007) *Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. In this text, which was written to rearticulate journalism’s purpose at a time when its role was being challenged by the rise of digital technology, the authors clearly identified ten key principles of journalism that distinguish it from blogging and citizen journalism. Those principles include: “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth”; “Its first loyalty is to citizens”; and journalists “must serve as an independent monitor of power” (Kovach, 2007, p. 5).

However, the ‘watchdog’ role is not the only function of journalism. It also performs many others which are recognised by the *Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance – Journalists’ Code of Ethics* (1998). The code states that the role of the journalist stretches beyond a duty to “inform
citizens and animate democracy” to also include a commitment to “search, disclose, record, question, entertain, suggest and remember” (MEAA, 1998). Despite this diverse range of functions attributed to journalism, the idealised conception of the reporter as ‘watchdogs’ has dominated western journalism scholarship, which has “tended to adopt the journalism/democracy nexus as a naturalized part of understanding what journalism is for” (Zelizer, 2012, p. 7).

In contrast, the parliamentary media adviser is conceived to occupy the morally ambivalent position of a purveyor of ‘spin’ whose manipulative tactics serve to undermine democracy and is “almost universally reviled” (McNair, 2011, p. 140). This thesis argues that the sense of opprobrium toward the role of parliamentary media adviser stems from its co-location in the fields of politics and public relations which are both historically tainted by perceptions of dishonesty and propaganda.

The world of politics has long been linked to notions of lying and corruption. In the minds of one contemporary philosopher, the two are virtually synonymous:

No-one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician’s or the demagogue’s but also of the statesman’s trade. (Hannah Arendt in Jay, 2010, p. 16)

The uneasy relationship between politics and the truth can be traced as far back as Plato and his reference to what has been translated as “the noble lie” in politics, which has come to mean the justified use of an untruth in the name of a higher cause. This notion of a permissible lie in order to achieve a greater good was furthered by the Italian political historian Niccolo Machiavelli in his political treatise The Prince (originally published in 1532). In this seminal work, it is argued that Machiavelli was reluctant “to impose abstract moral principles on politics” and believed politics should not be hamstrung by the everyday moral constraints of telling the truth (Jay, 2010, p. 6). Instead, the renaissance diplomat argued that a successful leader needed at times to be “skilful in simulating and dissembling”:

A prudent prince neither can nor ought to keep his word when to keep it is hurtful to him and the causes which led him to pledge it are removed. If all men were good, this would not be good advice, but since they are dishonest and do not keep faith with you, you in
return, need not keep faith with them; and no prince was ever at a loss for plausible reasons to cloak a breach of faith. (Machiavelli, 2010, p. 131)

Though the connection between politics and mendacity has ancient roots, it was not until the time of the First World War when the American, British and German governments launched propaganda campaigns to rally community support behind their war efforts, that the coupling of politics and public relations with lying and manipulation really took hold in the public imagination (L'Etang, 2006a p. 26; Lasswell, 1927/1971). The association between propaganda and public relations is a fraught issue amongst public relations practitioners and one that has been traditionally ignored in scholarly public relations literature (Fawkes, 2007; L'Etang, 2006a; Moloney, 2006). Until the 1950s the term “propaganda” was widely used by communications professionals, however it fell out of favour and attempts were made to distance the profession from the negative associations of manipulative propaganda techniques. In order to do that effectively, a new term or label was sought to identify the profession, one that would:

be free of the connotation of factual and emotional manipulation in the search for power: and to be reclothed with softer, civic qualities such as goodwill, mutual understanding, adaptability and trust, all qualities compatible with liberal democracy. (Moloney, 2006, p. 166)

The search for a more neutral term resulted in the adoption of the title *public relations.* However, despite this rebranding exercise Moloney (2006) says little has changed. The stigma of lies and manipulation that the profession was trying to shed continues to hang over the profession with recent surveys showing that public relations continues to be portrayed in the media as “damage control, publicity, an attempt to hide or disguise the truth” (White, 2010, p. 319).

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8 It should also be noted that the media played an enthusiastic role in supporting propaganda efforts at this time, particularly in Australia. For more on the role of the media in supporting propaganda efforts during the First World War, see: Lasswell (1927/1971). For more on the Australian experience see: Putnis & McCallum (2008); Putnis & McCallum (2013).
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In order to address this image problem, critical theorists (Fawkes, 2007; L'Etang, 2006a; Moloney, 2006) claim the historical association between propaganda and public relations cannot continue to be ignored because the public perception is there, even if the academic acknowledgement is not:

The contemporary problem facing public relations is therefore that many basic definitions of propaganda could be equally used to describe public relations, and the crux for many has been identifying the difference between acceptable and non-acceptable persuasion…In other words one person’s public relations may be another person’s propaganda. (L'Etang, 2006a, p. 28)

Fawkes (2007) argues, that if the perception of the profession is going to change, public relations’ link to propaganda and the issue of *persuasion* “should be brought to the centre of discussion about what public relations is, not marginalised” (p. 316). Fawkes (2010) makes the point that by denying the historical links to propaganda and focussing on best-practice ideals rather than what actually happens in daily practice, the reality of everyday use of persuasion techniques is ignored and allows unethical approaches to flourish. As a result, Fawkes (2007) argues, public relations needs to come to terms with its “shadow” side because “in the absence of discussion the spectre of persuasion has grown more malevolent and more powerful, so that it is often seen as synonymous with manipulation” (p. 327).

The divergent historical paths of journalism and parliamentary media advising outlined above led to the development of an idealised conception of journalism that became enshrined in codes of ethics and dominated journalism scholarship; whereas the conception of the role of the parliamentary media adviser took on a negative complexion based on its links to the morally ambiguous fields of politics and public relations and high-profile examples of unethical practice. These historical tensions and oppositional stereotypes form part of the context in which the interviewees in this study worked as both journalists and parliamentary media advisers and help to explain why some of the interviewees in this study felt a degree of reluctance about leaving journalism to cross over to the “dark-side”. However, as will be discussed in the following sections, once the interviewees were employed in the job of parliamentary media advising, their experiences did not necessarily reflect the level of tension suggested by the history of conflict between the two roles.
3.4. Theoretical perspectives on reporter-source relations

Before hearing the interviewees’ theories about the level of tension in the relationship between journalists and parliamentary media advisers, it is useful to provide a sketch of some of the academic theories in this area. The location of parliamentary media advising within the fields of politics and public relations and its intermediary role between politicians and journalists, means that four sets of literature about the reporter-source relationship have been drawn on to paint a fuller picture of the dynamics between the two actors. Those sets of literature relate to the relationship between reporter and source generally as well as the specific relationships between politicians and journalists; parliamentary media advisers and journalists; and public relations practitioners and journalists. As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis does not claim that one configuration of the relationship can be directly substituted for another; however, the literature does reveal that the different variations share a similar fluctuating power dynamic and antithetical framing. As will be shown below, a tension between adversarialism and cooperation features in the scholarship about each of these reporter-source relationships.

3.4.1. Reporter-parliamentary media adviser relations

There is a limited amount of scholarly work specifically examining the relationship between journalists and parliamentary media advisers. However, two studies about parliamentary media advisers – one on press secretaries in the United States (Downes, 1998) and the other in Australia (Phillipps, 2002) – provide useful material on the relationship between reporters and parliamentary media advisers. In Downes’ (1998) American study, he describes the two actors as being engaged in a mutually dependent and mutually beneficial “symbiotic” relationship (p. 268) in which the two actors need each other to achieve their goals. The journalist needs the media adviser for news about what is happening politically; and the media adviser needs the journalist for exposure of the politician’s ideas to the public via the media. The tone of this symbiotic relationship is described by interviewees in the American study as “tense”, “antagonistic” and “confrontational” (Downes, 1998, p. 274). In Phillipps’ (2002) study of Australian parliamentary media advisers, he also describes the relationship as symbiotic and paints the two actors as “adversaries yet accomplices” (p. 1) who are at once “adversarial” yet
“cordial” toward each other (p. 111). The conception of *symbiosis* between journalists and parliamentary media advisers also appears in Louw (2010) who describes the two actors as being engaged in a “constant struggle for dominance” (p. 79). Depending on the circumstances, Louw (2010) says, one side will assume more control over the presentation of information than the other.

### 3.4.2. Reporter-politician relations

The concept of symbiosis features strongly in the literature on politician-reporter relations (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 106; Brants & de Vreese, 2010; Brants & Voltmer, 2011, p 130; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006, p. 147). Though both actors are engaged in a mutually beneficial relationship it is a relationship involving constant negotiation (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 111). This sense of ambivalence and fluctuation in the relationship was described by Leon Sigal (1973) forty years ago as a “mixture of conflict and cooperation” with reporters and their official sources being both “allies and adversaries” (p. 85). A few years later, Herbert Gans (1979/2004) described this tension as a “tango” (p. 116) to illustrate the fluctuation in power between the two actors. The image of the dance illustrates tension between the reporter and the politician as they constantly seek to wrest the lead from the other. This dance metaphor appears in other literature on the relationship (Ross, 2010; Sanders, 2009; Strömbäck, 2006) which also paints politician-reporter relations as tense and interdependent.

Blumler & Gurevitch (1981; 1995) argue that, determining how adversarial or co-operative the two actors are toward each other and who takes the lead in this tense tango, is dependent on a range of contextual circumstances. In their essay *Politicians and the Press: An Essay on Role Relationships* the two authors say the relationship between politicians and journalists has traditionally been explained using two main models: the “Adversary Model” and the “Exchange Model”. In the “Adversary Model”, politicians and journalists are seen as opponents who are in conflict with each other over the use and control of information. In the “Exchange Model”, the two actors are perceived as more co-operative and manoeuvring within a tense but mutually advantageous or symbiotic relationship. In addition to the adversary and exchange models, Östman & Eriksson (2013) inject a third “Dependence” model, in which journalists are largely
seen as dependent on politicians for information (p. 305). This ‘dependence’ perspective appears in literature concerned with the rise of professional political communications practitioners, or ‘spin-doctors’, and journalists’ increasing reliance on information subsidies (Gandy, 1982) such as, press releases and staged events, for information (Louw, 2010; Meyer, 2002; Moloney, 2006).

However, Blumler & Gurevitch (1981; 1995) argued these separate and distinct models of adversary and exchange were inadequate to describe the nature of the complex shifting power relationship between politicians and reporters. Instead, they developed the more nuanced “Expanded Framework” to reflect the fluctuating nature of the tension between the two roles. Under this more sophisticated model, the two authors saw the relationship between politicians and reporters as neither exclusively adversarial, nor always co-operative. Instead, Blumler & Gurevitch (1981) described the actors as being interdependent, “mutually dependent” and “mutually adaptive”, in their pursuit of different yet overlapping goals (p. 476). This process of mutual adaptation between the two actors as a response to a range of external and internal contextual factors which have an impact on the environment in which the two actors operate. It should be noted that one of the criticisms of Blumler and Gurevitch’s “Expanded Framework” is that it assumes a balance of power between the two actors and that negotiations take place between equals. Voltmer and Brants (2011) say this conception of equality between the two actors has been challenged in more recent literature which argues alternatively that the media is either in control of the agenda or that the government is in charge. Either way, Voltmer and Brants (2011) contend these different perspectives simply demonstrate the importance of the context in which the negotiation between the two actors is occurring. Voltmer and Brants (2011) list a range of influences that can have an impact on that level of tension including: a) the issue at hand; b) the potential damage to the authority or credibility of either side; c) public opinion; d) changing communication technologies; e) and the cultural and political context of the communication (p. 5). Depending on the circumstances, the two authors say, the amount of power either actor is able to exert changes, which sees the tension between politicians and reporters shifting “between complicity and open power struggle” (Brants, 2011, p. 4).
3.4.3. Reporter-PR practitioner relations

The concept of “mutual adaptation” used by Blumler and Gurevitch (1981; 1995) is also present in the theoretical model of “interefficication” (Bentele, 1997) which describes the relations between public relations practitioners and reporters. In the interefficication model, the relationship is described as being negotiated through a process of “mutual influence, mutual orientation and mutual dependence” (Wehmeier, 2008, p. 2354). This model most closely resembles the co-operative, exchange model described by Blumler and Gurevitch (1981; 1995). In contrast, there is a range of public relations literature pointing to a sense of animosity and conflict between the two actors (Aronoff, 1975; Charron, 1989; Delorme, 2003; Gower, 2007; Lloyd, 2006; Moloney, 2006; Sallot, 1998; White, 2010). This is clearly demonstrated by Moloney’s (2006) characterization of the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners as ranging from “love-hate” to “hate-hate” (p. 24).

The concept of fluctuating levels of tension identified in the literature on each of the specific relationships above also appears in research examining the reporter-source relationship more generally. In Ericson, Baranek and Chan’s (1989) work, Negotiating control: A study of news sources, the authors describe the ambivalence in power relations between reporter and source as a process of “negotiating control”. By that they mean the negotiation of control over knowledge, or information, and the way it is presented. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1989) call this negotiation the “knowledge/power dialectic” which they see as a tug-of-war over ongoing issues of “secrecy, confidence, censorship and publicity” (p. 2). As to which of the two actors manages to take control of the presentation of information at any given time, the authors say, is “contextual, equivocal, transitory, and unresolved” (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 2). The contextual factors they identify as having an influence on the negotiation of control are similar to those identified by Voltmer and Brants (2011) and include cultural, personal, professional and institutional influences “that are played out in the eternal dance of secrecy and revelation characterising knowledge/power relations” (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 2).

Though the above selections of literature about the reporter-source relationship reflect a degree of variety in their interpretation of the power dynamic between the two actors, they also share
two common features. Firstly, they all recognise the fluctuating nature of the tension between the two actors from adversarial to co-operative. Secondly, each perspective recognises that the level of conflict and co-operation between the two actors can be influenced by a range of contextual factors. As will be shown in the following section 3.4.4., the same two features were also present in the interviewees’ perceptions of the nature of the relationship between journalists and parliamentary media advisers.

3.4.4. Practitioner perspectives on parliamentary media adviser – reporter relations

So far this chapter has outlined a selection of theories and dominant conceptions about the relationship between parliamentary media advisers and journalists; politicians and journalists and public relations practitioners and journalists. Common to these scholarly conceptions of the relationship is the recognition of varying degrees of conflict and tension between the two roles and the importance of context to that level of tension. As the following pages reveal, the divergent views expressed by the interviewees on the nature of the power dynamic between reporters and parliamentary media advisers echoes the range of theoretical models expressed in the literature.

Despite some challenging experiences during her time as a ministerial media adviser, Alex Wake said she had a positive perception of the relationship between reporters and parliamentary media advisers that more closely resembled the collaborative ideas behind the exchange model (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981) than the combative notions underpinning the adversary model:

**Alex Wake:** I just thought I was there to help the media and help the minister get out his message and help the media to do that. I did not really see it as some deep dark force of whatever else. I was just there to be the in-between-guy who helped it all happen and run smoothly, a facilitator. I think they are complementary...you need both. (Wake, 2011)

After some quiet reflection over a cup of tea in her kitchen *Helen thoughtfully described the relationship between the two actors as being at odds with each other, with the conflict emanating from the desire of both actors to control the message, resembling Ericson et al.’s (1989) theory of “negotiating control” over the presentation of information:
*Helen: They are conflicting roles and I think that is a healthy conflict and that there has to be that conflict. That is how democracy operates and when it’s not then we’ve got a problem. The journalist has to be out there inquiring, serving the public interest by getting information out and sometimes in politics you don’t want it out there, or you might not want it out there at that point. But by the fact that you know it could be out there at any point then you have to be cognizant of that and make sure that you are doing the right thing... Who gets to present the information, I guess is the battle and when and how it is going to be presented. But you are both out there trying to get information across, and it’s about control of the information. Who has the control? (*Helen, 2012)

At the heart of the relationship conflict perceived by *Helen is the notion of journalism as the democratic ‘watchdog’ holding government – and therefore also the parliamentary media adviser – to account by using the threat of exposure to encourage ethical behaviour. Conceptions of “mutual dependence” and “mutual adaptation” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981) combined with a sense of both conflict and co-operation also reoccur throughout the reflections of the interviewees. For example:

Niki Savva: You need each other so it’s symbiotic, but you’re working towards something for different reasons. Obviously journos want stories and they want them first and they want every piece of information; whereas I might release information to someone, but my objective will be something quite different, furthering the government’s objectives or my bosses’ objectives or whatever. (Savva, 2012)

The complex, context dependent nature of the role relationship between media advisers and reporters is echoed by another of the interviewees, Dennis Atkins. Atkins has revolved through the roles of media adviser and print journalist at both federal and state levels and is now a senior reporter with The Courier Mail newspaper in Brisbane. The last transition Atkins made between the two roles saw him return to print journalism after six years at the helm of government communications for the Goss Labor government in Queensland. Based on his experience, Dennis Atkins said he perceived the roles to be both conflicting and co-operative depending on whether the government was in political difficulty or not. As a result he said the conflict was not stable, it ebbed and flowed:

Dennis Atkins: They can be opposing roles and especially when a politician is in trouble or under siege, being attacked by the media, then it is a field of combat, but they can also be complementary roles. All politicians need the media as one way of getting their message across and journalists need politicians to fill column inches about politics...
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It’s not always a conflict. When there is combat going on, it is conflict. But that is not the natural state of things, or I don’t think it should be. (Atkins, 2011)

Rather than the two actors always being adversaries, Dennis Atkins suggested there can be periods of sustained or relative harmonious co-existence.

What these reflections from the interviewees highlight is the fluctuating nature of the tension between the two roles. Based on their experience of working as both reporters and parliamentary media advisers, the interviewees perceived that while reporters and parliamentary media advisers might have opposing goals the two actors were not necessarily in conflict all of the time. As Ericson et al. (1989) contend, the interviewees were aware that the tension between the two roles was “contextual, equivocal, transitory and unresolved” (p. 2). This is supported by the work of Stanyer (2007) and Graber (2010), who have identified three interlinking phases in the relationship between the two actors. The first is commonly called ‘the honeymoon period’ when new governments assume power. This initial phase is characterised by a period of co-operation when the new government’s messages are aired in the media with minimal criticism. Phase two begins once controversial policies and programs have been put in place and start attracting negative media coverage and public criticism. This phase of negative reporting, Graber (2010) argues, marks a turn in the tide of the relationship, and ushers in a third phase of “mutual hostility” and heightened conflict between the media and politicians (p. 235).

Dennis Atkins’ observation also resonates with Eriksson & Östman’s (2013) suggestion that different phases of conflict and co-operation also occur during the production process of a single news story. At the interactional phase where information is being gathered and disseminated, Eriksson & Östman (2013) conclude a more co-operative mode of interaction is adopted that resembles the exchange model described by Blumler & Gurevitch (1981). The journalist’s stance can then shift to a more adversarial position during the news construction phase when he or she is independently writing the story for publication.

However, in a small jurisdiction like the ACT, there appeared to be less conflict between journalists, politicians and their media advisers than at the federal level. That was the experience
of Craig Allen, who worked for a regional commercial television network before joining the staff of the ACT’s then Liberal Chief Minister, Kate Carnell:

Craig Allen: There is an element of that (conflict) especially when things get nasty, but most of my work wasn’t overtly political or wasn’t ripping in to the Opposition. It was the genuine release of information and a lot of the work that the ACT government does is dead boring by media standards. Most of the media releases did not get picked up but we were still obliged to put out media releases about changes in liquor duties and opening hours and all sorts of peripheral stuff that was still important work for government to do. In that sense we were helping the public generally through the media to get access to this information. So we weren’t at each other’s throats most of the time and it was probably duller than people think it should be. (Allen, 2012)

What Craig Allen described is a less politically aggressive environment where the focus of his job was on the “genuine release of information” about government services. This is possibly attributable to the fact that the ACT is a smaller, almost municipal jurisdiction. This supposition is supported by a Swedish study by Larsson (2002) which found high degrees of collaboration between politicians and journalists in small local areas. Larsson’s (2002) study found the relationship between the two actors in these smaller jurisdictions was governed more by trust and norms instead of conflict. This allowed both actors the necessary “manoeuvring space” to achieve its goals without hostility or obstruction (Larsson, 2002, p. 21). As a result of these jurisdictional features, Craig Allen’s perception of the level of tension he encountered with reporters during his time as a parliamentary media adviser in the ACT more closely reflected the characteristics of the co-operative exchange model of reporter-source relations, than the adversarial model.

The fact that there was no uniform view expressed by the interviewees about the nature of the relationship between parliamentary media advisers and reporters underlines the complexity and changeability of the reporter-source relationship. Just as Blumler & Gurevitch (1981) found that the narrow adversarial and exchange models were inadequate to capture the nuances in the relationship between politicians and reporters, so did the interviewees in this study. Instead, both the academic theorists and the practitioners describe a fluctuation in the level of tension in that relationship that is dependent on the changing contextual circumstances and requires constant adaptation. The fluctuation in power and mutual adaptation identified in the scholarly and
practitioner theories both point to the inherently tactical nature of the relationship between journalists and parliamentary media advisers, which will be explored directly below.

3.5. A tactical relationship

The word tactical has military connotations and conjures images of opposing troops manoeuvring against each other to gain advantage. Though set in a different environment and on a much smaller scale, the imagery of military manoeuvring is useful in helping to conceptualise the interaction between journalists and parliamentary media advisers as they ‘mutually adapt’ in response to, and in anticipation of, the other’s moves. To explain this conception of the relationship being tactical, I have drawn on Stanyer’s (2007) description of the nature of the relationship between politicians and reporters. In his book Modern Political Communication, Stanyer (2007) says the relationship between politicians and journalists is tactical because both actors are goal oriented and are working to achieve their goals in the competitive strategic environments of media and politics. As a result, he says, the two actors are required to be reflexively engaged in monitoring:

their own activities – the activities of their rivals and their audience. The process of reflexivity is seen as allowing the effective achievement of a particular goal in a fast changing socio-political environment. (Stanyer, 2007 p. 4)

Blumler & Gurevitch (1981) described the tactical nature of the relationship as a “tactically shifting process in which the principal actors strive to influence each other for their own benefit” (p. 484). Given that parliamentary media advisers and journalists are also goal oriented and operating to achieve their goals in the same competitive strategic environments of media and politics, this thesis argues the relationship between parliamentary media advisers and journalists can also be seen through the same tactical lense.

Not only is the interaction between reporters and parliamentary media advisers tactical, the way parliamentary media advisers perform their role also requires the use of tactics9 (de Vreese, 2000).

9 It is important to note that references to tactics in this thesis cover both “overt” and “covert” tactics described by Gaber (2000). Overt or “above the line” tactics refers to the information management techniques identified in the
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2011; Downes, 1998; Gaber, 2000; Goodin, 1980; Louw, 2010; Phillipps, 2002; Richardson, 2002; Sigal, 1973; Young, 2011). Whether writing a press release, preparing for a media conference or deciding how much information to provide to a particular reporter, several of the interviewees perceived the use of tactics as being important to the work of the parliamentary media adviser:

*Helen: It is quite tactical. You are thinking a lot about who is going to cover this well? Who will be fairest? So there is a lot of thinking about that kind of thing and perception. How different things will be perceived if you do this or do that? (*Helen, 2012)

Dennis Atkins: It’s a pretty serious game. Part of it is about tactics. There is interplay that the journalist does this, the press secretary does this in response. Both sides know what the other side’s doing and you try to finish in front. But it is a serious game and especially if you are working for a minister and anything you say you have to live with for the rest of your life. So you take it seriously. (Atkins, 2011)

Malcolm Fraser’s former press secretary, David Barnett, said his whole way of thinking changed when he became a prime ministerial media adviser to focus on issues of tactics and strategy:

*David Barnett: It’s not what happened last, it’s what happens next. It’s what you do next. It’s what’s required in the circumstances... It is strategic thinking and I have never stopped that. (Barnett, 2011)

In *Scott’s ministerial office the staffers had regular meetings with the minister to discuss how best to respond to issues in the media:

*Scott: The discussions you have are more about ‘OK we’ve got this story in the paper this morning. It’s adverse. What’s a good tactic?’ It’s more about the tactics not about how to ‘spin’ it, rather: ‘Is it wise to go out and try and knock it on the head?’ ‘Is it wise to put the minister up on radio when there’s this other story running?’ ‘If we go out now and say X, Y and Z about this story that is in the news cycle when we know that in a months’ time the position is going to be A, B, C.’ You know, ‘how do we make sure we don’t mislead?’ or ‘how do we handle that?’ So it’s more discussions about the tactics and how to respond to issues and present policy than about ‘spin’ as such. Maybe some

public relations literature such as the use of press releases or staging promotional events. See also (Mahoney, 2013; Tench & Yeomans, 2006) for more on overt public relations tactics. Covert or “below the line” tactics refers to a more subtle level of decision making about the consequences of releasing certain information, such as: which reporter the press secretary should to talk to? Or, how much information should be released to reporter and when? The use of covert tactics by the interviewees is discussed in 4.5.
people would think that is ‘spin’, but to me I think ‘spin’ is more about the language you use and the style of messaging you use. I don’t really get much of that. My minister tends to speak fairly directly and you know we kind of construct media releases and speeches in the office with a good ear to how he likes things to be anyway. So yeah, it’s more tactics I think and strategy, like ‘where are we going to be in a years’ time, politically?’ and ‘how what we are saying now should anticipate where we are going to be in 6 to 12 months’ time?’ (*Scott, 2011)

*Scott’s comment highlights many different factors that need to be considered in responding to inquiries from the media. Whether the press secretaries worked for government, the Opposition or a minor party, they were required to constantly juggle questions about: What information? How much? When? For whom?; and, what are the possible consequences? There is a lot riding on those choices in politics. Ultimately electoral success is at stake.

So far, this chapter has revealed a wide range of interpretations about the degree of conflict present between the two roles through an examination of historical tensions between journalists and parliamentary media advisers; dominant stereotypes and theoretical models; and comparing them with of the interviewees’ perceptions. Rather than the traditionally dominant adversarial model taking precedence, this study has found the interviewees perceived varying degrees of tension from animosity to co-operation in their interactions with journalists. That level of tension was perceived to depend on a range of contextual influences such as the issue at hand, the political climate, the size of the jurisdiction, and also possibly the era¹⁰ in which the interviewee performed the role. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis the perception of conflict between the role of the journalist and the media adviser does not stop at the descriptive level of how the positions tactically “mutually adapt” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981, p. 476) to each other. The perception of conflict between the two roles permeates the level of ethics as well, which is expressed through the blunt antithetical stereotypes of the ‘watchdog’ and the ‘spin-doctor’.

¹⁰ The question of whether the era in which the interviewee performed the role as press secretary had an influence on the level of perceived tension between the roles and the level of ethical tension the interviewee experienced is discussed in the introduction, chapter 4 and the conclusion to the thesis.
Before we hear the practitioner’s perceptions of these antithetical constructions, it is useful to briefly revisit the dualistic representations of the two roles in the literature that were outlined in the introductory chapter.

3.6. **Antithetical conceptions of the roles in the literature**

In their analysis of the relationship between politicians and journalists Blumler & Gurevitch (1981), contend the relationship between politicians and journalists is based on an “abiding” role-related ethical conflict regarding the use of information (p. 485). The two authors say that this under-lying conflict stems from the politician’s primary goal of “persuasion” and the journalist’s goal of “enlightening the electorate” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981, p. 485). As outlined in the introduction, this antithetical portrayal of the two roles is also expressed elsewhere in the literature (Moloney, 2006; Sanders, 2009; Spence, 2011). For instance, (as discussed in Chapter 1) in their analysis of the ethical compatibility between journalism, public relations and advertising, *Media, Markets and Morals*, Spence et al. (2011) contend the central purpose of journalism is to “inform” truthfully and fairly in “the public interest”; whereas the primary goal of public relations is advocacy – which is a form of “persuasion” – and requires “presenting the client in a favourable light” (pp. 97, 99). On the basis of an appeal to universal morality (discussed in the introduction), the authors conclude that journalism and public relations are “inherently incompatible both epistemologically and ethically” with each other (Spence et al., 2011, p. 96). In her book, *Communicating Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, Karen Sanders (2009) says politicians can be seen as wanting to “control” information and journalists wanting to “release” information (p. 36). This simple dualism implies a lack of transparency and desire to manipulate the flow of information on the part of the politician and a commitment to the democratic ideal of disclosure of information on the part of the journalist. Moloney (2006) separates the role of the journalist and the public relations practitioner along the lines of professional motivation. He describes the goal of public relations as “advocacy for interests” as opposed to the goal of “scrutiny of interests” on the part of the reporter (Moloney, 2006, p. 162). As a result, Moloney (2006) says “the two roles are antithetical” (p. 162).
While these blunt distinctions between the two roles might be useful to try and neatly describe differences between them at an abstract level, they do not reflect the complex reality of either role, as the practitioners describe below.

### 3.7. Practitioner perspectives on the conception of antithesis between the roles

When asked to respond to the conception of journalism and public relations/parliamentary media advising being ethically incompatible, as articulated by Spence et al. (2011, p. 113), several of the interviewees said they found the antithetical framing to be simplistic and judgemental. In a measured tone, Craig Allen said, “I don’t think it is that black and white at all because I think you both want the same things you just have different ways of approaching it”. *Tom, however, gave a passionate reaction to the antithetical framing of the two roles:

**Tom**: I find that so sanctimonious. I mean if you have been a press secretary you know that journalist’s commitment to the truth and public interest is a highly subjective and qualified thing. There are good journalists and bad journalists and there are ethical and unethical journalists as there are ethical and unethical PR people and ethical and unethical advertisers. So for anyone to say that, I think it is just wrong, inaccurate, jaundiced and sanctimonious frankly. I think you can do those jobs and do them ethically, every single one of them. I think the public knows the difference... I don’t think the public views journalism as being as special as it views itself. I don’t think the public has the faith in journalism that journalists think they have. I don’t think the public sees such a big difference between journalism, PR and advertising as journalists would like to think, either. If you accept a job you do it to your best ability and with your ethics and integrity. And it doesn’t matter in which of these silos it’s in. (*Tom, 2011*)

*Tom’s frustration stemmed from what he saw as an idealised and inaccurate view of journalism. Based on their recollections of their time in both roles, the interviewees in this study argued there was nothing inherently unethical about parliamentary media advising, not inherently ethical about journalism, it was how the jobs were performed that mattered.

**Kerry O’Brien**: There is nothing unethical, per se about being in PR or being a media minder to a politician. I don’t have a problem with that per se. I didn’t have it when I was inside and I don’t have it now as a journalist... Where I have a problem is where a press sec or some kind of media consultant will endeavour to teach a politician or some other public figure how to lie to the media without being caught or how to avoid or evade
difficult questions; or how to manipulate an interview for their own self interest. Those are the things that I would say are wrong. (O’Brien, 2012)

This was a view shared by other interviewees:

*Adam: I think it comes down to individuals and how they go about their jobs...The key factor is the personal ethics and values of the individual that they bring to the job; it’s not the job itself that is the problem. (*Adam, 2011)

*Helen: I think there is an ethical way of doing both jobs and an unethical way of doing both jobs. I don’t think journalism or government ‘spin’ or government information is unethical, it’s how it is done really. I mean look at what has happened with the Murdoch press and the whole climate change argument. I mean that is totally unethical, dangerous. They ignore great big sections of information or underplay it. I recall one story where the Immigration Department told them certain things weren’t happening – completely denied that the event the paper wanted to report on had happened and yet the Murdoch paper in question printed a whole article and did not even quote the Department of Immigration’s denial. So the Department was being ethical there and the journalist was being unethical by ignoring its statement. At the very least it should have quoted the statement if not dropped the entire story. Obviously the government has to get information out and tell people what it is doing – given the ferocity of the 24/7 news cycle now it is unrealistic to think it won’t employ ‘spin-doctors’ to do it. It is whether it does it in an ethical way. There will always be a tension within in the government of whether it meets that test or not and that’s up to culture makers within the government. (*Helen, 2012)

The interviewee’s comments (above), reflect what Jacquette (2010) calls “the troubled interface where abstract moral philosophical theory meets the realistic workaday professional practice” (p. 221). It is troubled because the moralistic, antithetical framing of “persuasion” and “advocacy” against “informing” in the “public interest” did not reflect the interviewees perceptions of the reality of journalism practice, as explained directly below.

Rather than having antithetical goals, several of the interviewees in this study perceived the two roles as sharing similar goals and values. For instance, based on their experience as journalists and parliamentary media advisers the interviewees considered “informing” the public via the provision of factually accurate information to be a central goal of both roles, rather than solely belonging to the domain of journalism. This is also supported by the public relations literature (Pieczka, 2006, p. 321). In a survey of journalists and public relations practitioners (Sallot, 1998), both sets of communication professionals listed “factual accuracy” as the most important
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value in their job. Despite sharing this priority their perceptions of each other’s professional values did not reflect this common goal:

journalists saw little similarity between their news values and their perceptions of practitioners' values...Journalists thought practitioners would rank "depicting news subjects in a favorable light" most important and "fairness to different views" least important. They also thought practitioners would rank "factual accuracy" much less important than they themselves ranked it. (Sallot, 1998, p. 370)

Similarly, the practitioners interviewed for this doctoral thesis did not see the goals of “advocacy” and “persuasion” as belonging solely to the role of parliamentary media advising. Based on their experience in both roles the interviewees felt that journalists also seek to persuade their audience by making their stories as interesting as possible. The interviewees also argued that some journalists and news organisations (not all) also advocate on behalf of minority voices or push particular interests through their reporting. Vivienne Wynter described her view of the situation this way:

Vivienne Wynter: Look at the crusades that News Ltd runs. Absolute crusades against climate change, against the Democrats, against the Greens. The Manning Clark stuff, they absolutely seek to persuade. So it is completely bogus to claim they are the only ones with fidelity to a balanced view and the public’s right to information. Let’s get real here. (Wynter, 2012)

The issue of reporters blurring the line between “gatekeeper” or objective reporting and “advocate” or participant journalism is something that Janowitz (1975) warned against nearly forty years ago. In his influential article Professional Models in Journalism: the Gatekeeper and the Advocate, Janowitz (1975) expressed concern that advocacy reporting would undermine journalism’s “professionalism” and reduce its ability to carry out its democratic function in society (Waisbord, 2008, p. 372). Debate still continues among journalism practitioners about the appropriate role of advocacy in journalism (Edwards, 2013; Keller, 2013; McNair, 2009; Schafer, 2013; Taibbi, 2013). Janowitz (1975) saw the two models of gatekeeper and advocate journalism as being governed by conflicting ideals, the same conflicting ideals which Spence et al. (2011) and others (Moloney, 2006; Sanders, 2009) argue place journalism at ethical odds with public relations and parliamentary media advising:
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The gatekeeper can be considered as the ideal of the enlightenment of the mass public; the advocate, as the ideal of the lawyer and almost that of the politician. (Janowitz, 1975, p. 626)

What this demonstrates is the fine line that separates journalism and “informing” from public relations/parliamentary media advising and “advocacy”. If one were to pursue the logic of Spence et al.’s (2011) line of argument further and apply it to the apparent conflict between objective reporting and advocacy, then it must be conceded that the same ethical tension between providing information and persuasion identified by the authors as an “inherent conflict of interest” and ethically “incompatible” (p. 96), also resides within journalism itself. It is a tension between advocacy reporters who blur the public interest with the interests of those they are advocating on behalf of through their stories on the one hand, and journalists who are unswayed by special vested interests on the other.

This internal ethical conflict within journalism highlights the oversimplification of the advocate-versus-informer dichotomy used to distinguish the ethical role of public relations in relation to journalism outlined above. It weakens the argument that these opposing goals define the conflicting motivations of public relations and journalism because journalism is not ethically quarantined from the moral ambiguity of advocacy and persuasion. Thus it demonstrates the problems with idealism and moralism outlined by Coady (2008). Those problems are the unrealizability of ideals, and the judgmentalism of moralism as outlined in the introduction to this thesis.

The following statement by Vivienne Wynter challenges the oversimplified advocate-versus-informer dichotomy even further. Rather than the goals of “informing” and “advocacy” being incompatible, Wynter found they were often complementary. During her time as a parliamentary media adviser she said she was able to serve them both simultaneously:

Vivienne Wynter: I hate being told that I had crossed over to the ‘dark-side’ and I think its intellectually disingenuous for journalists to just try and privilege their profession because I got more stories broken – I did not author them – but I got them broken and I am talking several stories on Four Corners, several front pages of The Courier Mail and Sydney Morning Herald through being a media officer, than I ever would have done hacking away in the 4BC newsroom. That’s the reality and I don’t care about the by-line, I just want to serve the story... A lot of the time I thought I was doing the work of
producers on television programmes. They knew I was willing to do the production research so they let me do it and I was willing to do it to get our lines in to the story. (Wynter, 2012)

While Vivienne Wynter’s experience was not shared by the other twenty participants, her comments offer a unique perspective on the issue of ethical conflict between reporting and parliamentary media advising. The above comment reveals a blurring of the perceived antithetical goals of “informing” and “advocacy” identified in the literature (Spence et al., 2011). Her statement reflects a strong journalistic drive to “serve the story” and make information available to the public, as well as a desire to promote the issues or stories that reflected the interests of the politician. Despite the convergence of these goals, Vivienne Wynter said she did not see the two interests as necessarily conflicting, especially if the parliamentary media adviser was acting out of a journalistic commitment to informing the public. While practitioners and scholars who adhere to a strict division between the roles might find these comments challenging, the concept of parliamentary media advisers providing research assistance to reporters and doing the work of journalists is not unusual and is reflected in the literature on reporter-source relations, particularly in relation to media advisers employed by opposition parties (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 191). It is also well documented that reporters rely heavily on public relations professionals, including parliamentary media advisers, to provide them with information and news subsidies (Bacon, 2010; Davis, 2002; Ericson, 1989; Gandy, 1982; Macnamara, 2012; McNair, 2011; Tanner, 2002). Busy reporters are often happy to receive help from media and communications advisers they know and trust as they race towards a deadline. Louw (2010) says one of the key roles of ‘spin-doctoring’ is to make life easier for the journalist by offering story ideas, providing picture opportunities, media friendly sound-bites, and reliable background research.

The preceding examination of the issue of antithesis between the roles of journalism and political media advising has once again revealed a tension between the expectation of ethical conflict set up by the moralistic and idealistic stereotypes and the practitioner’s perceptions of the way in which the two jobs are performed. As this chapter has so far demonstrated, distinguishing parliamentary media advising from journalism on the basis of ‘advocacy’ versus ‘informing’ does not stand up to scrutiny. Having practiced as journalists themselves the interviewees were
well aware of the existence of poor ethical reporting practice and as a result rejected the moralistic perception of going to the “dark side” when they became parliamentary media advisers. Based on their experience in both roles, the majority of the interviewees argued there was nothing inherently unethical about political media advising or ethical about journalism – it was the way the jobs were performed that counted. The following sections of this chapter look at the similarities between journalism and parliamentary media advising as perceived by the interviewees.

3.8. **Similarities between journalism and parliamentary media advising**

3.8.1. **Shared Skills**

Among the twenty-one interviewees there was unanimous agreement that the role of journalist and political media adviser shared many similarities, particularly a common skill set and an understanding of media culture or “media logic”, as Altheide (2004) described it. Each of the interviewees was cognizant of the fact that it was his or her understanding of the media’s operational requirements, as well as mastery of basic journalism skills such as fast, accurate writing and working to deadline, that made them attractive employees to politicians.

Greg Turnbull was approached by Prime Minister Paul Keating’s chief of staff to leave ABC Television’s 7.30 Report in Brisbane and become the Prime Minister’s press secretary in 1991. Turnbull said he saw it as a flattering offer and one that was hard to refuse. During our conversation in his office seated on either side of his large timber desk, Turnbull described the transition as being “huge” and the highlight of his career. In response to some follow-up questions via email after the face-to-face interview, Turnbull said he perceived there to be more similarities than differences between journalism and media advising:

**Greg Turnbull:** One common denominator is the need for accuracy. A press secretary can get his or her boss in to trouble (and therefore trouble for himself or herself) by being loose with facts. Ditto journalists. The other skill which journos and press secretaries should have in common is fast, accurate writing. That is the craft that makes them attractive employees. Sometimes a big political office will have lots of brilliant, technically highly qualified people, all coming together with points of view on that day's particular crisis, but it usually takes the press secretary (the only journalist in the room) to actually bash out a media release in time to meet deadlines. (Turnbull, 2011b)
When I met *Scott in the marble foyer of Parliament House in Canberra, he had only been a ministerial press secretary for six months. Lodged in a booth at the back of the staff canteen while Question Time was underway we discussed his first impressions of the job. Reflecting Bowman’s (1949) comments that the initial phase of transition to a new role provides a valuable opportunity for insight, *Scott’s fresh reflections on the transition from reporting to parliamentary media advising proved very useful as many of the interviewees in this study made the transition between the two roles some years ago. After the interview *Scott said he had also found the discussion useful to chart his own feelings about the career move he had made. Based on his first six months in the job *Scott said he perceived the two roles as having much in common:

*Scott: Journalism teaches you to be quick on your feet, good hopefully with the written or spoken word, able to find information at short notice, track it down, and able to develop a network of contacts. I guess they are all useful things to have if you are a media adviser. You know there a lot of similarities in that you come in each day and you might have a plan to do task x and then fact y blows up and then you end up chasing that all day. That happens in journalism and it happens in this role. You are working to deadlines in both roles. You are trying to source, process, massage and write information and get it out quickly. And inside the office you have to have good relationships with the people you work with, and quickly work out who to go to for a piece of information. You can’t spend half the day waiting. That is similar to what a journo does. For this story that person in that interest group is the right person to go to for a couple of quotes to fit this story. Or for this story you know that’s the right contact to phone. So you kind of do that a little bit to work out quickly how to get information from within the government or your department. (*Scott, 2011)

Working as a media adviser for a minor party or the Opposition also requires the same skills to those used by ministerial media advisers working for government. Reflecting on her five-year period working for Democrat Senator John Woodley, Vivienne Wynter found there were many commonalities:

Vivienne Wynter: My work in Senator Woodley’s office in some ways was really similar to working as a journalist because I was on the phone gathering information most of the time. Instead of doing it for The Courier Mail I was doing it for the Democrats to put in a press release to send to The Courier Mail. (Wynter, 2012)
Two of the interviewees took the perception of similarity between journalism and parliamentary media advising even further and argued both roles were situated on a continuum of information presentation and storytelling. *Adam felt both roles even focused on the same goal:

*Adam: journalists are as much about the presentation of a story as a press secretary writing a press release. They have different masters but they are both keenly attuned to the presentation of information...Now if you ask me if a press secretary who writes a media release presenting a particular policy position in a particular way, is that less journalistic than a person who reads that press release goes to the press conference along the angle as the most saleable and then the presentation of that in the paper the next day. Aren’t they doing the same thing?

Caroline Fisher (researcher): Storytelling?

*Adam:...Yes, storytelling. (*Adam, 2011)

In a similar vein, Andrew Fraser saw the process of selection and interpretation of facts by journalists to determine the best angle of a story as being very similar to a parliamentary media adviser ‘spinning’ a story to put the politician’s best foot forward. This is an interpretation that is also supported in the literature (Burns, 2013, p. 11; de Vreese, 2005, p. 59; Downes, 1998, p 281; Mahoney, 2013, p. 130).

Andrew Fraser: In fact I make this view quite strongly to my colleagues when they rail about ‘spin-doctors’ and I say, ‘Oh no, we never have an angle on anything do we? We are always so straight down the line’. (Fraser, 2012)

The interviewees’ perceptions of these similarities between journalism and parliamentary media advising are significant because they complicate the commonly portrayed black and white conceptions of the two roles as having opposing goals. Rather than notions of factual accuracy solely belonging to journalism the interviewees saw the provision of factually accurate information as central to parliamentary media advising as well. Instead of selectivity and manipulation of information being a characteristic solely belonging to media advising, the interviewees perceived the presence of these activities in journalism practice as well. Further examination of these areas of professional convergence and overlap continues in chapter 4.
It is widely discussed in the public relations literature that a shared skill set is the common denominator between these two roles (Aronoff, 1975; Hobsbawm, 2006; Kopenhaver, 1985; Macnamara, 2012; Moloney, 2006; Sallot, 2006, 1998; Sinaga, 2008). Journalism skills are seen to be desirable for public relations practitioners, but to many journalists the use of those skills for public relations purposes, such as to provide media training to company executives and government officials, is seen as an act of treachery. The former editor of *Mother Jones* magazine says when journalism graduates go directly into public relations it seems like:

> an almost traitorous career choice to traditionalists like myself who instruct students how to handle PR executives and circumvent the barrier they erect between truth and the story they want told about their clients. (Dowie in Stauber, 1995, p. 3)

For reporters who consider the craft of journalism as a “calling”, Sigal (1973) said they regarded those who left the profession as “somehow akin to fallen priests” (p. 91)\(^1\). Once they crossed over the boundary to public relations they could be accused of betraying the faith, giving away trade secrets and using their journalism skills “against journalism” (Henningham in Christensen, 2012). As *Sarah* recalled:

> *Sarah:* I remember finding out that Paul Lyneham\(^12\) used to do media courses and media strategy for politicians and the reaction from most of my colleagues was ‘what a bastard he’s giving away all the secrets’. There still is that attitude. It’s ingrained in us. We are a club, journalists and we stick by ourselves and we don’t want to give away any tricks of the trade. (*Sarah, 2012)

Despite this jaundiced perception of public relations in the eyes of many journalists (Delorme, 2003; White, 2010) journalists continue to cross over to the “dark side” to swell the ranks of the public relations industry (Macnamara, 2012). A report from the United Kingdom released in 2010, *Laid Off: What do UK journalists do next?*, found 17 per cent of journalists who had been made redundant from newspapers sought new careers in public relations (Nel, 2010, p. 30). As a result of this cross-pollination between the two roles, the traditional distinction between

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\(^1\) References to journalism being like a priesthood also appear in Rosen (2004) and Van Dalen, De Vreese & Albaek (2012).

\(^12\) Paul Lyneham was a former senior political reporter with the ABC
journalist and public relations practitioner continues to blur under the label of the “professional communicator” (Carey, 1997d, p. 132) who juggles work across old boundaries to make a living in both journalism and public relations.

Despite the growing evidence of the increasing influence of public relations on journalism and convergence between the professional fields of communication (Carey, 1997d; Deuze, 2007; Schudson, 2003), this study has found the journalism scholarship to be virtually silent on the issue of commonalities and overlap with public relations. One recent article however stands out. In Dodd’s (2012) examination of the impact of media training on Australian journalism he points to the contradiction of journalists who bemoan the rise of public relations and ‘spin’ techniques on the one hand and provide media training to help interviewees avoid answering questions on the other: “Maybe there is some code of honour, an omertà perhaps, operating because many of those doing the training are, in fact, former journalists” (Dodd, 2012, pp. 157-158).

Dodd’s (2012) chapter offers a rare glimpse from the perspective of journalism into the complex crossover between the two roles and the potential conflicts that the transition can create. Public relations scholar, Jim Macnamara (2012), attributes the silence in the journalism scholarship to a sense of denial on the part of journalists about the links between reporting and public relations:

> almost every journalist knows the extent to which public relations has infiltrated the business. But, like so many elements of the respectable and glossy façade erected around journalism…they don’t like talking about it. (Eric Beecher, 2008, p.14 in Macnamara, 2012, p. 33)

Macnamara (2012) argues the journalism academy has taken this “head in the sand approach” (p. 33) because the rising influence of public relations does not fit the stereotype of the journalist as an independent democratic ‘watchdog’.

### 3.8.2. Shared Culture

Along with shared skills, political journalists and parliamentary media advisers also work in a “shared culture” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981, p. 481). As will be discussed, that shared culture is generated not only by the physical proximity of politicians and the media to each other but
also through “media logic” (Altheide, 2004, p. 293) or what the former federal Labor MP Lindsay Tanner (2011) despairingly called “Mediathink” (p. 3). Altheide’s\textsuperscript{13} (2004) concept of \textit{media logic} describes the way in which the operations of the media have come to dominate and shape interactions between journalists and politicians. This media-centric view has become so pervasive that politicians now craft their messages and plan their media strategies around the needs and restrictions of the media by providing the kinds of events that journalistic formats prefer. As a result, Altheide (2004) argues political communication is now part of popular culture and mass media and is blurring the traditional occupational and perspective lines between journalism and other forms of entertainment and professional communication (p. 294). McNair (2006, p. 11) describes this blurring as a “dissolving” of boundaries between journalism and “not-journalism”.

The blurring between occupations that Altheide (2004) and McNair (2006) refer to is further facilitated by the emergence of what Blumler & Gurevitch (1981) call “boundary roles”.\textsuperscript{14} One such role operating at the boundary is the parliamentary media adviser, who is located between the realms of media and politics and works to interpret one world to the other. Blumler & Gurevitch (1981) describe those who perform these roles as being:

\begin{quote}
\begin{itemize}
  \item closely familiar with the values and practices of the other camp. The publicity advisers of politicians may convey to their masters an impression of the current news-value system as part of the natural order of things. (p. 485)
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

In a similar vein, Esser & Tenscher (2005) see the political media adviser performing a “bridging” role between the political realm and the media realm. Where the “political communication experts work as intermediaries in a difficult border area where political logic and media logic blend into each other” (Esser & Tenscher, 2005, p. 9). Within that border area the

\textsuperscript{13} Altheide foreshadowed theories of mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013; Strömbäck & Nord, 2008) that argue politics has become ‘mediatized’ and that the institution of politics has internalized media routines and practices.

\textsuperscript{14} The concept of the “boundary role” also appears in the public relations literature and derives from the field of diplomacy and the need for “boundary-spanning” between different cultures and bridging cultural gaps. For more on the diplomatic origins of the concept in PR see (Grunig, 1984; L’Etang, 2006c; Signitzer, 2006).
media adviser’s job is to translate each world to the other by continually connecting political and media logics:

Thus by continuously *bridging the differences* between politics and the media, by balancing the *field of co-operation and conflict* (the so-called symbiosis) between politicians and journalists, they permanently influence their relationships, their specific expectations, norms, rules and routines of interaction as well as the flow of communication. (Tenscher, 2007, p. 517. Orig. italics)

Drawing on her experience as a ministerial media adviser *Helen usefully illustrates how “news sense” and media logic are beneficial in both journalism and political media advising, and how political logic is also applied by parliamentary media advisers:

*Helen: You need a good news sense in both jobs – one to know what story is worth pitching to a journo and the other to know what is worth pitching to your chief of staff. News sense also helps the ‘spin-doctor’ to know what stories might cause problems if they reach the media and to plan how to handle them if it does. New sense also helps you find the stories of interest to the media that will put your minister in the best light, or to plan policy announcements in a way that will gain coverage (you hope!). So in both jobs you are hunting for stories, but in one instance you are looking for stories that will increase the profile and advance the agenda of the government (or that you should know about in order to manage) while as a journo you are looking to get the stories that will be of interest to your readers as quickly, as cogently and as exclusively as possible. (*Helen, 2012)

These shared news values and understanding of each other’s modus operandi help form the basis of a “shared culture” with “both sides operating on the basis of news values” and playing a game with “more or less agreed rules” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, p. 36) where deadlines, embargoes and off-the-record briefings are respected.

Another aspect of shared culture between the two actors stems from the fact that reporters, politicians and parliamentary media advisers often physically work under the one roof at parliament house. Veteran political correspondent, Michelle Grattan (1996), likens the situation to dogs “sharing the same kennel” (p. 217). She says the co-location of politicians, their media advisers and reporters in the one building also helps to develop a sense of intimacy between them and contributes to the creation of a shared and somewhat “isolated” culture (Grattan, 1996, p. 217). This co-location and isolation has also led to criticisms of political reporters and
politicians living in a “bubble-like world” where both actors are seen to be “out of touch” with the concerns of the average voter (Young, 2011, p. 12).

So far analysis of the interview transcripts has identified a range of common features between journalism and parliamentary media advising, such as shared skills and values, a shared workplace and a common culture dominated by “media logic”. These are commonalities supported by the wider literature and were perceived by the interviewees as having helped facilitate their transition from the newsroom to the inner sanctum of politics. Despite the perceived similarities between parliamentary media advising and journalism outlined above, the initial transition from journalism to media advising was not seamless for all of the interviewees. Although each of the participants felt journalism and parliamentary media advising were ethically compatible several of them described experiencing a clash in values brought about by the change in perspective required as they made the adjustment from reporter to source, discussed below.

3.9. A clash of values

In the social psychology literature, making a transition from one role to another involves separating from the old role and integrating into the new (van Gennep 1960/1909 in Silver, 1996 p. 2). The initial phase of that transition is described as the “liminal phase” (Karp, 1998, p. 256). This phase marks the point in the transition when the individual is not quite settled in the new role and is still identifying with the former. Bowman (1949) said it is in this liminal period of transition “before a new equilibrium is achieved” (p. 196), that some of the most useful insights into a role can be gained. To that end the interviewees in this study were asked to reflect on their perceptions of their initial transition from journalism to the new role of parliamentary media advising. Two thirds of the participants did not recall any memorable sense of ethical discomfort when they crossed over from one role to the other. However, seven of the participants did clearly recall feeling a sense of unease in the new role of parliamentary media adviser. That sense of discomfort fell in to five main areas: 1. Difficulty in adjusting their mindset from reporter to source; 2. A sense of professional and social isolation once they became

15 For more on the federal parliamentary press gallery see Chalmers (2011); Fitzgerald (2008); Parker (1990); and, Simons (1999).
parliamentary media advisers; 3. Perceptions of stigma from former journalism colleagues; 4. Perceptions of distrust from politicians and former reporting colleagues; and 5. Unease about some of the tactics being used in the surrounding political environment. Examples of each of these are provided below.

3.9.1. **Reporter to source adjustment**

When Kerry O’Brien made the decision to leave the ABC in 1977 and work for Labor’s Opposition leader and former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, he was excited about taking on the new role:

*Kerry O’Brien*: I saw it as an opportunity to firstly work – albeit probably briefly – with one of the most dynamic fascinating politicians not just of my time but of Australian history, certainly since Federation. Secondly, to see the political process from the inside; and thirdly I guess ... to feel that for at least a moment in my life I was going to be part of a doing process rather than just an observer. Those were the sort of motivations. (O’Brien, 2012)

Despite his enthusiasm, Kerry O’Brien said he did experience some initial discomfort:

*Kerry O’Brien*: I felt very uncomfortable on my first day and my first week and probably first... I remember on my first day writing my first press release and that felt very odd. It felt very uncomfortable. Because it was so very much the other side of what I had been doing... I can remember people like Brian Toohey, fairly formidable characters in the gallery, coming down for This Day Tonight and 4 Corners to Canberra and reporting various things and drinking with these guys, journalist to journalist, and suddenly taking phone calls from them where they were on one side of the divide and I was on the other side. That was a very odd feeling and maybe there was a part of me that was never totally comfortable with it but that’s not a reflection, a negative reflection on the job as such, it’s just that I had been so kind of inculcated into the mindset of a journalist that it felt awkward for a time. But I had great relationships with a number of people inside parliament house. (O’Brien, 2012)

*Jill* said she found the job unsatisfying because she could not act on her journalistic instincts:

*Jill*: So coming away at the end of the day and thinking to myself that didn’t feel rewarding because there was a big story there today and I couldn’t tell it. So that job satisfaction wasn’t there. (*Jill, 2012*)
*Helen wept when she gave up her job at the newspaper to work as a ministerial adviser. Though she stayed in the job for more than two years, she said she did not enjoy being on the other side of the phone answering questions instead of asking them and being at the mercy of her former journalism colleagues around the clock:

*Helen: One of the things I really disliked was being at the media’s beck and call and not being the person who set the agenda. Of course you are always trying to be, but there would always be the 5 o’clock phone call when everything is cast into ‘the evening is over’ as opposed to being the person making the call. I liked the fact that you were actually achieving things, but I disliked the fact that you were always working on the same things, the same messages over and over again. Whereas being a journalist is a much more peripatetic thing, you kind of move a bit more. There might be a big running story and then you are out there hunting and deciding what you are going to do, rather than sort of begging someone to try and get something covered. I felt that quite keenly. (*Helen, 2012)

Participants in Phillipps’ (2002) study of Australian press secretaries also expressed similar feelings of dissatisfaction with being required to constantly repeat the same political messages. Like *Helen, the shift from journalism to ministerial media advising proved not to be professionally satisfying for Dennis Shanahan either. During our interview in his press gallery office of The Australian newspaper, Shanahan described himself this way:

Dennis Shanahan: I’ve been a journalist man and boy. I’m not a fancy writer. I’m not someone who writes books. I’m a workaday journalist and that’s what I do. When you take the workaday journalist out of the workaday there’s not much left. (Shanahan, 2011)

Dennis Shanahan had been working at the Sydney Morning Herald for several years and had seven children to look after when the offer came from the office of the Liberal NSW Attorney General, John Dowd, to become his media adviser. Shanahan recalled that at the time of the offer he was not happy with the way he was being treated by the newspaper and decided to take the media advising job purely for financial reasons. However, Shanahan said he did not enjoy the new job and only stayed in the role for six months:

Dennis Shanahan: I found all of my energies were being directed towards helping an individual and ensuring that his profile was being kept up, that he did not make mistakes and all those sorts of things and the mistakes he did make I covered for. So I just found that my energies and intellect were being directed towards political advancement of an
individual. Now there’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s not quite what I enjoyed and I started to get restless to return to journalism after a few months. (Shanahan, 2011)

What the above reflections of the interviewees suggest is that these journalists so strongly identified with journalism and were so accustomed to the perspective of the journalist – or as Kerry O’Brien expressed it, were so “inculcated into the mind of a journalist” – that it felt awkward for a period of time until they adjusted their world view to that of a parliamentary media adviser. As a result of this inculcation the other interviewees said they did not enjoy being at the beck and call of journalists and working to promote the profile of a politician while they became almost invisible in a back stage role. In the cases of Dennis Shanahan, *Jill and *Helen none of them settled happily in the role of parliamentary media advising and soon left. Like Dennis Shanahan, *Jill left her position in the minister’s office after six months. Based on her experience of parliamentary media advising she said she felt it went “against the grain” of journalism.

3.9.2. Professional & social isolation

For several of the interviewees the act of crossing over to the other side of the reporter-source relationship brought with it a sense of division and separation from journalism. In some of the comments from other interviewees there was a perception of professional and social isolation, which was expressed by *Helen as no-longer belonging to her old journalism “gang”:

*Helen: We mainly socialised within the minister’s office. You know I wasn’t really socialising with journalists except when I had to. Because of the nature of the job and I was always conscious of having to be careful about what I might say, but it was also a matter of knowing that I was not one of them, I was not one of that gang, I was in a different tribe and I guess I always felt I wasn’t quite me in a way and so I was probably more conscious of it that any journalists were. I don’t think they treated me any differently but I think I felt that I was a different person in some ways. I was playing a different role to the role that I had trained for really. (*Helen, 2012)

Niki Savva also experienced a sense of separation from her old journalism friends when she left the Canberra press gallery to work for the federal Liberal Treasurer Peter Costello in the Howard government. Like *Helen, Niki Savva found the confidential nature of working for government meant she could not share her work life with her friends.
Niki Savva: I think other press secs have found this as well that you do have to separate yourself from your friends. You know you can’t have the same relationship with people that you did as a journalist. You know they have completely different objectives, usually. So that was a difficult thing. I knew when I took the job with Costello, that that would happen...not just for the fact that I had gone to work for a conservative, but that would have been part of it, but because of the nature of the business...I couldn’t speak freely. You know most of my friends were journalists because they were the people I had spent most of my life with- my working life and my personal life. Then once I went to work for Costello my loyalty was to him. So when things go wrong, you usually want to tell people about it, talk to people about it, seek their advice, and of course the last people I could do that with were journalists. It wasn’t so much me being disloyal to Peter by confiding in people, but it then puts the person you confide in a difficult position. I mean knowledge, you might not write the story, but it informs everything you write as well and you can’t pretend you don’t know something. So there is that kind of separation all the way through. (Savva, 2012)

In contrast, Vivienne Wynter recalled a very different experience when she left commercial radio to work for the Australian Democrat Senator for Queensland, John Woodley, from 1996 – 2001. Wynter said she did not experience any feelings of social or professional isolation. On the contrary, while performing her primary role of press secretary to the Queensland Senator, Wynter said she continued to write articles as a freelance journalist:

Vivienne Wynter: ...basically I still operated as a journalist and the Democrats were quite happy... I went to him, because the Sunday Mail was publishing my features, in fact my first feature published as a freelancer was about female Viagra and I went to John and said: ‘are you cool about me doing this?’ and he said: ’as long as it doesn’t touch policy matters, go for it”. (Wynter, 2012)

None of the other twenty interviewees continued working as journalists whilst simultaneously performing the role of parliamentary media adviser. Vivienne Wynter attributed this flexibility to working for a minor party Senator rather than for government or the Opposition. As a result, Wynter said she was able to maintain her professional identity and association with journalism without feeling the discomfort and isolation that some of the other interviewees described.

3.9.3. Stigma

The third challenge identified was stigma. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (3.2.), this was an issue that many of the interviewees were concerned about before they took on the
role of parliamentary media adviser. Despite those concerns, the majority of the interviewees did not recall experiencing derogatory remarks when they crossed-over to media advising. However, as mentioned in 3.2. Alex Wake said she was accused of lying on her first day in the new job by a former ABC colleague: “People treated you so differently. People accused you of lying. It was a really horrible thing”, Wake said. As mentioned previously, though the other interviewees did not recall experiences as direct as this, several of them did refer to smaller instances once they returned to journalism when their employment as a media adviser was referred to in negative manner. Further discussion of this appears in chapter 5.

3.9.4. Distrust

A fourth challenge to some of the interviewees when they became parliamentary media advisers was a sense of distrust from politicians. Three of the journalists described perceptions of distrust toward them because of their previous work in the media. Chris Kenny recalled his move from journalism to parliamentary media advising as being initially “extremely uncomfortable”. He said it took him “a long while to settle down”. Kenny said the sense of discomfort he experienced was triggered by his previous practice as a journalist when he “scarified” a minister he was later required to work with as the Director of Communications for the South Australian, Olsen Liberal government.

**Chris Kenny:** It was very uncomfortable because I [was] working with people who I had been scrutinising in the media only weeks before hand. I remember clearly a certain cabinet minister refused to attend a cabinet communications sub-committee that I was supposed to be part of because I had scarified her in an opinion piece some months earlier. So I remember going around seeing this particular cabinet minister and explaining to her I was just doing my job then and I am now employed by the Premier and I wanted her involvement in this communications committee and would she please come along. So there were bridges to be mended. (Kenny, 2012)

3.9.5. Tactical political environment

Lastly, some of the interviewees found the political environment in which they worked, rather than the job itself, to be an ethical challenge. For *Helen* her sense of unease in the role of parliamentary media adviser was not limited to the initial phase of transition from journalism.
She said she also experienced a sense of ethical discomfort over certain political tactics being used around her. *Helen said it was not the job of parliamentary media advising that challenged her ethics, but the political deal making that made her feel unsettled:

*Helen: I mean I did have some disquiet about some of the things we were doing. I feel very proud of the things we did. We made a real difference in some areas... but there were other things where I was kind of disappointed to see, not surprised, but disappointed about some of things that were sold to the public and me as scientific and weren’t very scientific in the end. There was basically a lot of horse trading. As a result of that horse trading part of an industry was closed down and people lost their jobs and that happened due to some bastardry by another minister. I don’t regret having that experience at all, but I think long term that is hard to keep being part of I guess. (*Helen, 2012)

Chris Kenny also found himself in a situation where his personal values clashed with the political goals of his boss. At the time, Kenny was chief of staff to the leader of the Liberal Party, Malcolm Turnbull, during negotiations over a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2009. At a personal level Kenny said he did not believe it was the right policy for the Liberal Party to be pursuing, but he was forced to advocate it on behalf of his boss:

Chris Kenny: ... look it was difficult for me and difficult for him but probably to his benefit to have someone more sceptical working with him. So I think both he and I used that creative tension. We used that tension for creative or politically opportune purposes. So that was good... but I found over time it was quite debilitating, especially the horrible situation of having Malcolm taken down over that issue when he knew, and I knew, that I was more sympathetic to Tony’s16 position on that issue. Of course I was extremely loyal to Malcolm and fought to save him but it was horrible to go down on that issue when it was an issue I thought we had sort of invited upon ourselves. That was my failing as his COS [chief of staff]. I am saying that is the one issue when I felt a real horror in arguing a position I did not believe in. (Kenny, 2012)

Scenarios such these, in which a ministerial adviser finds his or her personal values at odds with broader tactical values, led Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, to once describe the role of a ministerial adviser as a “special kind of vocation”:

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16 He is referring to Prime Minister, Tony Abbott who became leader of the Liberal Party in December 2009 over the issue of climate change policy. He defeated Malcolm Turnbull by one vote 41:42.
Chapter 3: Adversarial or co-operative?

To work extremely hard for someone else to get the credit, to be completely frank with your boss but utterly discreet with everyone else, to be deeply involved in politics without becoming a political player oneself and constantly to judge not what’s right so much as what’s right for the boss takes a special kind of vocation. (Tony Abbott, 1997, Unelected Powers Behind the Throne, The Australian newspaper, p11 in Phillipps, 2002, p. 199)

Phillipps (2002) described the need for media advisers to judge between what is not necessarily morally “right”, but what best served the interests of the politician, as a constant dilemma “faced by advisers daily and hourly” (p. 199). It should be noted, that the need to constantly deal with ethical dilemmas and balancing interests is not peculiar to parliamentary media advising. It is also a feature of ministerial responsibility (Fleming & Holland, 2001; Haydn, 1998; McAllister, 2000; Preston, 1998; Uhr, 2005), as well as journalism (Burns, 2013, pp. 12, 66; Hirst & Patching, 2007, p. 2; Sanders, 2003; Sigal, 1973, p. 79).

During the course of his PhD research Phillipps (2002) found that the 152 political staff who participated in his study had little time in fact to consider ethical issues because they were simply too busy dealing with the issues at hand:

As a group, they did not dwell on the ethical implications of their relationships with journalists. They are a pragmatic lot, thinking about what works best for them and their minister. They do not have the time for ethical reflection in a demanding, time-pressured work environment that does not support or promote ethical decision-making processes. (p. 169)

The most recent calculation of working hours by federal ministerial staff found that media advisers worked the longest of all the advisers with an average of approximately eighty hours per week (Government, 2011). However, having little time for reflection in politics is not peculiar to parliamentary media advisers. It goes hand in hand with political life and is a symptom of the enormous workload of the politicians they work for. Former and current ministers who participated in studies of ministerial workload pressure (Grattan, 1981; Tiernan, 2010) acknowledge the lack of time for reflection is an issue of concern. The employment of personal staff, including media advisers, is one of the ways for ministers to ameliorate the situation. It must be noted that the workload pressures vary from office to office depending on the portfolio area and the issues receiving attention. Whether one works for the Opposition or a minor party
also has an impact on workload pressures and recommendations about staffing allocations are made with those variations in mind (Henderson, 2009).

In the absence of ample time for reflection, the majority of the interviewees in this study said they just got on with the job, trusting in their own ethical judgement and/or looking to their minister or politician’s conduct for ethical guidance. As Kerry O’Brien expressed it:

*Kerry O’Brien: I like to think by nature I was fairly ethical. I mean I was raised in a strong catholic family and I think my moral compass was reasonable... because I think that by and large it was a pretty ethical office. Gough was very correct and proper on a number of things. He was respectful of the institution of parliament.* (O’Brien, 2012)

As will be discussed below, the interviewees considered the ethical culture of the political office they were employed in played an important role in the way they went about their work.

### 3.10. Office Culture & Ethics

The influence of workplace culture on the ethical behaviour of staff is readily acknowledged in the field of organisational behaviour (DuBrin, 2012; Robbins, 2010) and applies to private sector workplaces as much as it does to political offices. In their study of reporter-source relations across government and the private sector Ericson, Baranek & Chan (1989) explain that factors such as organisational demands, workplace culture and requirements of the position all have an impact on the way parliamentary media advisers and other source roles approach decision-making. From the perspective of the interviewees in this study, similar contextual factors were also perceived to have had an impact on the ethical climate in which they operated as parliamentary media advisers. Those factors were the ethical orientation of the politician they worked for and the ethical culture of the office. In fact, the transcripts revealed that an interviewee’s perception of a politician’s ethics was central to his or her decision to take on the role of parliamentary media adviser in the first place. The interview data showed that it was important to all of the interviewees that they believed the politician they had agreed to work for was an ethical individual. Unanimously the interviewees felt they could not have worked for a politician they did not respect or admire. This position was echoed by the parliamentary media advisers interviewed in Phillipps’ (2002) study.
When Alex Wake was deliberating over whether to accept a job as ministerial media adviser in the Beattie Labor government in Queensland she approached a former journalism colleague who had worked as a ministerial media adviser for the previous National Party Government. Wake said the former adviser gave her some sage advice:

*Alex Wake*: basically it was: ‘be very careful of the character of the person you’re going to be working for’. She had been in an experience where her minister had been off seeing prostitutes. So she was very honest about that: ‘look at the character of the man or woman’. (Wake, 2011)

And that is what each of the participants in this study said they did. When *Adam* was looking for a job as a parliamentary media adviser for family reasons, he said he initially approached the side of politics that he and generations of his family had always identified with. However, when he was told there was only one position available with a certain government minister, *Adam* rejected the offer because he did not respect the politician concerned and could not imagine being able to work for her. Instead, *Adam* went against his own political beliefs and sought a position as a parliamentary media adviser with a politician from another major party. He said he did this because it was important to him that he worked with someone he respected and he held that particular politician in higher regard than the government minister.

When *Kelly* made the decision to work for a government minister, she said it was central to her decision that she considered the minister to be an ethical person:

*Kelly*: It was one of the reasons I went to work with [X] too. It wasn’t just the policy it was [X] as a person. I knew just from dealing with [X], that [X] had very high standards. And if I was going to ‘sell my soul’ as they say I may as well sell my soul to someone like [X]. (*Kelly, 2011*)

The interviewees explained that the ethical perspective of the politician they worked for generally set the tone of the office and the standards of behaviour expected from the staff. This perception of office culture within ministerial offices being created by the politician is also supported by the literature (Tiernan, 2010, p. 271; Tiernan, 2007, p. 29). In the case of Alex Wake, her minister was a former philosophy teacher with strong values who she described as an “absolute believer in ...fair and open governance”. Wake said the minister’s commitment to these principles informed the approach she took to her role as his media adviser:
Alex Wake: In everything we did he would not have allowed sneakiness, underhandedness and lying. That wasn’t who he was. He had previously been the Attorney General and then previously introduced Freedom of Information Laws. We would have these conversations about documents going out. And he would say, ‘Alex I believe in freedom of information. I can’t turn around and say these documents shouldn’t go out. You have to release them’ and I would say, ‘but it will make my life a nightmare’ and he would say, ‘this is good governance’. (Wake, 2011)

*Scott also received quite explicit directions from his government minister about the ethical approach staff members were to take in relation to media matters:

*Scott: He did say that right up front. He said ‘I won’t ask you to go up to the [press] gallery and lie to people’. He’s also got very firm views about his own communications whether it’s a media release or a policy document needing to be factual. He’s quite rigorous about that in relation to compiling information documents in his name to be factual. He doesn’t like mistakes, doesn’t like grammatical errors, spelling errors and doesn’t want wrong factual material to find things being done in his name. He kind of made that clear up front that ‘this is how I like my written communications materials, press releases’ and the like. ‘They need to be concise, factual and accurate representations of the government’s policy’. Beyond that he hasn’t given me any specific riding orders and I suspect this varies from minister to minister, but I have no real insight in to other offices, but ours is somewhat unstructured...It’s really just a get-on-with-the-job-and-do-it type approach. (Scott*, 2011)

In the case of Alex Wake and *Scott their ministers gave clear expression to their ethical view on how they wanted information treated. In other cases, it was the media adviser who initiated frank discussions with the politician to state their own ethical boundaries in relation to the job:

*Adam: I made it clear to [X], that I was not a member of the [X]Party or any other political party and had no intention to become so and if it was required then I wasn’t the person for the job. I had never worked as a press secretary before and I had no idea how I would enjoy it or otherwise...The bottom line was – I said to [X] in these words – ‘if you want somebody to give you advice with kid gloves I’m not the person for the job. How I see it is all I can do is give you the benefit of my experience and knowledge in terms of how the media will react to this, and if you want me to wrap that up and put a bow on it, I’m not the person for the job’. And he said, ‘That’s exactly what I want’. So we made an arrangement. (Adam*, 2011)

In a similar fashion, Dennis Shanahan said he made it clear to the then New South Wales Attorney General, John Dowd, he did not want to be involved in the internal workings of the party:
**Dennis Shanahan:** One of the conditions I put on the job when I took it was that I would not become involved in party politics and I would not attend branch meetings and I would not do anything that was party political. He agreed to that and one of the things that came out... I kept saying to him ‘Why have you offered me this job?’ He said ‘You were one of my toughest critics so I know that you know what my weaknesses are’ and he said ‘I get you in my office to defend my position and that’s it’. And I said ‘OK’. I mentioned the political thing that I wasn’t particularly interested in party politics and he said ‘that’s fine’ and so they were the conditions upon which I joined. (Shanahan, 2011)

This type of candid exchange and negotiation on ethics between the politician and parliamentary media adviser was not described by all of the interviewees. The majority of the interviewees recalled being thrown in the deep end, without specific guidance, induction or training, learning on the job and absorbing the ethical culture by osmosis. The transcripts revealed that only one of the twenty-one interviewees received any training in relation to the workings of the public service and none of the interviewees received any induction or training in how to perform the role of parliamentary media adviser. This trend is well documented by Phillipps (2002) in his PhD thesis, and other literature about the role of ministerial advisers (Horne, 2009; Tiernan, 2007 & Weller; 2010; Warn, 1996). As Phillipps (2002) says, “media advising differs from journalism in that there is no cadetship or internship” (p. 35). At the federal government level some induction programmes are offered to parliamentary advisers, however there is a low participation rate due to the intense work pressures (Horne, 2009).

What the above contributions from the interviewees demonstrate is the strength of feeling that some of them had in relation to the ethical character of the politician they agreed to work for. All of the interviewees said they could not have worked for people they did not respect. In the case of *Adam*, he said he turned down a job with a government minister from the political party he naturally supported because he did not respect the politician concerned. Instead, he accepted a job with a politician from a party he did not identify with to ensure that he did work for a politician he respected.

### 3.11. A code of ethics?

In addition to there being no induction or training for the role of parliamentary media adviser, there was also no specific code of ethics to guide the new appointees in their work. Prior to
making the transition to parliamentary media advising each of the interviewees in this study worked in a role with a well-recognised journalists’ code of ethics designed to support ethical best practice in reporting (MEAA, 1998). It should be noted that the *Media, and Entertainment Arts Alliance – Journalists’ Code of Ethics* (1998) only technically covers members of the Media and Entertainment Arts Alliance (or MEAA). Though the code and its principles are known across the media industry, the MEAA can only take remedial action against journalists who breach the code if they are members of the MEAA. However, most major news organisations also have their own internal editorial guidelines and codes of ethics which cover the reporters they employ (C.L.C., 2010; Media Watch).

The level of identification with the journalists’ code of ethics varied among the interviewees. The data revealed that some of the interviewees paid the code little heed while others felt it was deeply ingrained in them. For instance, Dennis Shanahan from *The Australian* newspaper said he always insists on attaching a copy of the journalists’ code of ethics to his employment contract as a sign to his employer and a reminder to himself of the values that guide his work. However, it would be foolish to suggest that all journalists adhere closely to the code. A study of Australian journalists’ attitudes toward the *Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance – Journalists’ Code of Ethics* found most journalists have only a “general understanding of what is in the code” rather than detailed knowledge of its contents (Anderson, 1995, p. 32).

Although the interviewees in this study made the transition from a role with a specific code pertaining to their role as a professional communicator to a role without one, this was not perceived by the interviewees to be a problem. When asked if they thought the development of a specific code of ethics for parliamentary media advisers would have been useful, none of the interviewees supported the proposal.

In contrast to this practitioner’s view, the absence of a specific code of ethics for ministerial media advisers (as opposed to a code of ethics for all parliamentary media advisers) was recognised as potentially unhealthy for democracy by the Fitzgerald Inquiry into Queensland Police corruption (1989). In his findings, Commissioner Fitzgerald (1989) promoted the idea of
developing specific guidelines for ministerial media advisers and the introduction of an all-party parliamentary committee to:

analyse whether the money is being spent on informing the public, or distributing propaganda for political gain. It could also bring to the attention of Parliament any misrepresentation or misinformation emanating from the administration. (p. 160)

In his report to government, Fitzgerald (1989) argued:

3.6.3. Media Units and Press Secretaries

It is legitimate and necessary for government ministers, departments and instrumentalities to employ staff to help ensure the public is kept informed. Media units can also be used, however, to control and manipulate the information obtained by the media and disseminated to the public. Although most government generated publicity will unavoidably and necessarily be politically advantageous, there is no legitimate justification for taxpayers’ money to be spent on politically motivated propaganda. The only justification for press secretaries and media units is that they lead to a community better informed about government and departmental activities. If they fail to do this then their existence is a misuse of public funds, and likely to help misconduct flourish. (p. 142. Emphasis added)

In 2010, a dispute began in the Victoria Civil and Administrative Tribunal (Davis v Office of the Premier, 2011) over the Brumby Labor government’s refusal to release copies of media plans under Freedom of Information laws, raised the very issue articulated by Commissioner Fitzgerald (above). That being, his concern about tax payer funds being used to run the government’s media unit for purely political purposes, rather than informing the public.

At the time of writing this thesis – more than twenty years since Fitzgerald made this suggestion – no jurisdiction in Australia had specific guidelines or a specific code of ethics in place to guide the operations of ministerial media advisers. It should be noted that Western Australia did have a specific code of ethics for ministerial media advisers for a short period of time following the W.A. Inc corruption inquiry (Phillipps, 2002, p. 213), but that code is no longer in use.

In the absence of a specific code of ethics and little induction or training, the interviewees said they followed their own moral compass, relied on the journalists’ code of ethics and/or looked to the politician to set the ethical standards of conduct in their office.
3.12. Chapter summary

Chapter 3 of this thesis has explored the initial phase of the transition under examination from journalist to parliamentary media adviser. It is a transition between two communications roles that are commonly characterised as antithetical to each other. This chapter began by testing the oversimplified dualistic conceptions of the two roles that appear in the academic literature and popular culture against the perspectives of the interviewees’. In doing so, this chapter revealed similarities between the theoretical conceptions of the relationship between the two roles and the perceptions of the practitioners. Based on their lived experience, the interviewees rejected the traditionally dominant conceptions of the two actors as being either “adversarial” or “co-operative” and revealed more nuanced and varied interpretations of the power dynamic between the two actors. Rather than a consistent mode of interaction between journalists and parliamentary media advisers, the interviewees perceived fluctuating levels of animosity and harmony between the two actors. Comments made by the interviewees pointed to a range of contextual factors that influenced the fluctuation in tension between the two actors. Those factors included the issue at hand; the standing of the politician; the phase of the electoral cycle; the size of the jurisdiction; and the tactical nature of the interaction between the two actors. A similar range of contextual factors said to influence reporter-source relations also appears in the literature (Blumler, 1981; Brants, 2011; Ericson, 1989).

This chapter also showed that the majority of the interviewees did not support the antithetical conceptions of the two roles found in the literature (Louw, 2010; Moloney, 2006; Spence et al., 2011; Sanders, 2009). Rather than seeing journalism and parliamentary media advising as having opposing goals, this chapter revealed that each of the twenty-one interviewees perceived some similarities between journalism and parliamentary media advising at the level of practice and values. Those similarities included shared skills such as fast writing and news sense, as well as a common world view dominated by “media logic” (Altheide, 2004). The interviewees also perceived the two roles as sharing the common goal of providing factually accurate information. Several of the interviewees also perceived the goal of advocacy to be common to both journalism and parliamentary media advising and not exclusive to either (this point is explored further in chapter 4).
Based on their experience in both roles the twenty-one interviewees did not perceive either journalism or parliamentary media advising to be inherently ethical or unethical. Instead, the interviewees argued that the ethical status of any role is determined by the way it is performed. Though each of the interviewees said they did not face ethical dilemmas moving between the two roles, several of them did describe situations that invoked a clash of values for them.

Lastly, this chapter pointed to the importance of the ethical character of the politician and culture of the political office in persuading each of the interviewees to make the transition to parliamentary media advising in the first place. All of the interviewees, with the exception of *Helen*, actively chose to work for a politician they respected and believed to have high ethical standards. In the absence of a formal process of induction and training or a specific code of ethics, the interviewees said they followed their own moral compass, drew on their knowledge of journalism ethics and/or looked to the ethical standards of the politician they worked for to set the ethical tone of the office and act as a guide for their own practice.

Each of these factors summarised above contributed to the interviewees’ ethical experience of making the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising. So far this chapter has shown there was no single interpretation of that experience. Rather than black and white distinctions between the two roles, this chapter has begun to reveal the inadequacy of the blunt stereotypes and dualistic portrayal of journalism and parliamentary media advising. In their place, this chapter has offered nuanced individualised perceptions of the two roles based on practitioner experience.

In the following chapter, this thesis takes a deeper look at the mutually adaptive tactical nature of the relationship between the parliamentary media adviser and the journalist and the importance of context in ethical decision making. In doing so, chapter 4 considers the importance of the adversarial political context to the interviewees’ interpretations of ‘truth’. It also considers the importance of the interviewees’ perceptions of trust in the media and the impact a lack of trust can have on candour and the free flow of information. The following chapter will reveal how

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17 *Helen was employed as part of a ‘pool’ of media advisers and was then allocated to her minister.*
considerations of trust led one third of the interviewees to re-evaluate their conceptions of journalism and reconsider their commitment to the key journalism principle of the ‘public’s right to know’.
4. Trust, truth & the ‘public’s right to know’

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter in this study explored the initial phase of the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising. In doing so, this thesis began testing the dominant antithetical conceptions of the two roles against the lived experience of twenty one journalists who have followed this career path. This fourth chapter focuses on the middle phase of the career transition under examination – that being the journalist’s experience in the role of parliamentary media adviser – and continues the process of comparing idealistic and moralistic conceptions of the two roles against the more ‘realistic’ practitioner perspectives. In doing so, this chapter directly addresses one of the central aims of this study, to discover whether moving through the roles of journalist and parliamentary media adviser had an impact on the interviewee’s conceptions of journalism practice and values. It will be shown that shifting from reporter to source and experiencing journalism from the other side did have an impact on the way many of the interviewees came to view their former journalism colleagues. The experience also had an impact on the way several of the interviewees conceived certain journalism values, in particular the ideal of truth and the ‘public’s right to know’. Central to this change of heart was the issue of trust. It will be shown that for one third of the interviewees, being the recipient of poor journalism practice once they crossed over to parliamentary media advising had a negative influence on their perceptions of trust in particular journalists. In several cases this loss of trust led to less openness and disclosure by the interviewees with reporters they did not trust, and the adoption of defensive media management tactics. For those interviewees who had previously been reporters and considered themselves to be advocates of disclosure, their loss of trust led to a change in their commitment to the key journalistic value of the ‘public’s right to know’.

This chapter also highlights the influence of contextual circumstances on the interviewees’ conceptions of the key journalism value of truth. In weighing up the “pragmatic pressures” of parliamentary media advising against the “moral ideal” of truth telling (Tetlock, 2003, p. 324) this chapter reveals a variety of tactical approaches to truth and disclosure adopted by the
interviewees in the role of parliamentary media adviser. In doing so, this chapter highlights the importance of perceptions of trust to truth, candour and the free flow of information to the public.

It is important to note that a large range of factors or “pragmatic pressures” emerged from the transcripts and literature that would have had a bearing on the interviewee’s approach to truth when dealing with a particular journalist in a particular circumstance. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into every possible scenario. However, some of these contextual influences are briefly mentioned here. Firstly, the interview data revealed that the amount of pressure the interviewee perceived him or herself to be under had an influence on the tactics the interviewee recalled using in relation to providing information to the certain journalists. Whether the pressure was due to a heavy workload or dealing with a damaging political issue, the amount of stress the interviewee recalled being under influenced the way he or she chose to manage a particular situation. The level of pressure the interviewee was under also varied depending on whether the interviewee worked for the government, the Opposition or minor party, a minister or a backbencher (see 1). The transcripts revealed that those who worked in ministerial offices tended to face the blow torch of media scrutiny more often than those working for the Opposition or a minor party. However, as will be demonstrated, the level of pressure for all of the interviewees fluctuated depending on the fortunes of the politician (see Figure 2.) and the issue at hand.

**Figure 1. Contextual factor: Whether employed by a Government minister or a backbencher**

Dennis Atkins said there was a great deal of difference in working for an Opposition Senator and a cabinet minister, particularly a cabinet minister in trouble. When Dennis Atkins became a parliamentary media adviser in 1982 it was to South Australian Labor Senator, Nick Bolkus, he said it provided him with a soft entry into the world of politics:

**Dennis Atkins:** Working for a new backbench senator there’s not much pressure, you know. It’s all about using opportunities and creating opportunities. So that was sort of a soft way in to that side of politics and I got on pretty well with the press gallery in Canberra and got to know them and it was sort of a nice friendly relationship and I had a boss who wasn’t in trouble. (Atkins, 2011)

**Figure 2. Contextual factor: The fortunes of the politician**

Dennis Atkins said his “views of the pressure cooker changed” when the Hawke government was elected and he joined the ministerial media pool. This meant he provided media advising services to more than one minister, including Mick Young, the then Special Minister of State. In 1984 Mick Young was forced to resign from cabinet for breaching cabinet security:

**Dennis Atkins:** I suppose the toughest time was when Mick Young resigned and they left me with him for two weeks... That was pretty eye opening. Just the intensity of... his problem and the way the media were pursuing him. I was staying at his place over in Adelaide and [the media] were camped on the front door step. I led the six o’clock news one night talking to the media through a screen door, which shocked my mother. (Laughs). (Atkins, 2011)
Even the interviewees employed as parliamentary media advisers to the Opposition and minor parties and those working in smaller jurisdictions recalled enduring times of intense media pressure that had an influence on their decisions about the amount and type of information they were prepared to release to journalists (see Figure 3.)

It is also interesting to note that the interview data revealed a rough distinction between interviewees who had worked as parliamentary media advisers prior to the mid 1990s and those who worked from the mid 1990s to the present. Those who performed the role in the 1970s and 1980s – (David Barnett for Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser 1975 - 83; Kerry O’Brien for Opposition leader Gough Whitlam in 1977 and Deputy Opposition leader, Lionel Bowen 1978-80; Dennis Shanahan for NSW Attorney General, John Dowd, 1988; Dennis Atkins for Senator Nick Bolkus 1981-83 and Mick Young 1983– 85; and Barrie Cassidy for Prime Minister Bob Hawke 1986-91) – did not express strong views about poor media standards and a resultant loss of trust. In contrast, it was more common for the interviewees who worked as parliamentary media advisers from the mid 1990s to the present to express stronger views about poor media practice. For example, when asked if the experience of working as a media adviser to Opposition leader, Gough Whitlam, had an impact on his perceptions of journalists and journalism practice, Kerry O’Brien said: “No, I don’t think so”. When he was told that other interviewees had expressed a sense of shock at the poor journalism standards they had encountered, Kerry O’Brien responded:

**Kerry O’Brien:** Well it would depend on when you were talking about. That wouldn’t surprise me today. It wouldn’t even surprise me going back say seven or eight years, but it was a smaller [press] gallery and at the senior level there were a lot of real quality people there, people with a lot of experience and corporate history. (O’Brien, 2012)

**Vivienne Wynter:** The Democrats were quite happy for me to be honest… the only thing I had to conceal working for the Democrats was how we felt internally about Cheryl’s defection… (Wynter, 2012)
When Barrie Cassidy was asked similar questions, he acknowledged that he had witnessed some poor reporting practice but he thought journalism standards had dropped since he worked for Prime Minister Hawke:

*Barrie Cassidy:* What I find about a lot of the reporting that goes on these days is that it isn’t fair. You can argue it is accurate but it’s selective and unfair... Even now what annoys me most about journalism, not so much when I worked for Hawke, but now, is the lack of fairness in some of the stuff that is thrown up. (Cassidy, 2011)

Both Kerry O’Brien and Barrie Cassidy also perceived differences in the way parliamentary media advising was practiced prior to the mid 1990s and today.

*Kerry O’Brien:* I think a lot of them are coming in without a lot of journalistic experience... I think that there is now a fairly common understanding that if you can manipulate an outcome, if you can play this game where you’ll have favourites and you’ll feed unofficially or deliberately leak policy. To me that is not a leak. Getting a group of journalists in a room to release an awkward report for the government and hand the report out to them while the ministers started talking about it. That began under Howard. I’m not sure if it goes on under Rudd and Gillard. Those kinds of cynical operations were not a part of the process when I was there. I’m not saying that we were all wonderful clean skins, but the way in which manipulation is pervasive today it was nothing like that then. (O’Brien, 2012)

*Barrie Cassidy:* ...and this idea that we are in constant ‘spin’, that is a phenomenon that started with Kevin Rudd. Really it is and they are not much better now... but I think once Rudd took over, it was all about just responding and reacting to [polling and focus group] material than using it to help better explain your position. I think that is what has changed. (Cassidy, 2011)

What Kerry O’Brien and Barrie Cassidy’s reflections point to is a shift in their perception about the way both journalism and parliamentary media advising have come to be conducted over the past forty years. Both perceived a drop in reporting standards which Barrie Cassidy described as being “selective and unfair” – a point raised by other interviewees later in the chapter. Cassidy and O’Brien also perceived a rise in “cynical” or deliberately manipulative tactics by parliamentary media advisers.

Though a fractured pattern did emerge from the interview data along historical lines, further research of a quantitative nature needs to be done to confirm whether or not there is a genuine
trend in rising levels of distrust between parliamentary media advisers and journalists or whether
the issue of trust between journalists and parliamentary media advisers has remained stable. If
there is a trend it would be interesting to determine if it follows a similar timeline to the wealth
of political communication literature concerned with falling standards in political reporting and
the demise of the public sphere (Brants, 2011; Cappella, 1997; Carey, 1997a; Gurevitch, 1995;
Habermas, 1989; Lloyd, 2004; McNair, 2009; Sabato, 2000; Schlesinger, 2006; Tanner, 2011).
However, regardless of the era during which the interviewee worked as a parliamentary media
adviser, this chapter shows that trust was a key consideration for all of them when it came to
dealing with the individual reporters.

4.2. The importance of perceptions of trust to truth & disclosure

To facilitate the examination of the importance of the interviewees’ perceptions of trust in
particular journalists and the impact that had on truth and disclosure, I have drawn on the work
of moral philosopher, Bernard Williams (2002). Once I have laid out his general argument, the
discussion will be divided in two parts. Firstly, in section 4.3, I will use Williams (2002) to help
explain the importance of trust to disclosure. Secondly, in section 4.4, I will use Williams (2002)
to illustrate the importance of trust to truth. In many ways this is an artificial division as the truth
and disclosure are intimately interconnected. However, for the sake of clarity I have attempted
to deal with them separately.

In his examination of *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams (2002) argues that two virtues need to be
present in order for someone to tell the truth: accuracy and sincerity. By sincerity, Williams
(2002) means a person must believe that what they are saying is true and offer it spontaneously,
whereas accuracy involves getting the facts the right. Accuracy, Williams (2002, p. 45) contends
involves the unambiguous “intention, choice, attempts and concentration of effort” to provide
accurate information. Sincerity, Williams (2002, p. 45) said, “involves a certain kind of
spontaneity, a disposition to come out with what one believes...but is not itself expressed in
deliberation and choice”. By that he means it must be a genuine attempt to tell the truth without
calculation in order for it to be considered ‘sincere’. Without either the disposition of sincerity
or the intention of accuracy Williams (2002) argues, a person would not be able to tell the truth.
However, truth does not rely on the existence of accuracy and sincerity alone. In order for someone to be accurate and sincere, Williams (2002) contends there also needs to be a condition of trust (p. 88). Without trust, Williams (2002) argues, one cannot expect people to be open and honest with each other. This is especially so, he says, in the adversarial world of politics. However, whether or not two people can trust each other also depends on what Williams (2002) calls the communicative expectations between them (p. 111). The concept of communicative expectations and its application to the relationship between journalists and parliamentary media advisers is discussed directly below.

### 4.2.1. Communicative Expectations

In *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams (2002) makes the case that each situation and each relationship has its own communicative expectations attached to it. For example, in an everyday situation of talking to a friend, Williams (2002) says, one might safely expect that the friend is telling you the truth (p. 113). However, in a political environment politicians do not expect their opponents to be fully frank (p. 111). This can equally be applied to the relationship between parliamentary media advisers and journalists. Given the location of parliamentary media advising in the adversarial field of politics and the fluctuating nature of the reporter-source relationship (established in the previous chapter), a sense of ‘normal trust’ that one might expect in relationships with people in everyday situations is not realistic. Williams (2002) goes on to say that these communicative expectations are shaped by two factors: “Some of what we expect from each other is a matter of social roles in which we are engaged. Some, very significantly, are a function of how individual people behave” (p. 117).

In relation to expectations based on social roles, the previous chapter discussed the fluctuating tension in the dynamic between parliamentary media advisers and journalists that oscillates between adversarial and co-operative. This constant manoeuvring is also accompanied by a set of communicative expectations with each other. Robin Brown (2011b) describes the role-based expectations around truth this way:

...the rules of the game prohibit lying but accept that it is legitimate for politicians and their ‘spin-doctors’ to present information in a partial and misleading way, while at the
same time it is understood that journalists may present that information in a similarly selective way. (Ingham, 2003 pp. 68-71 in Brown, 2011b, p. 63)

Based on Brown’s (2011b) description, the communicative expectations between a journalist and a parliamentary media adviser or ‘spin-doctor’ includes an expectation on the part of the journalist that he or she will not be able to fully trust what the parliamentary media adviser says and the parliamentary media adviser will not be able to fully trust what the journalist is going to do with the information. As one Australian journalist put it, “I don’t object to advisers trying to put the best ‘spin’ from their point of view on a story. You can’t expect them to do otherwise” (Anonymous interviewee in Phillipps, 2002, p. 112).

A view supported by one of the interviewees in this study:

**Vivienne Wynter:** And I don’t think journalists are easily manipulated either. Someone like X, Y or Z, you are not going to be able to manipulate them. (Wynter, 2012)

Wynter’s assertion is supported by Richardson (2002) who says the fact that everyone in the media is now aware of ‘spin’ it is making it harder for parliamentary media advisers to get away with using it (p. 178). Though, it must be stated that two of the interviewees acknowledged they found it easier to fool less experienced reporters who were often employed in the regional media.

What the above comments point to is the importance of trust in the communicative expectations between journalists and parliamentary media advisers. As will be examined in the following pages, the transcripts revealed that the interviewees’ perceptions of trust in their former journalism colleagues ranged from caution to distrust, depending on a range of factors including the issue at hand and the individual behaviour of the journalist and the interviewee was dealing with.

### 4.2.2. Levels of trust

The issue of trust and its impact on the way the interviewees recalled using information in the role parliamentary media adviser emerged on different levels in the transcripts. I have classified these different levels of trust under two headings. The first level I have called *caution* by which I mean a sense of wariness around the use of information in the role of parliamentary media...
adviser. As will be described more fully in the coming pages, I have broken down the category of caution in to two further sub-categories of administrative caution and caution toward the media. By administrative caution, I mean recognition of a necessary degree of confidentiality around some government information and policy processes. By caution toward the media, I mean a sense of wariness toward the media in general and/or certain journalists in particular based on the interviewees’ personal experience of working as a journalist and acceptance that not all journalists behave ethically. Depending on the contextual circumstances and the journalist the interviewee was dealing with, the sense of generalised caution toward the media rose to a sense of distrust. Each of these different levels of trust will be examined in turn.

4.2.2.1. Administrative caution and confidentiality

As mentioned directly above (4.2.2.), different layers of caution – administrative caution and caution toward the media- emerged from the transcripts regarding the interviewees’ decision-making around the management of information. The level of administrative caution is dealt with here.

It is widely accepted in the literature and by the interviewees that a certain amount of administrative secrecy is required for the machinery of state to work effectively, even in a liberal democracy. This has been argued since the earliest sociological discussions of government such as the classic text, Economy and Society, by German sociologist, Max Weber (1922/1968). In his study of bureaucracy, Weber (1922/1968) argues that secrecy and bureaucracy go hand in hand. Public service administrations, he contends, “always tend to exclude the public, to hide its knowledge and action from criticism as well as it can” (p. 992). Weber (1922/1968) even suggests “the concept of the ‘office secret’ is the specific invention of bureaucracy” (p. 992). In the context of this study, the extent to which the twenty-one interviewees experienced this need for confidentiality varied depending on the circumstances of their employment.

The interview transcripts showed that different expectations of confidentiality were required of the interviewees depending on whether they worked for a government minister in a sensitive portfolio area or a minor party. Some portfolios, such as Defence or Attorney General, for
example, require management of particularly sensitive information pertaining to national security and legal matters that necessarily place extra confidentiality pressures on the advisers working in those areas. The additional emphasis on confidentiality in these sensitive portfolios is reflected in the comments made by the interviewees who worked in those policy areas. As well as this variation across portfolios, each jurisdiction also applies different confidentiality conditions to staff. For instance at a federal level all political staff, regardless of whether they work for government, the Opposition or a minor party, are employed under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*. This legislation does not contain any clauses relating to the use or misuse of confidential information. However, the disclosure of information obtained by commonwealth government ministerial staff, including ministerial media advisers, is restricted under section 70 of the federal *Crimes Act 1914*. Under the Act, a ministerial staffer faces a two-year jail term if he or she:

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publishes or communicates, except to some person to whom he or she is authorized to publish or communicate it, any fact or document which comes to his or her knowledge, or into his or her possession, by virtue of being a Commonwealth officer, and which it is his or her duty not to disclose, shall be guilty of an offence.
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The situation also varies at a State or Territory level. Because the twenty-one interviewees in this study were employed as parliamentary media advisers to both government and opposition parties and at State and Federal levels, it would be unwieldy to try to tailor the discussion about confidentiality to fit each individual circumstance. Given that seventeen of the twenty-one interviewees had been employed as ministerial media advisers, the discussion about confidentiality largely centres on that common experience. However, some variations are also considered in this chapter.

This culture of confidentiality described above represented a significant departure for the twenty-one interviewees who had come from the culture of journalism with its values disclosure, scrutiny and a free press. Journalist and author, James Button (2012) described the transition from reporter to prime ministerial speech writer in the Australian Public Service (APS) as crossing “from the disclosure business to the secrecy business” (p. 27) where he moved in a “locked down world” (p. 68). Having worked as a journalist for twenty-one years, James Button (2012) said he was struck by the “silence” in Canberra (p. 66), by which he meant the lack of
openness between the APS and the media. Though the interviewees in this study were not employed by the bureaucracy, the same confidentiality provisions that apply to public servants under section 70 of the Crimes Act 1914 also apply to ministerial advisers. Beyond these legal penalties there is also a strong need for discretion in all circumstances when employed in a ministerial office. As a former chief of staff in the Howard government explained it: “what’s in the office stays in the office” (Tiernan, 2010, p. 258).

In contrast to this culture of confidentiality surrounding parliamentary media advising, journalism culture is historically embedded in ideals of freedom of publication and the scrutiny of power (Mill, 1859/2013; Siebert, 1956/1973). The very concept of government secrecy can be seen as undermining journalism’s ability to perform its ‘watchdog’ role in society and be an independent monitor of power (Kovach, 2007, p. 140-42). Given the ideological importance journalists place on the disclosure of information, one might expect that reporters who identify with journalism’s values framework might have difficulty adjusting to the new world of government confidentiality. The interview transcripts revealed that at times some of the interviewees did perceive a tension between those values:

_Craig Allen:_ *The biggest change I found in going from being a working journalist to working on the other side of the fence was that I spent six years of my career desperately trying to get access to information and decision makers and within the first day I had a whole in tray full of stories that I wasn’t allowed to give out. A huge power shift... As a former journo you’d love to get hold of some of the information but it is never going to happen.* (Allen, 2012)

Despite their journalistic instinct to disclose stories, the interviewees said they resisted the temptation18. Instead, all of the interviewees said they understood that a degree of secrecy or confidentiality was necessary for the wheels of government to turn and they pragmatically accommodated the new perspective. As Kerry O’Brien remarked:

18 It should be noted that the issue of leaking information did not arise during the interview process except on a few occasions. The lack of reference to it does not mean leaking did not occur, it simply means the issue was not explored during the interviews.
**Kerry O’Brien:** Because I had done quite a bit of political reporting from outside the gallery I had a reasonably sophisticated understanding of the pushing and pulling on the public’s right to know and there is a difference in some degree to being in an elected government and being in Opposition. When you are an elected government you really are public property to a substantial degree. At the same time, even the journalist in me has to acknowledge for the processes of government to go on there has to be some capacity for confidential conversations to take place and the obvious one is the public servants. Public Servants have to feel free to express themselves... So I do understand the principle of cabinet confidentiality and the need for ministers to speak candidly around a table... And yes as a journalist I will try and find out about it and yes there is an argument for some aspects of confidentiality inside political parties. I also fundamentally believe that the more open the processes of government the healthier the society. I think the more secrecy that prevails the greater risk of abuse and ultimate rottenness. The sort of abuses of power that we would all rail against are more likely to blossom in a culture of secrecy, so I am fundamentally opposed to a culture of secrecy per se but I do understand there are some circumstances in which it is necessary for government and for that matter even a strong Opposition to be able to conduct some aspects of those political processes in a private fashion. Does that make sense? (O’Brien, 2012)

It does: There is a real tension between the need for confidentiality and the need for open and accountable government; a tension between the competing demands of “the norms of democratic accountability on the one hand, and the functions that require secrecy in the interests of effective political management on the other” (Beetham, 1996, p. 100). Ericson et al. (1989) frame this concept of tension differently. Rather than a tension between secrecy and disclosure of information in government, they see it as a tension between “publicity” and “privacy” that is present inside all organisations. The authors argue that privacy is required during the development of policy options; and publicity – which is central to the functioning of liberal democracy and desired by all political parties – is best once the policy has been agreed and a face of unity and consensus can be displayed. Until then, Ericson et al. (1989) contend publicity “is a disruptive influence on deliberations, and likely to expose dissensus” (p. 217). Bok (1989) describes this tension as the “perennial conflict” because “every government has an interest in concealment; every public in greater access to information” (p. 177).

Despite the interviewees all coming from a background of journalism and experienced in its practices and values, the need to balance the competing interests of secrecy and transparency once they took on the role of parliamentary media advising was pragmatically accepted by them.
As will be shown, some of the interviewees did recall instances when their journalism values did come into conflict with the requirements of the new role. However, the interview transcripts also showed that there was an acceptance by the interviewees that they had taken on a different role and therefore different interests needed to be considered.

As demonstrated by Kerry O’Brien, there was an understanding among the interviewees that not all information could be made public. Dennis Shanahan explained that when he was working for the New South Wales Attorney General, John Dowd, reasons of national security limited the type of information he was allowed to disclose to the media:

_Dennis Shanahan:_ There was certain highly sensitive information and most of the time I was kept away from that deliberately and I kept away from it. Being the point man to deal with the media for a department that has a lot of secret information, like being ASIO’s press sec, its best that you don’t know. I would say to people that ‘I do not know. I will try and find out. I might not be able to. I can’t guarantee it’. I would get back to people and say ‘I’m sorry, I can’t help you on or off the record and I can’t find out. I simply can’t find out and so I can’t help you’. Again, particularly because it was Attorney General. (Shanahan, 2011)

Legal and privacy reasons were also identified for not releasing certain information, as Craig Allen discovered when he became a ministerial media adviser. This was particularly the case, he said, in dealing with complex social issues such as child protection, domestic violence or mental health issues:

_Craig Allen:_ As an example you might have somebody who knocks on your door as a journalist and says the government screwed me over, they are not helping my family. From another perspective as the media adviser you recognise this is a dispute that has been going on for ten years. This person might have mental health issues. I guess I learned as a journalist coming out of that process to be a little more sceptical and not as accepting of a story being as black and white as a person would have me believe, and that often they are very murky. (Allen, 2012)

Contrary to convention, Barrie Cassidy said he advocated greater openness with reporters when he was in charge of media for the Hawke Government at the time of the first Gulf War (1990). He said his strategy for greater disclosure went against the instincts of some members of Cabinet:
Barrie Cassidy: When the Gulf War broke out, that was the first Gulf War, the good one (laughs) – the one that started with Iraqis going into Kuwait therefore we all felt good about it – I was a bit torn then because I could sense among some of the ministers a real tightening up of information and I thought at times like that the opposite had to happen – given the limitations of what the Americans would allow. It was essentially their war – that we should really keep the information flowing and that whatever was happening to Australian troops the country ought to know about it. But I thought ‘I am not in a position to deal with this’ so I suggested we set up a separate unit and had it manned 24 hours a day... and there were never any complaints from anyone about that. I thought there was a real sense of openness and I think many of the ministers got the message then that if it’s properly handled... I don’t know that the public was really denied anything in the end that they needed to know that wasn’t sort of classified operational. (Cassidy, 2011)

Each of these three reflections demonstrate different tactical responses to situations involving sensitive information and serve as good examples of why the blunt frame of moralism is inadequate in dealing with the interviewees’ interpretations of how to deal with the scenarios they faced. As has been outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the moralistic conception of the role of the parliamentary media adviser as ‘spin-doctor’ invites expectations of controlling, manipulative behaviour for the purposes of deceiving the media and the public. None of those stereotypical motivations were identified by the interviewees in relation to the above examples. In the scenarios described by Craig Allen and Dennis Shanahan the amount and type of information they were able to release was dictated by valid legal and national security reasons rather than a desire to obfuscate or deceive. Instead of taking advantage of a period of heightened national security to increase control over information during the first Gulf War, Barrie Cassidy said he took an open approach toward the media. In doing so, his inclination to facilitate greater media access challenges the oversimplified moralistic conception of the controlling and deceptive ‘spin-doctor’.

4.2.2.2. Caution toward the media

Overlaying the administrative caution described above, was a second level of caution that I have called caution toward the media. As mentioned earlier (in 4.2.2.) many of the interviewees recalled adopting a cautious disposition toward the media based on their prior experience as working journalists and their understanding that not all reporters adhered to the journalists’ code of ethics. A sense of caution from parliamentary media advisers toward journalists has been
found in other studies (Downes, 1998; Davis, 2009) and links back to the sense of ambivalence and tension in the reporter-source relationship discussed in chapter 3. A study of congressional press secretaries and journalists in the United States described the relationship between the two actors as one of “guarded honesty” (Downes, 1998, p. 263). Similarly, research by Aeron Davis (2009) examining the relationship between politicians and journalists in the United Kingdom found most of the participants referred to the relationship between the two actors as one of “cautious co-operation” (pp. 209-210).

In this doctoral study, one third of the interviewees brought a sense of caution toward the media with them to the role of parliamentary media adviser. The transcripts revealed that this pre-formed sense of caution stemmed from the interviewees’ prior journalism experience and recognizing that not all reporters behaved ethically:

Niki Savva: I was guarded from the start. Having done it for so long myself and knowing most of the people I was dealing with. (Savva, 2012)

*Kelly: I always knew there were scumbag journalists. I used to work with them. (*Kelly, 2011)

For roughly half of the interviewees, the sense of caution grew out of negative experiences of being on the receiving end of poor journalism practice once they became parliamentary media advisers. In response to what was perceived to be unfair and unethical reporting, several of the interviewees recalled adopting a position of caution toward the media as a defensive action. Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser’s media adviser, David Barnett, explained it this way:

David Barnett: The first thing that happened to me was I became immensely cautious. You weighed every word you ever said to anybody. You become defensive. It’s supposed to be all about promoting an image and being positive and putting ‘spin’ on things but the Prime Minister’s Press Secretary is more often than not defending something. (Barnett, 2011)

Based on the reflections of the interviewees, it is clear that those who were not cautious and discrete in their dealings with the media paid a high price for their unguarded behaviour.

*Tom: Sometimes I was glib and sometimes I spoke too much like a journalist and not like a press secretary and there were some very public mistakes I made on that. On one
occasion... we had a feature writer with us and I foolishly relaxed and having never been involved in feature writing myself, I was chatting with her at an event and she used the comment that clearly to me was chit chat, but I should have known better and she used it as the opening line in the profile she did on my minister. Of course a press secretary should be seen and never heard. It’s certainly not my place to be quoted in a profile on my boss and this quote contained a four letter expletive...So I made some very high profile mistakes (laughs). At the time I embarrassed myself, but when you are a press secretary more importantly you embarrass your minister. There were times when I did embarrass my minister with my naiveté and inexperience... I made beginner’s mistakes. In the beginning I was still too much of a journalist. (*Tom, 2011)

As a result of experiences like the one described above, where the journalist was not clear about the rules of engagement and what was to be “on” or “off-the-record”, *Tom did become more cautious in his dealings with the media:

*Tom: I think it was probably a combination of learning from my mistakes and of having a new perspective on journalism. Learning caution and also I suppose in being enculturated a little bit in being a staffer. So perhaps that culture takes over a little bit as well. You learn – I don’t like to say a ‘siege mentality’ – but you do learn that you are not a journalist anymore. You are still journalists’ friends but you learn you are not a journalist anymore. You are in a different role and you have to behave differently. So I think all of these things combine after a while and you learn the job. You learn what is required and ameliorate your behaviour accordingly. (*Tom, 2011)

This correction in behaviour – from open to guarded – was experienced by other interviewees as well. After six months of being a ministerial media adviser *Scott said he had learned the hard way to be more reserved in his dealings with journalists:

*Scott: …I have probably become more circumspect. On one or two occasions I have perhaps said something that has been misunderstood or misreported. Whether they have misunderstood what I said, I don’t know, but that turned out poorly. So you become a bit more circumspect in your dealings with people you don’t necessarily know. (*Scott, 2011)

From the perspective of more seasoned ministerial media advisers (as opposed to the Opposition and minor party staffers), this shift to greater caution in dealing with the media was seen as a necessary rite of passage:
Chapter 4: Trust, truth & the ‘public’s right to know’

*Sarah: I think that happens especially if it’s your first time as a media adviser. It has to happen. It’s a natural progression. It has to happen or maybe there is something wrong or you’ve got such a quiet area that no-one calls up. (*Sarah, 2012)

Vivienne Wynter, who worked for the Australian Democrats, felt strongly that this defensive and cautious behaviour was a product of working for government rather than a minor party. As she put it, she rarely felt her Senator or the party had anything “to hide” and as a result she said she did not feel particularly cautious:

**Vivienne Wynter:** I think it is more to do with when you are working in communications for a government there are a particular set of circumstances that do with that, that don’t apply to communications jobs across the board. (Wynter, 2012)

However, there were also exceptions to that general air of openness. The few times Wynter described feeling guarded and protective were around internal party and privacy issues, namely the defection of the former Democrats leader, Cheryl Kernot, to the Labor Party and Kernot’s relationship with the then Labor Foreign Affairs Minister, Gareth Evans:

**Vivienne Wynter:** The Democrats were quite happy for me to be honest... the only thing I had to conceal working for the Democrats was how we felt internally about Cheryl’s defection. (Wynter, 2012)

Wynter also described the split between the subsequent leader of the Democrats, Meg Lees, and her young Deputy, Natasha Stott Despoja, over the party leadership as being “a bit touchy”. Both of these instances are useful in demonstrating how a change in contextual circumstances, such as the issue at hand, can have a direct impact on the level of caution and candour considered appropriate by the parliamentary media adviser to apply in a given situation. Both of these periods of internal party disarray reflect the impact that context had on the way Wynter temporarily performed her role. A shift in the internal contextual environment of the political party she worked for required her to change her usual open approach to media advising to a more closed approach by not revealing internal party information relevant to the defection of the leader and internal leadership tensions and conduct her role with greater caution until the issues subsided.
4.2.2.3. Distrust in the media

As mentioned above (4.2.2.2.), as to how cautious, circumspect or defensive the interviewee became in his or her dealings with journalists was influenced by the contextual circumstances and the level of trust the interviewee had in the media generally or certain journalists in particular. This finding is supported by a range of literature which highlights the centrality of trust to the successful working of reporter-source relations (Blumler, 1981; Brants, 2010; Cappella, 1997; Davis, 2009; Downes, 1998; Ericson, 1989; Mancini, 1993; Phillipps, 2002; Van Dalen, 2011). Without trust, Klaidman & Beauchamp (1987) explain, the reporter-source relationship founders and presents serious consequences for both sides:

If reporters cannot trust sources to be candid – not only to tell the truth, albeit from the source’s perspective, and not to deceive them (except on rare occasions) – the sources are virtually unusable. Similarly, if sources cannot trust reporters to accurately convey their information to the public and keep confidences, the sources will cease to be sources. (p. 163)

This mutual break down in trust between the two actors can lead to a “spiral of mutual mistrust” (Van Dalen, 2011 p. 148) where suspicion and cynicism about each other’s motives and actions comes to dominate the dynamic between them. Van Dalen (2011) describes this “spiral of mutual mistrust” as a precursor to the so called “spiral of cynicism” (Cappella, 1997) between political media coverage and public cynicism about the political process. As mentioned in the introduction, the independent Phillis Inquiry (2004) into government communication in the United Kingdom described this situation as a “three-way breakdown in trust between government and politicians, the media and the general public” (p. 2), which fostered a growing disillusionment among sections of society and saw a drop in participation in local elections:

Editors and journalists have complained about public information, which should be available to all, being used as the currency in a system of favouritism, selective release and partisan spinning. For their part, ministers and officials have complained about the way they believe much of the media offers a partial and distorted version of events, often with little relationship to what was said at lobby briefings and relying on off-the-record sources or, as some have alleged, deliberate misrepresentation. (Phillis, 2004, p. 25)
These sentiments are echoed in research by Brants (2010) and Van Dalen (2011). Both of the studies found that on the one hand journalists felt cynical toward politicians because of their “media salacity” or hunger for media coverage and the lengths they would go to achieve it. The more a politician tried to interfere or limit coverage, Van Dalen’s (2011) study revealed, the more mistrustful the reporter became of the politician’s motives. On the other hand, Brants (2010) found politicians felt cynical toward journalists for their attempts to set the agenda. However, the most “media cynical” politicians, or the politicians who least trusted the media, believed “the media do a poor job, are too agenda setting, and do not represent them well” (Brants, 2010, p. 37). Criticisms of poor journalism standards and behaviour as those described by Brants (2010) and Van Dalen (2011) were also made by interviewees in this study and are discussed below.

4.2.2.4. Perceptions of poor journalism standards

Just as Brants (2010) and Van Dalen (2011) identified behaviours by both actors which led to a break down in trust between them, recurring references to poor standards of journalism and a loss of trust also emerged in this study. Before we begin examining the issue of distrust, it is important to clarify what the interviewees meant by trust in relation to journalists. Based on the interviewees’ comments, it is clear that the concept of trust included conceptions of accuracy and what *Adam called “fair play”. As will be shown in this section, the interviewees’ reflections suggest that “fair play” was generally achieved by honouring agreements around the conditions of interview; providing the interviewee (in the role of parliamentary media adviser) with a right of reply; and, adequate opportunity to respond to media inquiries generally. “Fair play” also seemed to include equal or at least adequate representation of the politician’s perspective; and an absence of overt bias toward one point of view. The transcripts also suggested that accuracy of reporting, and absence of distortion, were also deemed to be very important to the interviewees. As the following pages will show, perceptions of distrust toward journalists appear to have been generated in response to behaviour such as breaching the conditions of interview; lying; not being given a right of reply and/or not being given adequate time to respond; overt displays of bias; and, distortion of information. Regardless of whether the interviewee remained merely
cautious or developed a stronger sense of distrust toward particular journalists, the transcripts revealed that many of the study participants were surprised by the low standards of journalism they encountered once they became parliamentary media advisers:

*Adam: The thing I found most disturbing about working as a political adviser or press secretary was the disturbing insight it provided into journalism. It wasn’t moving to the dark-side that was a problem, it was being put in to a position and exposed to journalists and the realisation that not everybody practices their craft the way you do…I have some horror stories. It comes back to these basic principles of truth, or basic courtesies of fair play and being straight forward. (*Adam, 2011)

*Scott: Well there’s a lot of bad journalism out there. I don’t think you really get that until you’re on the other side of it ... But then you come on the other side and you realise there are a lot of mistakes and a lot of slanted and hostile media. (*Scott)

Alex Wake: By the end of my time as a media adviser I thought most of the journalists were scumbags. Lying, cheating, particularly the metro ones... One day – I can’t remember the full details, but [a reporter] basically did a front page story saying, ‘Dean Wells was a liar’. After [the journalist] left political reporting [he said] that that was the one story that [he] really had regret about because the whole story was actually a beat up and wrong. But the damage had been done. You know, a young [reporter] trying to build [his] career. [He] wanted to get as many front pages as possible. I get that but [he] did it at the expense of the truth. (Wake, 2011)

Stephen Spencer: I was quite shocked to realise how many of the media in my opinion were just... they just ran anything they were given. They were very gullible. They didn’t care what was true or not... I had one and I said to him, ‘Why didn’t you ring me?’ And he said, ‘because I knew if I rang you you’d say it wasn’t true and now I get to run it again tomorrow with you denying it’. (Spencer, 2012)

Similar sorts of instances as those referred to by Alex Wake and Stephen Spencer were also recalled by other interviewees who reflected that these types of experiences began to erode their perception of respect and trust toward some people in the media. The following account from *Tom about his second year in the job is a clear demonstration of this:

*Tom: It was so relentless ...The phone would start ringing [very early] in the morning. They were very long days. It was shocking to see the [press] gallery hunt as a pack and not be able to influence it in any way. Then to see when it spreads to the Sydney media and the nightly current affairs programmes and see how hard they play the game and the

19 Dean Wells was the Minister for Education (1998 – 2001) at the time Alex Wake was his Senior Media Adviser.
tactics with which they play. Again it took another blow to my view of my former profession. You made mistakes where promises were made by a media organisation, which were flagrantly overturned in studio and I couldn’t believe they did it, but they did. We were a big story a lot of the time so there was a lot of fierce competition in the media for you. Like a lamb caught between wolves when you have A Current Affair up against Today Tonight up against Paul Lyneham on 7.30 all wanting a piece of you. [One day] I took 76 messages in one hour on my phone and I physically had burn marks down my cheek by the way I was using the mobile phone. You know I was physically ill. [My minister] was physically ill. It did take a huge mental and physical toll. It’s not to complain. That’s the job. (*Tom, 2011)

*Tom’s recollection of his second year as a ministerial media adviser highlights the impact a change in the contextual environment can have on the role and the way it is performed. His account not only demonstrates how gruelling the role can be during periods of intense political pressure but it also illustrates the link between perceptions of poor journalistic behaviour and a loss of respect and trust by the interviewee in his former journalism colleagues.

Based on the interview data, fourteen of the participants saw trust as an issue in relation to individual reporters. Dennis Shanahan (2011) simply put it this way: “I picked the journalists I could trust”.

The interviewees explained that their decision to trust or distrust a particular reporter was based on their prior interactions with that journalist and perceptions of the reporter’s ethical standards:

**Kerry O’Brien:** What you learned was who were the journalists who were honest in their craft and those who were pitching the line of their proprietor. (O’Brien, 2012)

**Vivienne Wynter:** My way of working as a communications officer was to only deal with the journalists I knew and trusted. So you would put a media release out to everybody, but the good stuff, and I often did have good stuff... I would give that to people I trusted. (Wynter, 2012)

Experiencing journalism from the other side was not all bleak. Three of the interviewees also recalled examples of reporting excellence:

**Helen:** I never sort of developed a blanket ‘all of the media are out to get us’ and I still have some shining examples of people who actually sat down and listened and changed stories or withdrew stories after listening to the facts. (*Helen, 2012)
Craig Allen: I guess you see the best and worst of journalistic behaviour as they try to get material from you. (Allen, 2012)

During Barrie Cassidy’s time on the staff of Prime Minister Bob Hawke he said some journalists even rose in his esteem because of their performance:

Barrie Cassidy: I thought there was some poor journalism. But I tell you the overwhelming thing that struck me was... how much they knew... and how hard it was to keep anything secret. It didn’t bother me. As a journalist of course it doesn’t bother you. And you kept reading this stuff and think ‘that’s interesting’. But once you are inside and part of your job is trying to keep control over the information. I was just instantly staggered by it. They quite often knew this stuff before I did. It’s because, as I came to understand, that ministers just leak all the time. They are always ingratiating themselves with the media and that is how the information gets out. Of course ministers are going to hear it before me, quite often, and then they are going to pass it on to journalists before I heard about it. I found it really odd. In a way it gave me this sort of perverse admiration for them that I didn’t have when they were competitors. (Cassidy, 2011)

Though trust, or more accurately distrust, in the media did not feature in Barrie Cassidy’s recollections of his time as a prime ministerial adviser, it did arise in the reflections of others. As will be shown below (4.2.3.), depending on the level of distrust the interviewee felt toward the media in general or specific journalists, one third said they observed a change in their views about the disclosure of information, including the key journalism ideal of the ‘public’s right to know’.

4.2.3. Trust & the ‘public’s right to know’

The adage the ‘public’s right to know’ is tied to the principles of democratic theory which espouse the need for an informed public to ensure a robust and accountable representative democratic system. It reaches back to 1787 and the birth of the American constitution when James Madison, who Stiglitz (2003, p. 124) calls “the architect of free speech”, argued that both houses of Congress be required to provide a report on proceedings because “the people have a right to know what their agents are doing and have done” (Richardson, 2004, p. 55). The phrase was then later used by the Executive Director of Associated Press, Kent Cooper, in a speech in 1945 and reported in the New York Times (Altschull, 1990, p. 250; Richardson, 2004). In his address, Cooper said:
The citizen is entitled to have access to news, fully and accurately presented. There cannot be political freedom in one country, or in the world, without respect for the right to know. (Richardson, 2004, p. 46)

The slogan was soon taken up by others in the United States in a campaign for greater scrutiny of government business (Altschull, 1990). Over time it gained such traction that the phrase the ‘public’s right know’ has become a “core element of the journalism ethos” (Meyers, 1993, p. 134) and synonymous with the democratic principles of a free press and journalism’s ‘watchdog’ role in democracy. The centrality of the concept to journalism’s ideological framework is reflected in the opening line of the Australian journalists’ code of ethics, which states: “Respect for truth and the public’s right to information are fundamental principles of journalism” (MEAA, 1998). Despite wide acceptance of the doctrine of the ‘public’s right to know’, there is not a constitutional protection of free speech in Australia as there is in the United States. However, Beattie & Beal (2007) explain, Australia is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which oblige recognition of free opinion and expression. In addition there is what is often referred to as the implied rights argument, which contends that because Australia is a democracy, the central role of free speech in a democracy must be recognised (Beattie, 2007, pp. 93-94).

In the eyes of some of the interviewees and in the journalism literature the right of the public to know had assumed fundamental, unassailable status. For several of the interviewees, the ‘right to know’ maintained that superior moral status until they became parliamentary media advisers. Once in the new role, this core journalistic principle began to unravel in the face of poor treatment at the hands of certain reporters, and a growing understanding about the wide range of other interests that also needed to be taken into account when governing. After just six months as a ministerial media adviser *Scott described his commitment to the ‘public’s right to know’ as being in flux:

*Scott*: Now, I guess my views have changed on issues of disclosure. Journos always favour full and maximum disclosure. (Laugh) I've come to view disclosure as problematic and potentially a bad thing...So I guess my values on the public’s right to know/disclosure, are probably in flux at the moment. As a journalist I had the standard journalistic view that barring national security or threat to life or limb you should just disclose everything. Now I am on the other side I see that I don’t think the stories are
necessarily fair, some are, but some very definitely aren’t. That changes your view of the value of disclosure. (*Scott, 2011)

Greg Turnbull recalled sensing a similar shift in his commitment to this value during his time working for Prime Minister, Paul Keating:

**Greg Turnbull:** I mean I can remember (laughs) writing a submission to somebody in the Queensland government when I was a journalist saying you know ‘we should have the cabinet agenda published every week and we should have the minutes and why shouldn’t we have all of this?’ I laugh about this now because when I got in to government I realised…the expression I used to use was ‘sometimes the government needs some thinking time’. Not every thought a government has can or should be an announcement. (Turnbull, 2011a)

This shift in relation to disclosure of information was also echoed in Marcus Priest’s account of his experience. Marcus Priest is a qualified lawyer as well as a newspaper journalist who has moved back and forth between the two professions throughout his career. When he went to work for the Attorney General, Robert McClelland, in the Rudd Government he turned down an offer to become a ministerial media adviser in favour of a policy role. Having worked in the Canberra press gallery Priest said he was aware of how badly some press secretaries were treated by reporters and plumped for a policy advising position instead. However, in that policy role Priest was still involved in the preparation of information for the media:

**Marcus Priest:** You deal with a lot media advisers and to me it seemed like a crap job. In fact I remember [the researcher’s husband] saying to me one day that he’d called a press secretary at 11.30pm at night and I said, ‘come on they’ve got to have time to sleep’ and he said, ‘Mate, we pay their wages, so they can take our call any time of the day’. It kind of stuck in my head. (Priest, 2011)

During his time in the federal Attorney General’s office, Priest said he was bothered by the way some of the media covered complex matters of policy. He strongly argued it was not in the public interest to release bits of information to individual reporters who he felt would distort it and get the facts wrong: “I get fed up with the ‘right to know’. It’s not the’ right to know’ it’s the ‘right to report’”. And a right to report sensational news, Priest said, was not necessarily in the public interest.
There is a distinction between the ‘right know’ and the ‘right to report’. As Primus (2004) explains, while the ‘right to know’ is linked to freedom of the press (and thereby the right to report) they are not “coextensive” (p. 13). In other words the two rights have different boundaries and are not synonymous. However, journalists generally fail to make the distinction. Primus (2004) says, the ‘right to know’ is “something that journalists claim on behalf of society in support of their quest to discover and publish guarded information” (p. 13); whereas, the ‘right to free press’ concerns the ability of the media and other writers to report without the interference or censorship of government in order provide information to the public so they can make informed decisions (Dworkin, 1985, p. 385). Just because a journalist has the freedom to report, does not imply that the journalist has a ‘right to know’ whatever interests him or her:

Journalists often confuse having a right to know with having an interest or curiosity in knowing and such conceptual confusion too often allows journalistic behaviour to occur that would otherwise be seen as unethical. (Meyers, 1993, p. 133)

This reliance on the ‘public’s right to know’ as a form of protection for journalists to write about what they deem to be interesting rather than what is in the public interest was reflected in the comments of the interviewees:

**Stephen Spencer:** ...because most of the people who were ringing me were trying to do something that was not remotely about informing the public. (Spencer, 2012)

**Kelly:** ...I don’t think you’d expect a minister’s office to be totally transparent and just give out information if it is going to be treated really unfairly and misrepresented because what kind of good does that do? If anything it creates problems for the public. It’s not like you are working with an organisation that is pure. It’s tainted and so you judge it per situation. People who say you were elected by us, you need to be truthful with us and open your books etc. That would be great but it’s not treated with the same level of accountability [by the media]. (*Kelly, 2011*)

**Marcus Priest:** A lot of what I saw in press gallery reporting was equal if not greater ‘spin’. You know they would take something and twist and ‘spin’ it. The Australian is the greatest spinner of political information going around. Equally with The Daily Telegraph. They’re not reporting things which people have a right to know because in many cases it’s just lies. So you know they don’t have a right to know political ‘spin’. (Priest, 2011)
There is some sympathy for this perspective in the broader literature. Philosopher Bernard Williams (2002) shares the view that the media should not necessarily be given access to information simply because they demand it under the “righteous” banner of “the freedom of the press” if they are not going to behave responsibly:

The best results with regard to truth management are not likely to follow from unlimited intrusiveness combined with unlimited righteousness (no doubt, on the part of the media, feigned) about how government can be expected to behave. This attitude… is often what is being defended under the title of “freedom of the press”. Government management of the press certainly is not going to improve the situation. But some restrictions do need to be observed by the media themselves if their activities are not going to be counter-productive. That is to say, if their aim is taken to encourage truthfulness in government and true belief among the citizens, and not simply to promote their own activities and (in a phrase of R.H. Tawney’s) to sell pieces of paper with nonsense printed on one side and advertisements on the other. (Williams, 2002, p. 213)

In addition to the confusion over the ‘right to report’ and the ‘right to know’, Marcus Priest also highlighted another difficulty with the journalists’ ‘right to know’ claim. That concern was to do with balancing the competing interests of the ‘right to know’ and what Priest called “the right to govern”:

**Marcus Priest:** The public have an interest in good government and good policy. They don’t have an interest in really, really reactive government coming up with bad policy and making bad decisions because that’s what a lot of media coverage provokes – bad government decisions. Yes there is a real interest in transparency but I suppose it’s transparency where all the facts get out in the arena, not selective facts, which is a broader issue. And so that has been really reinforced for me covering the climate change debate. You know, because they get fragments of facts and it completely swings the public debate…There’s a balance. I’m not saying that one ever trumps the other. Similarly the right to know is not an absolute and that’s probably the thing. I have a greater sense of where the balance lies between the ‘right to know’ and the ‘right to govern’. (Priest, 2011)

Priest’s argument (above) that there needs to be a balance between the competing rights of the ‘public’s right to know’ and the ‘right to govern’ without either “trumping” the other, refers to Dworkin’s (1984) concept of a “rights as trumps”. In his theory of rights, Dworkin (1984)
argues that moral rights, such as the right to liberty, cannot be trumped by other interests\textsuperscript{20}. As Priest notes, and Michael (2006) points out, this rights-as-trumps theory is problematic when two moral rights are in competition with each other. In his paper on human rights, Michael (2006) argues that if rights are trumps, then one of those two conflicting rights – the ‘public’s right to know’ or the ‘right to govern’ – must give way to the other. In other words, they cannot both function as trumps. To give another example, in the case of a journalist wanting to publish a story that might put the subject of the story at risk of harm, the ‘public’s right to know’ would come in to conflict with the subject’s right to “liberty and security of person” (U.N., 1948). In both of these examples the ‘right to know’ is in conflict with other rights or valid interests and therefore cannot trump them. According to Michael (2006), the need to balance these rights or interests demonstrates that “rights are not trumps”. Rather, they are competing interests and need to be weighed up and both considered carefully. Just as legal, security and privacy interests were recognised by the interviewees as legitimate barriers to disclosure of certain information, the perceived irresponsible reporting of issues was also seen by some of the interviewees as a legitimate reason to minimise disclosure of information about sensitive policy issues because they did not perceive poor reporting to be in the public interest. As the interviewees’ comments have shown, consideration of these issues, led to several of the interviewees to review their commitment to the journalist’s principle of the ‘public’s right to know’.

It must be stressed that this change of heart about the ‘public’s right to know’ was not experienced by of all the interviewees. The majority of the study participants said they did not perceive a change in their conception of journalism values. Vivienne Wynter, who was employed as a parliamentary media adviser to a senator from a minor party, felt strongly that the reason why some of the interviewees came to revise their commitment to the ‘public’s right to know’ was due to the pressures of working for government, pressures that did not exist to the same extent for staff employed by minor parties.

\textsuperscript{20} It should be noted that Dworkin does not in fact support the concept of the ‘public’s right to know’. He argues that ‘rights’ can only apply to individuals and not society as a whole. For discussion see (Dworkin, 1985, pp. 387-388; Primus, 2004, pp. 11-14)
Vivienne Wynter: I think they should get off their high horse really. It just sounds like a siege mentality. When you are in government or a minister’s office you feel continually under siege. That doesn’t mean you have to denigrate the whole profession of journalism. On the whole I think Australian journalists conduct themselves fairly well. I never questioned my beliefs or commitment to journalism. (Wynter, 2012)

Vivienne Wynter’s comment highlights the importance of contextual circumstances on the interviewees’ perceptions of the choices they had available to them when making decisions about the treatment of information. Her comments indicate a clear distinction between the pressures of working for a minor party senator compared with the pressures of working for a government minister.

So far, this chapter has looked at the importance of perceptions of trust on the disclosure of information. The transcripts have revealed that the interviewees’ perceptions of trust were not only influenced by the cautious nature of the role relationship between reporter and source (discussed in chapter 3), but they were also influenced by the behaviour of individual reporters. This echoes Williams (2002) argument that communicative expectations, like trust, are influenced not only by the role relationship between two people, but also by the way those “individual people behave” (p. 117).

These reflections are important because they highlight a link between perceptions of unethical journalism behaviour and decision-making by the interviewees about the disclosure of information while in the role of parliamentary media adviser. What was made clear by the interviewees’ comments was the level of trust they perceived they had in a particular reporter had an impact on the amount and type of information they were prepared to give. The following section (4.3.) continues the discussion around the importance of trust but this time it focuses on the connection between perceptions of trust and conceptions of truth.

4.3. Trust & truth

The previous section (4.2) has considered the importance of perceptions of trust to the disclosure of information and the interviewees’ conception of the journalistic principle of the ‘public’s right to know’. In this section (4.3.), we return to philosopher Bernard Williams’ (2002) work on
Truth and Truthfulness to focus on the importance of trust to truth. Before we do, it is important to distinguish between two different conceptions of truth that were appealed to by the interviewees in this study and also found in the journalism literature (Jacquette, 2007; Klaidman, 1987; Kovach, 2007)

4.3.1. Conceptions of truth

One of the key findings to emerge from the interview data was the importance of truth to the interviewees’ sense of ethical wellbeing during their transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising. When asked if he or she experienced ethical conflict shifting from journalism to parliamentary media advising, almost all of the interviewees replied in the negative. The majority of the study participants attributed the absence of ethical conflict to the fact that they did not ‘lie’ whilst in the role of parliamentary media adviser. A lie according to moral philosopher Sissela Bok (1978/1999) is an act of intentional deception meant to mislead (p. 13). By not ‘lying’ and continuing to adhere to the journalistic principle of ‘truth’, the interviewees argued they had provided themselves with a sense of ethical continuum as they moved between journalism and parliamentary media advising.

The centrality of truth to journalism’s professional self conception cannot be overstated. A journalist’s obligation to tell the truth appears prominently in journalism codes of ethics and professional handbooks (I.F.J., 1986; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; MEAA, 1998; S.P.J., 1996). As such, journalism’s claim to truth is seen as its:

*Raison d’etre*, distinguishing journalism from entertainment as well as from political opinion. This claim to truth legitimizes journalism’s special position as Fourth Estate. (Broersma, 2010, p. 25)

Given the stereotypical conception of the ‘spin-doctor’ as a liar and manipulator of truth (see chapters 1 & 3), it might seem implausible to an observer that these twenty-one journalists could have spent their time as parliamentary media advisers or ‘spin-doctors’ without engaging in an intentional act of deception and thereby telling a lie. As the following pages will explore, the interviewees perceived a distinction between different kinds of truth, explained below.
Defining what is meant by ‘truth’ is a problematic exercise and well beyond the bounds of this study. However, for the purposes of this thesis it is sufficient to point to an ongoing division between a positivist scientific view that there is an objective knowable true reality; and a constructivist view that contends reality – and thereby truth – is socially constructed, open to interpretation and different for each individual. This division between the objectivist, confirmable, factual truth and the constructivist interpretive, selective and individual truth also runs through the journalism ethics literature. As will be shown, the interviewees’ comments revealed that both approaches to truth were perceived to be relevant to the daily work of journalists and parliamentary media advisers. To assist in the discussion of how truth was interpreted by the interviewees, I have made a distinction between what I have called **factually accurate truth** and **selective truth**. Each will be dealt with in turn.

### 4.3.2. Factually accurate truth

By factually accurate truth I mean the minimal account of truth provided by Aristotle in his work *Metaphysics 1011b25*: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true” (Aristotle, 1984). For example, if A says “it’s snowing outside” and outside is a blazing hot Australian summer day, then what A said is **false**; if A says “it’s snowing outside” and there is snow falling from the sky and lying on the ground, then what A says is **true**. This verifiable form of truth is the version of truth that the majority of journalists identify with in relation to their obligation to tell the truth when they are reporting (McQuail, 2013, p 57). This has been demonstrated by survey research which confirms that many journalists tend to equate truth telling with factual accuracy. A study of American journalists by the Pew Research Centre found “getting the facts right” was seen as the most important value of journalism (Kovach, 2007, p. 36). The code of ethics for Canadian journalists declares that “accuracy is the moral imperative of journalists” (C.A.J., 2011). Similarly, Jacquette (2010) asserts that: “Truth is the gold standard by which journalists are judged…Truth telling is a positive correspondence with the state of the world, with the facts” (p. 216). This implies that in journalism there is a degree of conflation between truth and factual accuracy. This is clearly illustrated by the following example from Jacquette (2010) which argues: “when a reporter says there was a bank robbery in downtown Manhattan and there was in
fact a bank robbery, the reporter has told the truth” (p. 216). These are all facts, they are unambiguous and verifiable. The bank robbery happened therefore what the reporter said is true. As will be shown in 4.5.2., the interviewees relied on this factually accurate version of truth to ensure they did not ‘lie’ when they took on the role of parliamentary media adviser. However, the interviewees revealed they were also selective with the truth, a skill they perceived to be central to their former role of journalism as well.

4.3.3. Selective truth

As outlined above, what I have called ‘factually accurate truth’ refers to a conception of truth in journalism based on the reporting of verifiable facts. However, a news story is not just a list of facts – it is a narrative, which also includes interpretation, inferences to causal explanation and linkages to broader context. Through a process of selection a journalist identifies quotes and information and places them in a certain order to tell a story that explains an event to the public. It is a constructed version of truth based on interpretation and selection of information, or what I have called selective truth. It is a version of truth that both journalists and parliamentary media advisers – indeed everyone – makes use of in their work. It is important to stress that the use of the term ‘selective’ does not imply that it is factually wrong, but it does raise a question about the appropriateness of the selections made. The point is, one can imagine a story where all of the selected facts are accurate yet the story might not convey a faithful and reliable account of events and is therefore misleading.

The role of selectivity and interpretation in journalism is acknowledged by practitioners. In their handbook on journalism practice Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007) state that:

‘Journalistic truth’ is more than mere accuracy. It is a sorting out process that takes place between the initial story and the interaction among the public, newsmakers, and journalists. (p. 41)

Here, Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007) introduce a more interactive, interpretive and indeed iterative conception of truth in journalism that involves the amalgamation of many perspectives and is a co-construction of reality between the interviewer and interviewees. In their examination of moral integrity in journalism, The Virtuous Journalist, Beauchamp & Klaidman (1987) also
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acknowledge the role of selectivity and highlight some of the contradictions between the ideal of truth in journalism and the reality of daily reporting practice:

Is it enough to report selected facts accurately, while omitting others that may be crucial to many viewers or readers? Is it enough to marshal facts to support a thesis that a more objective or a more balanced account would weaken? If a reporter’s reconstruction of the facts conflicts with alternative versions that have a reasonable claim to reliability, is omitting all reference to those versions justified? (p. 30)

To counter these concerns, Beauchamp & Klaidman (1987) contend that truth in journalism needs to be seen as a question of “ completeness” of the information provided rather than an attempt at providing a singular, correct version of truth. For instance, the authors ask how much should a journalist write? How much information can people absorb? And how much detail or sophistication of argument should a journalist go in to? Each of these questions requires a different answer depending on the type and style of story being written. Beauchamp & Klaidman (1987) argue that “journalism cannot be entirely complete, always accurate, perfectly balanced or totally objective” which leaves the journalist’s obligation in reporting “somewhere between the poles of full disclosure capable of promoting an in-depth understanding and a cursory account of the bare facts” (p. 31).

What both Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007) and Beauchamp & Klaidman (1987) point to is a level of interpretation, creativity and selectivity that journalists use to build a version of the truth by putting facts in context and explaining why and how things happen. Interviewee, Andrew Fraser, expressed the use of selectivity in journalism this way:

Andrew Fraser: Do people select things in journalism? Yes they do. They select things a lot... there are several ways of looking at any situation. We pick one of them. You could pick another. (Fraser, 2012)

As Andrew Fraser’s comment (above) demonstrates, being selective with information means that the journalist has consciously chosen particular facts to describe an event in a certain way. There is more than one way it could have been described. These journalism skills of narration and selectivity were also used by the interviewees once they became parliamentary media advisers. As mentioned in 3.8.1., the ability to be selective with the presentation of information and pursue the strongest angle of a story were identified by some of the interviewees as common
skills between journalism and parliamentary media advising and supported by the literature (Burns, 2013, p. 11; de Vreese, 2005; Downes, 1998; Mahoney, 2013, p. 130). As stated earlier, being selective with information does not imply that what the reporter or parliamentary media adviser has written is factually wrong. It simply raises a question about the completeness of the selections made and whether enough information has been provided for the public to understand what events have taken place. This question about completeness also points to what Williams (2002) calls “sincerity”, as discussed below.

4.4. **Accuracy & sincerity**

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in *Truth and Truthfulness* philosopher Bernard Williams (2002) states that the two virtues of *accuracy* and *sincerity* are required for someone to be able to tell the truth. Accuracy, Williams (2002) contends, involves the unambiguous “intention, choice, attempts and concentration of effort” to provide accurate information (p. 45). Whereas sincerity: “involves a certain kind of spontaneity, a disposition to come out with what one believes...but is not itself expressed in deliberation and choice” (Williams, 2002, p. 45). In other words, sincerity is a genuine, uncalculated attempt at truthfulness. Without either the disposition of sincerity or the intention of accuracy Williams (2002) argues a person would not be able to tell the truth. To my mind then sincerity implies an absence of calculation, premeditation or conscious selectivity. It implies a lack of tactical thinking and requires a set of contextual circumstances in which individuals are able to trust each other. As Williams (2002) argues, without trust, it is not realistic to expect people to be accurate and sincere with each other, particularly within the context of adversarial politics (p. 111). Instead, a normal sense of trust is replaced by a set of communicative expectations relevant to the circumstances. As previously discussed (4.2.1.), the communicative expectations on the part of the reporter include that the parliamentary media adviser is not able or willing to tell the reporter everything he or she wants to know. The journalist also understands that the role of the parliamentary media adviser is to advocate on behalf of a politician and will therefore be presenting only one side of a story framed in the most favourable or least damaging way to the politician. In doing so, the information provided might be factually accurate, but it might not be “sincere”.
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It is important to note that while factual accuracy can be easily verified by checking whether the information presented correlates with what actually occurred, ascertaining a person’s sincerity is a more difficult endeavour and beyond the scope of this study. By discussing the contextual influences on the interpretations and application of truth by journalists and parliamentary media advisers, I wish to stress that I am not attempting to excuse unethical behaviour by either party. As mentioned in chapter 1, this research is an exercise in understanding the lived experience of a particular phenomenon. It is not an exercise in the researcher’s moral judgement. This study is an attempt to prise apart the historically embedded moralistic and idealistic expectations of how these two roles should be performed, from the interviewees’ perceptions of the contextually complex reality in which they are performed. It is an exercise in understanding if and how working in the different contexts of journalism and parliamentary media advising had an impact on the values and attitudes of the twenty-one interviewees who made the transition between them. Understanding those changes requires reflection on the real-world tactical context in which the two roles operate and how the interviewees perceived that environment might have influenced their behaviour.

The following section (4.5.) highlights the tension between the two versions of journalistic truth – ‘factually accurate’ and ‘selective’ – as well as the tension between accuracy and sincerity in the task of truth telling. This is done via the examination of a range of tactics used by the interviewees in their management of the journalistic ideals of truth and disclosure whilst in the role of parliamentary media adviser.

4.5. Varying tactical approaches of truth and disclosure

Within the context of an ever-changing political work environment where idealised trust between journalists and parliamentary media advisers is not possible, the interviewees of this study recalled adopting a range of tactics around the selective release of information. As the following typology shows, the interviewees recalled adopting different tactics for different circumstances. All but one of the thirteen tactics described below fall into what Ivor Gaber (2007) would call “below the line” tactics, discussed further in 4.5.1 below. In his examination of ‘spin’, Gaber (2007) makes a distinction between “above the line” or “overt” tactics such as speeches, media
releases and staged events; and “below the line” or “covert” tactics that are more concerned with tactics and strategy than the release of information: “Indeed, it could be argued that they have very little to do with imparting information” (Gaber, 2007, p. 508). Whether ‘above the line’ or ‘below the line’, each of the following thirteen tactics described by the interviewees demonstrates the tension between accuracy and sincerity in their responses. The tactics also highlight the importance of contextual factors – such as the issue at hand, the standing of the politician and whether the interviewee trusted the journalist they were dealing with – in determining the degree of openness and control the interviewee recalled trying to assert in the release and management of information to the media.

4.5.1. Tactic 1: ‘spin’ or ‘putting your best foot forward’

One of the most common tactical approaches to truth described by the interviewees was ‘spin’, which the majority interpreted as ‘putting your best foot forward’. Though widely used, the meaning of the word ‘spin’ has changed considerably since it first appeared around forty years ago. In his research into the history of ‘spin’ Andrews (2006) says what began as a word to describe a single tactic came to “define both the process of political communication, and the practice of public relations itself” (p. 31). The term ‘spin’ first appeared in the American media in the late 1970s and early 1980s around press coverage of the presidential elections. Andreasen (2006) explains each party assigned ‘spin-doctors’ to:

buttonhole reporters in the ‘spin room’ after the debates to offer the case as to why their side won. The task of the ‘spin-doctor’ was to take the raw data of the actual debate—words, tone, logic, appearances—and interpret them in ways favorable to his or her candidate. (p. 46)

Over the past forty years Stanyer (2007) says the term ‘spin’ has come to “mean anything from presentation to lying” (p. 65) and is viewed as “a clichéd pejorative term” (Mahoney, 2013, p. 130). Because of the malleability of the word’s meaning, some of the interviewees in this study were dismissive of the term. Dennis Atkins said the word is often misused and has become an easy retort for people who reject any version of events that does not reflect their own:
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**Dennis Atkins:** It's used by critics and opponents or whoever it is they are trying to have a go at... ‘spin’ is just a modern word for a very old practice. It’s a cliché. It should be treated like one. (Atkins, 2011)

Not only is there dispute about the word’s meaning, the derivation of the term is also contested. For instance, Macnamara (2012) says the term is “derived from spinning thread to fabricate textile materials and subsequently applied to spinning stories involving fabrication and misrepresentation” (p. 34). Whereas, Lilleker (2006) says the term hails from spin bowling in cricket (p. 194). The Oxford Dictionary definition most closely resembles that described by Macnamara (2012) and defines the act of ‘spin’ as: “to tell or write (a story, essay, article etc)” as in the colloquial expression of “spinning a yarn”, to tell a story. The label ‘spin-doctor’ is defined in the same dictionary as the colloquial term for “a political spokesperson employed to give a favourable interpretation of events to the media” (The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1997, p. 1313). This latter description most closely reflects the one given by the majority of the interviewees in this study and is echoed in Downes (1998) research. That being, ‘spin’ meaning to put “the best angle on a story” or to put “one’s best side forward” (Downes, 1998, p.279-280). As the following comments show, the interviewees made a distinction between ‘putting the best foot forward’ and lying.

*Helen:* …I certainly never told a lie. There was a certain amount of gilding the lily and putting the best foot forward. (*Helen, 2012)*

**Dennis Shanahan:** We didn’t fib to anyone. We just put the best gloss on things we could. (Shanahan, 2011)

**Greg Turnbull:** ‘spin’ is ‘spin’. That can be clever advocacy accentuating the positive. It’s not lying. (Turnbull, 2011a)

These comments by the interviewees highlight the distinction between ‘factually accurate’ truth and ‘selective’ truth. In ‘putting the best foot forward’, the interviewees selected the most positive elements of an event and were able to present it in a factually accurate way and thereby not ‘lie’. The interviewees’ references to ‘putting the best foot forward’ also point to the distinction between accuracy and sincerity made by Williams (2002). While the information provided might have been factually accurate, ‘putting the best foot forward’ was a tactical
approach to truth telling – as opposed to a spontaneous and sincere approach – designed to present the politician in the best possible light.

As testimony from two of the interviewees demonstrates, unsophisticated, naïve or “sincere” behaviour as a parliamentary media adviser can lead to major blunders, such as that described earlier by *Tom. In section (4.2.2.2) *Tom recalled being quoted swearing in a feature article about his minister, because he assumed the comments were made in an off-the-record chat with the reporter. While there are high levels of cynicism surrounding the tactic of ‘gilding the lily’ or ‘spin’, not ‘putting the best foot forward’ in a political context can prove to be a poor strategy. In her interview Alex Wake described an incident when she was ministerial media adviser to the Queensland Education Minister, Dean Wells, in the Beattie Labor government. Wake said she was helping her minister prepare for a television interview about the announcement of some new funding which should have been a positive story for the government, but it backfired:

**Alex Wake:** It was something along the lines of 499 kids are going to benefit from this decision. It’s a great and wonderful thing, but there will be one... of course Dean went out and talked about the one kid who was going to miss out on everything (laughs). After an hour of prep! Because that was the kind of person he was. For him the one person was the one that he wanted to help because he was the idealist ...I remember getting an abusive phone call after that one – ‘This was meant to be a fucking, fucking positive decision ... and you’re talking about the one kid who misses out’. But that was who he was. (Wake, 2011)

Despite the advantages in being able to ‘put your best forward’ some of the interviewees were also mindful of the tactic’s limitations:

**Chris Kenny:** The closest you can go in terms of ‘spin’ is to highlight your strong points to undersell your weaknesses. Work out what the weaknesses in your argument are and try and avoid them and get on the front foot. I mean it’s very straight forward and you need to be smart about it. In order to do it properly you need to understand what your weaknesses are. You need to understand your weaknesses better than the other side of politics or your ‘enemies’ in the media. I have said this to everyone I have worked for and anyone who has worked for me: ‘the best spin is always no spin at all’. It’s just a matter of being smart about your arguments and facts and marshalling them well. (Kenny, 2012)

In contrast to the narrow definition of ‘spin’ used by the interviewees, in the political communications literature the term has come to equal a whole range of manipulative and
inherently defensive media management techniques “that are now universally derided as ‘spin’” (Tanner, 2011, p. 93). In his excoriating critique of the state of contemporary political communication in Australia, *Sideshow: Dumbing Down Democracy*, former federal MP, Lindsay Tanner (2011), said the use of controlling and evasive techniques to manage political communication was a defensive response to a voracious and aggressive media:

> What is now universally derided as ‘spin’ is, in fact, a whole range of techniques that have evolved among politicians in response to changing media dynamics. In essence, these techniques, though highly manipulative, are inherently defensive. The more the media set out to trap politicians in order to generate entertaining content, the more politicians have to resort to dubious artifice to do their jobs. (p. 93)

As mentioned earlier, Ivor Gaber (2000) identified a range of eighteen manipulative approaches to information management which he described as “covert” or “below the line tactics” (p. 510). They included: “fire breaking”, “laundering”, and “throwing out the bodies” all of which involve either setting up a diversion or using the cover of other events to deflect attention from a damaging story; “stoking the fire” to keep alive a story that is damaging to your opponents; “kite-flying” to test public reaction to policy proposals before making a commitment to announcing them; and “bullying and intimidation” of journalists and news organisations for unfavourable reporting (Gaber, 2000, pp. 510-516). Richardson’s (2002) examination of ‘spin’ techniques would add several to that list, such as “the leak” or strategically providing certain information to a particular journalist; “the freeze” – punishing a reporter; “the spray” – which is effectively publically bullying the media; “the wedge” – which the author says is “best explained as the divide and conquer principle”; and “the drip” or keeping a steady flow of information to favoured reporters (pp. 173-181). Cappella & Jamieson (1997) say these techniques are widely perceived by journalists as tools used to hinder them from accessing information and reporting objectively. In response, journalists argue that cynical and negative approaches to political reporting are “justified – even required – by the relentless spin of the politicians they write about” (Cappella, 1997, p. 238).

However, in some of the public relations literature – in which parliamentary media advising belongs to the sub-category of media relations – putting a positive light on a subject is not regarded cynically as ‘spin’, instead a less pejorative word is used. Andreason (2006) explains:
“the more neutral academic term for ‘spinning’ is framing” (p. 16). Andreasen (2006) goes on to explain that framing is a process of selecting facts and a frame: “is a context offered for interpreting a set of data. Different people will interpret the same set of facts—frame them—in different ways” (p. 16). Entman (2009) echoes this definition by describing framing as something conducted by a “network of professional communicators” engaged in “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and constructing messages that highlight connections among them in ways that promote a particular interpretation” (p. 176)

In the case of politics, Andreasen (2006) says the politician uses framing or ‘spinning’ to present a policy agenda in the most effective way. In the case of news journalism, the process of selectivity and presentation of information is also called framing (de Vreese, 2005; Entman, 2009). Entman (2009) makes a distinction between “strategic framing” in political communication and “journalistic framing” in news reporting. Without referencing ‘spin’, Entman (2009) says in strategic framing the politician is attempting to shape public discourse, where as in journalism, framing organizes the processing of information and presentation of stories (p. 179). However, Claes de Vreese (2005) does use the word ‘spin’ to describe aspects of news framing. He makes a distinction between “generic” framing of issues by the media and localized interpretations of big stories that he calls “spins”: “In sum, national news organizations provided a significant local or national spin to the framing of the news stories” (de Vreese, 2005, p. 59).

What the above discussion highlights is the malleability of the term “frame” to a range of contexts. As has occurred with the word ‘spin’, ‘framing’ has come to apply to an “unruly mélange of concepts under the framing rubric” (Entman, 2009, p. 175). There does not appear to be a great deal of difference between the two terms of ‘spin’ and ‘framing’ other than positive and negative connotations. As mentioned previously (3.8.1. & 4.3.3) some of the interviewees saw ‘spin’ as an activity also conducted by journalists and was supported by the literature (Burns, 2013; de Vreese, 2005; Downes, 1998; Mahoney, 2013). This connection between ‘spin’ and framing is important because it highlights the inadequacy of the oversimplified moralistic and idealistic distinctions made between journalism and parliamentary media advising on the
basis of ‘truth’ versus ‘spin’, manipulation and selectivity of information. Marcus Priest and Andrew Fraser expressed it this way:

**Marcus Priest:** The thing that really, really frustrated me about the Rudd government was that they were always getting sledged for the ‘spin’. A lot of what I saw in press gallery reporting was equal if not greater ‘spin’. You know they would take something and twist and ‘spin’ it. (Priest, 2011)

**Andrew Fraser:** In fact I make this view quite strongly to my [journalism] colleagues when they rail about ‘spin-doctors’ and I say; ‘Oh no, we never have an angle on anything do we? We are always so straight down the line’. (Fraser, 2012)

Framing, ‘spinning’ or ‘putting the best foot forward’ was just one of many tactics the interviewees described using during their time as parliamentary media advisers. The interviewees also recalled using a variety of other tactics around truth and the disclosure of information. The interviewees’ comments revealed that the choice of which tactic to employ was dependent on the perceived level of trust the interviewee had in the reporter, as well as other contextual factors previously discussed such as the issue at hand and the fortunes of the politician at the time. These contextual influences all had an impact on the degree of openness or defensiveness and control each of the interviewees recalled attempting to assert on the release and management of information to the media.

### 4.5.2. Tactic 2: Never tell a lie

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, almost all of the study participants said they never told a lie during their time as a parliamentary media adviser. The interviewees’ comments (below) show that by never telling a lie they were adhering to the journalist’s empirical version of the factually accurate truth articulated above:

**Barrie Cassidy:** ... I mean it’s just deadly and wrong anyway, to feed out anything that’s inaccurate. (Cassidy, 2011)

**Dennis Atkins:** You know, always deal as honestly and straight as you can with working journalists. Don’t lie to them...Don’t make something up. Don’t fudge. (Atkins, 2011)
The following comments from the interviewees show, the commitment to not telling a lie was both ethical and tactical. By tactical, I mean it was “not a moral judgment; it’s a practical one. You’ll get caught” (Stewart, 2003, p. 91). The practical consequences of lying were well understood by the interviewees in this study:

Chris Kenny: Certainly if you lie you will come undone. So you never tell an untruth. (Kenny, 2012)

Marcus Priest: Yeah. I always had a position of never lie and I made sure the press secretary never lied, because it hurts your minister. As soon as you get found out it hurts your minister. (Priest, 2011)

*Tom: No, I never knowingly lied on behalf of my boss. My boss never ever asked me to, nor my senior adviser. We were a sophisticated operation enough to know that... lying and cover-ups get you in to worse trouble, not less. So that was never the culture. (*Tom, 2011)

Interviewee Niki Savva (2010) said that as a ministerial press secretary she never told a lie, but as a political reporter she said she lied regularly. In her memoir, So Greek: Confessions of a Conservative Leftie, she wrote:

As a journalist I lied often, usually about my sources, but about other things too...Journalists can, and do get away with lying; politicians and staff can’t. Nor should they. In my later life as a press secretary I never (knowingly) lied. But I didn’t always tell the complete truth. Both courses would inevitably land your boss in trouble. Lies are eventually found out, and the whole truth is either misunderstood or misreported (Savva, 2010, p. 94-95).

When I met Niki Savva for an interview over coffee for this study I asked her to clarify what she meant by lying “often” as a journalist. She thoughtfully and candidly explained it this way:

Niki Savva: I lied a lot. When I was trying to get information from people sometimes I would pretend that I knew more than I did; or, I would pretend to like them more than I did in order to strike up the relationship to extract information. Those are lies. ‘Gee that was a great speech you gave last night, tell me more about...’ Flattery is part of it. Appealing to egos is part of it, but a lot of it is about what you think about them. Like I say, I might get a scintilla of information and you kind of think ‘there’s a story here, there’s more to it...I bet this is what happened’. So you would go to a source and say ‘I know this is what happened’ and they’ll say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ depending. But [if you said] ‘if you don’t tell me, I’m going to write this...and if it’s wrong you can come out and deny it
“later’ – usually faced with that, people tell you what happened. So coaxing, lying ...I didn’t realise how much guessing goes on about who people’s sources are and what the motives are until I became a press sec. Sometimes you get stories accidently or stumble across them or you think you do. So if someone were to ask ‘who told you?’ If they guessed, I would lie and say ‘no it wasn’t so and so’. (Savva, 2012)

I was surprised when Savva classified behaviour such as flattery and coaxing as lying. I did all of those things too when I was a journalist and I simply saw them as tactics to encourage reluctant people to talk to me. I never considered them to be lies. However, upon reflection they were clearly attempts to use deception in order to manipulate the situation to my advantage. In support of Savva’s views, studies by Lee (2004, 2005) also found that “deception is a routine part of much news work” with a “sort of dishonesty” like that described by Savva (above) being embedded in journalism practices (Dickinson, 2010, p. 228):

Because the subtleties and tacit rules that journalists use to evaluate what is acceptable deception and what is not are derived from negotiated meaning from within an occupation, journalistic deception becomes a criterion as well as an outcome of group membership. (Lee 2004 p. 116 in Dickinson, 2010, p. 229)

In a media/political context parliamentary media advisers and politicians expect journalists to coax, cajole, pry and flatter them for information. They are prepared for those inquisitive tactics and are armed with their own counter strike of “I don’t know” and range of other responses. It is all part of what Bernard Williams (2002) would call the “communicative expectations” between them. It is not simply about acting ethically – it is also about acting tactically due the mutually adaptive nature of the relationship and constantly changing political context.

The examples of ‘never telling a lie’ provided by the interviewees (above) are important because they challenge the moralistic stereotype of the lying ‘spin-doctor’ and the idealistic conception of the journalist committed to the principle of ‘truth.’ From the perspective of the interviewees – all of whom had performed in both roles – it was not only ethically wrong to lie as a parliamentary media adviser, but it was also tactically unwise. Niki Savva’s reflections also revealed the way in which reporters can engage in small acts of deception on a daily basis.

These observations, supported by the literature, serve to temper the idealised stereotype of the journalist strongly adhering to the principle of ‘truth’.
4.5.3. Tactic 3: “I don’t know”

The transcripts revealed that half of the interviewees said they adopted the tactic of saying “I don’t know” in response to questions from journalists they could not or did not want to answer. They would say “I don’t know” because it was considered less revealing than saying “no comment” (Stewart, 2003, p. 91), which might inadvertently lead a journalist to suspect that there was a story buried somewhere. In some instances the interviewees said they truly did not know the answer to the question, so the response was both accurate and honest. On other occasions however, some of the interviewees said they did know the answer, but could not divulge the information for political, security or legal reasons such as defamation and privacy. This latter scenario introduced the issue of what Chris Kenny called a ‘white lie’.

While Chris Kenny said he does not support lying in principle, as a parliamentary media adviser he said he did allow himself the ‘white lie’ of saying “I don’t know” at times when he actually did know – a tactic shown to be used by press secretaries elsewhere in certain circumstances (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 233).

**Chris Kenny:** I’ve said before that I’ve never lied and I just need to correct that. There is one, what I would call a ‘white lie’, that I have always allowed myself. That I think any person sensibly should. That’s when a journalist asks you something and I would often say ‘I don’t know’. For instance a decision has been taken in cabinet and I used to sit in the National Security Committee of cabinet and you are legally obliged not to reveal information. So if someone asks ‘has cabinet decided on this or that?’ Then I would often say ‘I don’t know’... for legal reasons you can’t say. The only obscuring I ever allowed myself was ‘I don’t know’ because I just couldn’t say, but beyond that... I’ve never, I’m very comfortable. (Kenny, 2012)

The above comment by Kenny raises the question of what constitutes a ‘white lie’ and what separates it from other forms of lying. Moral philosopher, Sissela Bok (1978/1999) describes a ‘white lie’ as a “falsehood that is not meant to injure anyone” (pp. 57-58) as opposed to a ‘black
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lie’ that involves a “serious breach of trust, capable of invoking serious damage” (Camden, 1984, p. 309). Based on Bok (1978/1999) and Camden’s (1984) reasoning, Chris Kenny’s claim not to know something because he was not able to reveal that in fact he did know, might reasonably fall into the category of ‘white lie’. By saying “I don’t know” he was not intentionally falsifying information that had been requested by a journalist and thereby distorting the reporter’s understanding of events. He was lying about his knowledge of the existence of certain information. One could possibly argue that by saying “I don’t know” the aim was not to injure the other person, but to protect himself from divulging information he was not permitted to divulge. Whether saying “I don’t know” in the circumstances Chris Kenny described can or cannot be classified as a ‘white lie’, is in fact not important. The value of Chris Kenny’s comments lie in their demonstration of how perceptions of contextual factors – such as national security and cabinet confidentiality – can have an impact on conceptions of truth.

Saying “I don’t know”, however, was not always a ‘white lie’. Sometimes for the interviewees it also happened to be the truth. Either way, many of the interviewees said they used the phrase “I don’t know” during their time as a parliamentary media adviser as a form of defensive protection from unwelcome media inquiries:

**Greg Turnbull:**...Geoff Walsh, who had been Bob Hawke’s press secretary... used to say that the three safest and best words for a press secretary to use are ‘I don’t know’...Geoff developed what we called the ‘press secretary walk’ where you walk so briskly with a mobile phone to your ear, even if it weren’t turned on just to deflect the questions. It’s like seagulls. You’re walking down the corridor with a packet of chips and the seagulls are coming for them and asking you things ... the safest words were ‘I don’t know’, especially if they had the merit of being true. Very often you were being asked about things you did know so you had to quickly get used to how you deflect that. Do you say ‘I can’t tell you?’ That tells a journalist something. It tells a journalist that there is something going on that you know. That’s one of the reasons why, with that siege mentality, the longer I was in the job, the less I liked hanging around the press gallery. It’s a very dangerous place. In a lot of democracies you know, they don’t have that risk because they won’t let the press gallery in to the very building that’s not only the legislature as well as the executive. I mean whose idea was that? (Laughs). (Turnbull, 2011a)

The image of the besieged press secretary doing the “gallery walk” with the mobile phone clutched to his ear is amusing, but beyond the humour it also illustrates the lengths some
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parliamentary media advisers will go to avoid answering difficult questions and thereby duck the moral dilemma of telling a lie. Even though his tactics were successful, Turnbull said there were times when he still wrestled with his conscience over this approach:

**Greg Turnbull:** I can remember a couple of occasions when I was straight out asked things I did know the answer to and I used to toss and turn a bit sometimes that you couldn’t say. It was borderline, it was sailing close to the edge of lying... because you did know the answer to the question, but as I said, sometimes saying ‘I can’t tell you that’ would be acknowledging, giving the journalist some information that you were under instruction [not to reveal], so sometimes you had to play a bit fast and loose with the truth and that caused me a few problems. But you also have to harden up about that sort of stuff too sometimes. The fact that... and I used to say to myself as much as anything, ‘there are things journalists are just not entitled to know’. Most good journalists think they are entitled to know everything, that’s their starting position. (Turnbull, 2011a)

*Sarah adopted a different approach to avoid telling a lie. *Sarah said she made a point of asking not to be told sensitive information so that she could honestly say “I don’t know” without feeling compromised:

**Sarah:** Well I would have a real problem if I had to tell a lie. I just remember one of the early things I picked up working for the Keating government. Some of my fellow media advisers would say: ‘How would you deal with not telling a lie if someone asks you about cabinet?’ One of them said, ‘I never want to know what’s going on in cabinet so I can say ‘I don’t know’ and then you’re not telling a lie’...I still try to stick to that rule that if it’s really sensitive and really big, then I don’t want to know before time and our chief of staff has the same attitude. My junior media adviser says, ‘we need to know the detail to so we can write some lines on it’ and I say, ‘you don’t really want to know the details because it might cloud our judgement and things might change’. (*Sarah, 2012)

The interview data revealed that decisions about how much information to give the media depended on the circumstances, including the level of trust the interviewees perceived in the reporters they were dealing with. As the following comments show, several of the interviewees said they made a point of providing certain journalists only with the information they requested and not a skerrick more.
4.5.4. **Tactic 4: The truth, but not the whole truth**

Just under half of the interviewees said that while they endeavoured to tell the truth in response to media inquiries, they did not necessarily tell the ‘whole truth’. This tactic also appears in other studies of parliamentary media advisers in Australia (Phillipps, 2002, p. 112), the United States and Canada (Downes, 1998 p. 281; Ericson, 1989 p. 219) where the interviewees described taking a selective approach to the release of information:

*Craig Allen*: You are definitely drip-feeding the truth. I don’t think it would have necessarily served our political benefit to just say, ‘there’s the cabinet brief, read it’, which of course you couldn’t do. Or ‘here is all the background, here’s the departmental brief’... that certainly doesn’t serve your political purpose to do that. So you are releasing information on an as-needs basis and the pace of release of that information is normally determined by someone other than you and it’s normally your boss. So you might be given strict parameters as an adviser to brief the journalist. You can tell them about this bit but we are leaving this up our sleeve to counter an argument we are going to have against this. I never felt I was doing anything dishonest, but yeah, drip feeding the truth is the only real way I can describe it. (Allen, 2012)

Reflection on the interviewee’s response (above) raises the question of whether “leaving information up your sleeve” or withholding information is the same as telling a lie. Moral philosopher Sissella Bok (1989) argues that withholding information is not necessarily unethical unless the intention of the person withholding the information intends to deceive the requester of the information (p. 8). After all, she says it is not possible to tell “the whole truth” (Bok, 1989, p. 4). Studies of public relations practitioners show that people working in the PR field do see a distinction between withholding information and lying. In a survey of members of the Public Relations Society of America, Cincinnati Chapter, nearly three quarters (70 percent) of those surveyed “agreed or strongly agreed that “ethically there is a difference between telling a lie and withholding the truth” (Schick, 1989 in Schick, 1994, p. 8). The belief that there is a distinction between withholding information and lying was also supported by other interviewees in this study:

*Caroline Fisher (researcher)*: When you were a press sec you said you never lied, but surely there were times when you didn’t tell the whole truth?

*Niki Savva*: Yeah obviously
Caroline Fisher (researcher): Tell me more about that

Niki Savva: Well you know you would give a version which was not untrue, but not to mislead and you wouldn’t give them the complete version.

Caroline Fisher (researcher): Isn’t that misleading though?

Niki Savva: No. Misleading is when you, I think, feed out a piece of information that distorts what actually happened or gives a false impression of what actually happened. So no, I think it’s different. (Savva, 2012)

*Jill made a similar distinction between withholding information and lying. Instead of seeing it as an act of deception, she saw it as an act of manipulation:

*Jill: It is dead set true. There is no way you can argue that. You are the holder of the information in the role of the media adviser. It is your job to disseminate the information as you choose when you choose and however much you choose. So it is a position of power you have over the journalist. Because, as I said, I never lied in that role, but certainly there were elements I never revealed because if the question isn’t asked there is no reason to give that information freely. (*Jill, 2012)

The comments made by *Jill and Niki Savva above, take us back to the issue of selective truth. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Beauchamp & Klaidman (1987) acknowledge it is not always possible to include all relevant information when writing a news story, or in this instance when responding to a media inquiry. However, the process of deciding what to leave in and what to leave out has an impact on the way those events are interpreted by the recipient. Both the parliamentary media adviser and journalist know that, and they make selections and frame their work accordingly. The question is not about factual accuracy, as all of the information provided might be correct; the question is about the “completeness” of the information provided (Beauchamp, 1987, p. 31).

Similar arguments surrounding the withholding of information are also relevant to the following two tactics. The first I have called “don’t ask, don’t tell” and the second is labelled “timing the strategic release of information”.

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4.5.5. Tactic 5: Don’t ask, don’t tell

One of the first tactics *Scott learned as a new parliamentary media adviser was not to offer up more information than had been asked for, especially if it was potentially damaging. After six months on the job, *Scott said he understood why parliamentary media advisers did not reveal all available information to journalists:

*Scott: ...There are whole bunches of reasons why you’re not just going blurt out everything. A journ might say, ‘well that’s not lying but it’s misleading or it’s withholding information and I guess when I was a journ I might have leant towards that view, but I wasn’t naïve and you wouldn’t really expect governments to give information to you that they didn’t have to that was damaging. Why would anyone expect anyone to do that? Well I guess I’m not going to do that. But that is different to telling people an untruth. That’s an important difference for me in terms of my personal set of values and also something that my minister has made clear is important to him. (*Scott, 2011)

The parliamentary media advisers in Phillipps’ (2002) research and the congressional press secretaries in Downes’ (1998) American study took the same approach of providing accurate information to answer the specific question, and nothing more. As one of his respondents said, “We control a lot of information. If we don’t want people to know something, we don’t tell them unless the reporter knows to ask” (Downes, 1998, p. 279). Stephen Spencer echoed these sentiments:

Stephen Spencer: ...If people don’t know, you don’t have to volunteer stuff that’s damaging to you. (Spencer, 2012)

Waiting for the phone call from a reporter who does know which question to ask can cause anxiety for the parliamentary media adviser, filling them with dread, but often unnecessarily:

Alex Wake: The only memories I have is hoping to hell that people didn’t ask questions about stuff. And those stories never made the light of day. There were a few things that would be sitting there for months and months and months and you’d be going ‘at any moment someone will ask me about this and I will have to tell them’, but just hoping to hell... I’m not volunteering up this shit sandwich. You have to ask about it to be told. (Wake, 2011)
4.5.6. Tactic 6: Timing the strategic release of information

When using this sixth tactic of timing the release of information, the former journalists were at times temporarily withholding information from the media in order to release it at a time most advantageous to the politician they worked for. While strategic issues might have resulted in delayed release of the information, the interviewees in this study said the information was later made available at a time of the politician’s choosing. A recent example of this was the decision by the newly elected Australian federal government under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Abbott to stop releasing information on asylum seeker vessels as they arrived in Australian waters. Instead, the government announced it will provide weekly updates rather than details about every new boat that arrives, as was the custom under the previous government. This new arrangement better meets the strategic goal of the government to stop the boats. Delaying the release of information until a time that best suits the government or an organisation is a common tactic used in public relations. In their study of media-source relations, Ericson et al. (1989) describe the tactic in this way: “Often it is not a matter of whether or not to release knowledge, but the occasion on which to release it” (p. 20). For instance planning a special event that best suits the client’s timing and strategic goals – whether launching a product or a political policy – is a standard tactic in the tool kit of any political public relations or strategic communications practitioner (Mahoney, 2013, p. 53; Young, 2011, p. 133) and was generally accepted by the interviewees as legitimate:

*Helen: I didn’t feel that my job was to withhold information except where it was going to be better to withhold it for a certain amount of time so that it could be presented in the best possible way. (*Helen, 2012)

Barrie Cassidy: When I say ‘the controller of information’ it was to keep the information tight until the minister or prime minister or whoever it was got the opportunity to present it on their terms. That is why you were controlling it…So there wasn’t anything particularly secret for the sake of it. (Cassidy, 2011)

*Kelly: I mean I remember having discussions saying ‘we need to release this’ and them saying ‘no’ and I lost the argument, even though I pushed and pushed and pushed. I thought it should be released because it was important information and people had a right to make up their own minds about it. The argument was, ‘yes, any other time but
In contrast to withholding information, the following tactic shows that in some circumstances the interviewees deemed releasing damaging information to the public arena to be the best tactic available to them.

4.5.7. Tactic 7: “Get rid of it now”

The aim of this seventh tactic described by two of the interviewees was to release all of the damaging information on an issue at one time, so that the negative story would be dealt with quickly rather than allowing it to continue for weeks in the media. When Malcolm Fraser’s press secretary, David Barnett, introduced the “doorstop” interview to Australian federal politics (Chalmers, 2011, p. 198) – a tactic Barnett said he had seen in operation while reporting overseas – that was exactly what he had in mind:

David Barnett: It’s a truism in politics – If you’ve got to eat a shit sandwich you’ve got to eat it straight away…The advice was always, ‘get rid of it now. Go and deal with it now. Stop on your way into the office at nine o’clock or half past eight in the morning and talk to the little mob of people who are waiting there to harry you’. Bob Hawke didn’t like it and the press didn’t like it. They never thanked me. (Barnett, 2011)

Under the mentorship of Keating’s previous media adviser, who had moved over to a policy role, Greg Turnbull also learned the benefits of getting rid of damaging information before the media got hold of it first:

Greg Turnbull: It was during the Thai teak table affair. You remember Paul Keating wanted to buy from some dealer in Sydney a Thai table for the Lodge and he wanted the Australiana Fund that put nice furniture in to the official establishments, to pay for it. The shit hit the fan and Paul was accused of being a dilettante for using this money to put a foreign table and the French clocks and all that sort of thing came about. It came up through senate estimates or something and then it became a public issue and Paul got a bit feisty about it. To cut a long story short, Mark Ryan was in his office one day and he had called for the file from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet on Lodge furnishings, because it started extending from tables to pillows and I said ‘what are you doing?’ and to paraphrase him he said ‘I am finding all the dangerous stuff about this’. And I was fairly new and I said ‘Why? What are we going to do with it? Are we going to take it outside and bury it, or burn it? Is there going to be a ritual burning?’ and he said
‘No. We’re getting it out there. We’ve got to get this over and done with. We’ve got to eat this sandwich and eat it as quickly as possible and move on.’ (Turnbull, 2011a)

Another tactic commonly referred to in the literature (Ericson, 1989; Gaber, 2000; Sanders, 2009; Tiernan, 2007) was that used by Blair government media adviser, Jo Moore, at the time of the September 11 attacks. Gaber (2000) dubbed this tactic “throwing out the bodies” (p. 151). As mentioned earlier, the aim of “throwing out the bodies” is to release damaging information under the cover of a major distraction. While it is mentioned in the literature as a commonly used strategy by ‘spin-doctors’, this was not a tactic described during the interviews for this study.

4.5.8. Tactic 8: Too much rather than too little

In a similar vein to tactic 7, the aim of providing too much information was sometimes thought to be a better tactic than providing too little. Depending on the circumstances, *Kelly said the best approach might be to overwhelm the journalist with too much data in an attempt to “snow” them:

*Kelly: Sometimes the best thing to do is give them a lot of information. Instead of two pars give them three pages. It’s one of the interesting things that the Rudd government did was snow the gallery with information so that it meant the really dedicated ones shone because they were the ones who read everything. Read every transcript, every press release. It was like finding the needle in the hay stack half the time. The obvious ones were there. The story of the day. That was an interesting tactic. Half the information that is revealed later has already been revealed but no one read it at the time. So sometimes the flip effect of that is being critical of the government for it giving too much information, knowing it won’t be used. (*Kelly, 2011)

This tactic of intentionally releasing a lot of information has also been described in the literature (Goodin, 1980, p. 59; Young, 2011, p. 133). While in the short term the tactic might have its desired effect of confounding the media and the public, in the long run this type of “manipulative” approach can create doubts about the politician and in this case, the parliamentary media adviser, and “undermine one’s credibility” (Goodin, 1980, p. 40).
What Greg Turnbull described as “death-by-transcript” also belongs in this category. Like the institutionalised “doorstop”, David Barnett is also attributed with introducing the transcript to the federal press gallery while working for Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (Chalmers, 2011, p. 198):

**David Barnett:** Whatever he said, wherever he said it was transcribed. The secretarial staff made them available in the press gallery. That was something that I learned to do working around the world. I think it was the White House that specific one. (Barnett, 2011)

What would have been a manageable number of transcripts in the 1970s and early 1980s, Greg Turnbull said, has turned into an avalanche today creating a mountain of work for journalists to trawl through:

**Greg Turnbull:** I mean now its death-by-transcript. Everything the leader says, Opposition or Prime Minister, is transcribed and now transcribed faster and faster. (Turnbull, 2011a)

Because of the volume of material it is not possible for journalists to read every transcript. The politicians and their media advisers know this and rely on the fact that contentious remarks buried in a speech transcript are likely to go unnoticed by reporters, and do not draw the media’s attention to them.

### 4.5.9. Tactic 9: Staying out of the media

Rather than constantly pursuing media coverage, the interview data revealed that sometimes avoiding media coverage was the tactically desired goal. One interviewee recalled being told by a press secretary in the Prime Minister’s office: “another day you’re not on the front page is another good day for me”. A similar scenario was faced by the office of former Attorney General, Robert McClelland, in the first Rudd government who was pursuing a range of reforms described by his former policy adviser, Marcus Priest, as “hot button Labor wedge issues”. Those reforms were in the areas of gay law reform, native title and national security. Priest said staying out of the media spotlight “was kind of our marching orders” and as a result he said they “tried to stay away from the media”.

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4.5.10. **Tactic 10: Bore them to death**

However, if the politician was unable to avoid the media altogether then an alternative tactic of “boring the media to death” was employed in the hope that the journalist would lose interest. Marcus Priest explained it this way:

*Marcus Priest:* Looking back we gave them really, really dumb comments. We gave them as bland as possible.

*Caroline Fisher (researcher):* Why was that?

*Marcus Priest:* because we didn’t want the story in the paper. Our MO was to keep things out of the paper, so if there was a big issue we’d feed them really, really, bland comments.

*Caroline Fisher (researcher):* Bore them to death?

*Marcus Priest:* Yeah bore them to death. It worked. (Priest, 2011)

4.5.11. **Tactic 11: Playing a dead bat**

If the bland comments did not kill off the unwanted story, then not supplying an answer to certain media inquiries was also attempted:

*Stephen Spencer:* Sometimes you can kill the story just by not responding to it, that sort of thing- playing a dead bat. (Spencer, 2012)

However, as a tactic Spencer explained it was not always successful:

*Stephen Spencer:* Occasionally I’d pick up the paper and think, ‘I wish had responded. I could have killed that’ and other times ‘If I hadn’t said anything they would have had nothing and it wouldn’t have got a run’. (Spencer, 2012)

4.5.12. **Tactic 12: “Shut them down”**

An alternative to “playing a dead bat” was to “shut down” the journalist’s inquiry. For example, on rare occasions Vivienne Wynter said she would use this approach when specific journalists
harangued her about matters that she did not judge to be in the public interest; or about issues she was not allowed to discuss with the media. Those rare occasions involved internal party matters or the findings of a Senate inquiry which had not yet been tabled in the Parliament. In those instances, Vivienne Wynter said she did not feel any ethical unease about not answering the reporter’s questions:

**Vivienne Wynter:** *I don’t see it as hiding because it’s personal or it’s not for the public domain. ‘Who is going to be the leader? How are the votes going? Do Meg and Natasha get along?’ It’s really awkward. It’s like being in the Spanish inquisition when you do know the answers and that’s when I shut a harassing journalist down. Maybe I am going to sound like one of the other press secretaries, but I don’t see that I am obligated to have that conversation with a journalist...If the Democrats are having discussions about who is going to be the next leader that will be revealed ultimately. So her trying to get it early is just for her to break a story. It’s not a legitimate story in the public interest and a newspaper journalist wanting an early copy of the Senate report, that’s actually contempt of parliament. I actually said that to him: ’asking me to reveal a report before it has been tabled in the chamber is contempt of parliament’ so I am quite comfortable about shutting them down, ethically.* (Wynter, 2012)

4.5.13. **Tactic 13: “Triage”**

In contrast to some of the more defensive and controlling information management techniques outlined above, one of the central tactics described by *Scott was used for purely logistical reasons. All busy workplaces require their staff to triage their workload and prioritise the most urgent cases. *Scott explained the same was true for parliamentary media advisers attempting to prioritise often vast numbers of media inquiries coming into the office. Invariably, journalists want their inquiries responded to immediately and if it is a big and contentious issue, the sheer number of phone calls, emails, texts and tweets from reporters can be overwhelming. At the height of a contentious policy debate, *Scott said, sometimes he received “literally a hundred plus phone calls a day”. In order to manage the workload, he said “you’ve got to triage” the media’s questions. To demonstrate how the triage process might work *Scott described the following scenario:

21 Vivienne Wynter is referring to the former leader of the Australian Democrats, Meg Lees and the former Deputy Leader, Natasha Stott Despoja who were rivals in 2001 for the federal leadership of the party.
*Scott*: I’ve got 20 calls I have to respond to by 6 o’clock tonight and three of them are really bad. The journo is on to something and I have to marshal a lot of complex information and get my head around it and turn it in to a meaningful response. Three of them are in that category. Six of them I will hand on to the department because they are standard things that aren’t a high priority. The ones in the middle I am just going to have to give them the standard lines because I don’t have time to give them anything else. It’s a safe option. (*Scott, 2011*)

As *Scott* explained, of the twenty media inquiries, only three of them would have received his full attention because they were the most difficult to manage. The majority would have received what he called “the standard lines” containing the key political messages. *Scott* explained this further:

*Scott*: In a way the responses you give when there’s a lot of intense incoming queries become more stock standard and you’re giving people just the standard lines, which when I was a journalist I used to think ‘that’s not a very good answer. That’s just obvious lines’, but partly you do that just to get through the day. Partly you do that because you make a quick evaluation that that’s all that is appropriate in this case. (*Scott, 2011*)

As a result of this prioritisation process, *Scott* acknowledged that some journalists who received the brief “standard lines” might have perceived them as intentional ‘spin’, even though *Scott*’s motivation was to manage his workload. Regardless of the motivation *Scott* accepted that those “standard lines” might have unintentionally had the same effect.

The typology of thirteen tactics described above illustrates how several of the interviewees recalled adapting their conceptions of truth and disclosure to the circumstances of each media inquiry. Those circumstances were shaped by issues such as the strategic interests of the politician; how damaging or sensitive an issue was to the politician; and the level of perceived trust between the interviewee and the reporter. The list of tactics also points to tensions between the conceptions of ‘factually accurate’ and ‘selective’ truth and dependency of truth and truthfulness on the virtues of accuracy and sincerity.
4.6. Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 of this thesis has examined the middle phase of the career transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back again. In doing so, this chapter has sought to address a key question at the heart of this research: whether moving between the two communications roles and shifting from reporter to source had an impact on the interviewees’ conceptions of journalism practice and values. The chapter revealed that for several of the interviewees (not all), the experience did influence their conceptions of journalism values and practice. Central to this change was the issue the trust. Assisted by the work of philosopher Bernard Williams (2002), this chapter examined the importance of the interviewee’s perceptions of trust toward individual journalists and the impact those perceptions of trust had on the interviewees’ conceptions of truth and disclosure.

The chapter has shown that for many of the interviewees (all of whom were former journalists) the shift to the confidential world of politics brought with it a sense of caution around the use of information generally, as well as a sense of caution toward the media more specifically. Some of the interviewees said they took on the new role pre-armed with a sense of wariness. Others recalled being shocked by the poor standards of journalism they encountered from their former colleagues. Depending on a range of factors, including the issue at hand, the fortunes of the politician and the level of trust they perceived toward the journalist they were dealing with, the sense of caution toward the media rose to distrust. This distrust was influenced by the ambivalent nature of the reporter-source relationship as well as perceptions of unethical behaviour by individual reporters. For several of the interviewees their growing sense of distrust toward certain journalists lead them to question their commitment to the journalism value of disclosure and the ‘public’s right to know’.

This chapter also explored the interviewees’ commitment to the journalistic ideal of ‘truth’. In doing so, two different conceptions of journalistic truth were examined – factually accurate truth and selective truth. While all of the interviewees said they maintained their journalistic commitment to truth by ‘not lying’ once they took on the role of parliamentary media adviser, a range of thirteen nuanced tactical approaches to managing truth and disclosure were also
described. Though none of the techniques outlined by the interviewees involved providing factually inaccurate information, several of the tactics did involve the selective presentation and management of information.

Through the examination of both ‘factually accurate’ and ‘selective’ truth, this chapter continued to highlight the inadequacy of the moralistic stereotypes of the lying ‘spin-doctor’ and the ‘watchdog’ journalist committed to the ideal of ‘truth’. The interviewees’ reflections showed that that they perceived accuracy, selectivity and ‘spin’ to be characteristics of both journalism and parliamentary media advising and not exclusive to either role. The range of tactical responses to the management of truth and disclosure by the interviewees’ continued to underscore the diversity of individual contextualised experience in the role of parliamentary media adviser. This again pointed to the partiality of the oversimplified stereotype of the lying and controlling ‘spin-doctor’. As explained in the introduction to this thesis, the caricatures of the ‘spin-doctor’ and ‘watchdog’ are only partially true because the moralistic and idealistic expectations attached to them do not represent the behaviour of all of the practitioners all of the time. They also fail to take into account the contextual circumstances of the individual’s performing the roles and how they balance the tension between “pragmatic pressures and moral ideals” (Tetlock, 2003, p. 324). Those pragmatic pressures include the tactical nature of the reporter-source relationship, and the existence of communicative expectations around truth and disclosure between journalists and parliamentary media advisers.

The following chapter examines the final phase in the transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back again. It examines the interviewees’ attempts to return to practising journalism and the influence that perceptions of conflict of interest and bias had on their success or failure to do so.
5. Conflict of interest & bias

5.1. Introduction

This fifth chapter completes the journey from journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back again through the examination of issues surrounding the interviewees’ attempts to re-enter journalism. It also continues the exploration of the issue of trust and the tension between moralism and idealism. However, this time the discussion of moralism and idealism occurs within the context of exploring the contentious issues of conflict of interest and bias on the interviewees’ attempts to return to journalism. The transcripts revealed the interviewees who chose to return to areas of journalism outside of politics managed to avoid having a conflict of interest. However, for the interviewees who wanted to return to political reporting, the process of re-entry ranged from simple and direct to circuitous or impossible. The transcripts showed that the level of difficulty each of the interviewees encountered in returning to journalism generally or political reporting in particular was related to perceptions of concern about possible conflicts of interest and bias. Depending on that level of concern from either the hiring editor or the interviewee, a range of strategies were adopted to manage conflicts of interest and perceptions of bias. This chapter then concludes with some final reflections from the interviewees about their re-entry to journalism and the impact of the transition experience on their journalism practice.

When a journalist returns to political reporting having been employed as a parliamentary media adviser, concerns of conflict of interest and bias are occasionally raised by their journalism colleagues, members of the opposing political party and the public, as this comment from journalist Matthew Knott (2013) reveals:

An amusing irony in the media is that while journalists loathe being labelled, they're more than happy to pigeon-hole each other politically...Columns and tweets are examined for signs of bias...So are stints as a political staffer -- for example, Barrie Cassidy's time spinning for Labor or Dennis Shanahan for the Liberal Party. Such pigeonholing does not necessarily reflect what a journalist actually believes or who their contacts are. But the perceptions stick.
These concerns point to the possibility that the journalist may have developed a sense of loyalty to the politician and/or political party they had worked for. In doing so, that political loyalty would be in conflict with journalism’s primary interest of the public. As Kovach & Rosentiel (2007) state, journalism’s “first loyalty is to citizens” (p. 5). This new found loyalty would then raise the concern that the journalist had become biased in their thinking, undermining his or her journalistic independence and rendering them “incapable of objective analysis” (Parker, 1990, p. 174).

The notion of journalistic independence is central to the idealized role of the democratic ‘watchdog’ and translates into reporters being encouraged to remain “free of associations and activities that may compromise their integrity or damage their own or their organizations credibility” (Brown, 2011a, p. 245). Through the prism of journalism ethics, breaching that contract of independence is seen as breaching the public’s trust. As Borden (2001) explains, the public cannot rely on a journalist’s stories if his or her loyalty to a politician is greater than his or her loyalty to the public’s interest in being provided with a balanced range of views. When a journalist does face a conflict of interest, the Australian journalist’s code of ethics stresses the reporter must: “disclose conflicts of interest that affect, or could be seen to affect, the accuracy, fairness or independence of your journalism” (MEAA, 1998). While journalism codes of ethics highlight the importance of avoiding and declaring conflicts of interest, this chapter reveals that the ideals of those principles do not match the interviewees’ perceptions of the reality of everyday practice.

The transcripts showed that each of the interviewees decided to return to journalism for a range and combination of reasons. Approximately one third of the participants left their parliamentary media advising role for family and financial reasons. The same number lost their jobs following the electoral defeat of a government. The rest of the interviewees left before the government’s term had finished because they said they either did not enjoy being a parliamentary media adviser, were burnt out, or were sacked. One of the interviewees however was still employed as a ministerial media adviser at the time of writing this thesis. As will be explored in detail, of the twenty interviewees who did wish to return to journalism, eleven of them went back to political journalism either directly or indirectly after their time as advisers. Five of the interviewees chose
to return to general reporting instead of politics and four of the participants were unable to return to political reporting. This caused three of them to refashion themselves as political commentators to maintain a foothold in journalism and earn a living.

As will be shown, the success or failure of the interviewees’ attempts to return to political reporting was influenced by two key factors identified in the transcripts. Firstly, the interviewees’ own concerns about conflict of interest and external perceptions of bias; and secondly, the level of concern of their employing editor in relation to conflict of interest and bias. The transcripts also revealed that the interviewees believed the editor’s level of concern was influenced by the amount of controversy surrounding the politician that the interviewee had worked for; and whether the interviewee had been employed by a Liberal or Labor politician. If the interviewee was concerned about returning to journalism for ethical reasons, the transcripts showed the interviewee either took time off before resuming their former reporting career, or they opted to avoid political reporting altogether and became either a general news journalist or developed a new area of reporting expertise. However, if the hiring editor was concerned about conflict of interest, the transcripts showed that a range of other options were pursued such as “laundering” the returning journalist through another area of reporting before reassigning them to politics; or allowing the interviewee to go “straight back in” to political reporting. As to which strategy was pursued in relation to each of the interviewees, *Tom said was a matter of cost-benefit analysis on the part of the hiring editor:

*Tom: An editor has to weigh up ‘well this person brings new insight into the political process and political players and fantastic contacts’. That weighed up against ‘what they write and the way they write it will be viewed suspiciously by the other side’. So the editor needs to weigh up the opportunity costs of employing an ex staffer and manage the new recruit accordingly. (*Tom, 2011)

Each of the different strategies employed by the interviewees and the hiring editors, outlined above, will be discussed in detail in the coming pages. In addition to concerns about conflict of interest, returning to journalism from political media advising also brought with it concerns about possible bias in the interviewee’s reporting. If not actual bias, then concerns about perception of bias, on the part of the audience. As this chapter will show, a perception of bias toward some of the interviewees often lingered long after any conflict of interest had gone.
5.2. Conflict of interest & bias

To aid the following discussion it is important to clarify what does and does not constitute a conflict of interest, and distinguish the difference between a conflict of interest and bias. I have predominantly chosen the work of Michael Davis (1998; 2001; 2013) to assist with this task for three reasons. Firstly, Davis (1998; 2001; 2013) applies conflict of interest to a broader range of contexts than financial matters, which dominates the discussion of the topic in the literature. Secondly, he considers the application of conflict of interest specifically in relation to the professions. Thirdly, his work is widely cited in the literature in this area. I also draw on the work of Borden & Pritchard (2001) who write specifically in relation to conflict of interest and journalism which appears in Davis’ (2001) Conflict of Interest in the Professions.

Davis (1998) defines a conflict of interest as being a situation where a person’s loyalties are divided between “two masters”, or more specifically when a person holds an interest in something and that interest interferes with the proper exercise of his or her judgement about it (p. 589). Or, as Borden (2001) put it:

Conflicts of interest in journalism arise in circumstances in which there is reason to be concerned that the judgment and performance of journalists might be unduly influenced by interests they have that lie outside their responsibilities as journalists. (p. 74)

In the literature on journalism ethics references to ‘conflict of interest’ tend to revolve around discussion of financial matters, such as whether a journalist should declare personal shareholdings (Patching, 2007), accept gifts from news sources (Hurst, 1994) or whether journalists should pay sources for an interview (Bauder, 2009). However, the definitional application of conflict of interest is much broader than financial interest. As Davis (1998) explains, an interest is not restricted to financial matters, it can be “any influence, loyalty, concern, emotion, or other feature of a situation” that would make an individual’s judgment “less reliable than it would normally be” without rendering that person incompetent (p. 590). In the context of this study the interest that could have caused a conflict of interest for the interviewees was a loyalty to the politician or the party they had worked for which might have affected their judgment and translated into bias in their reporting.
Bias on the other hand is different to conflict of interest but also closely connected. Davis (1998) describes it as “a deflection of judgment in a certain direction” (p. 591). Whether the bias be conscious or unconscious, Davis (1998) says it is easy to correct for because others can “simply discount for the bias” by taking “it with a grain of salt” (p. 591). For instance a regular weekly column written by a Labor politician is likely to present a more left-wing interpretation of events than a column written by a conservative politician. Readers of that column would expect that to be the case and would adjust their reading of it accordingly by either ignoring the left-wing bias in the article; agreeing with it; or dismissing it with: “well they would say that, wouldn’t they? He or she is a Labor politician”. Davis (1998) describes the bias in this type of situation as consistent, declared and expected by the reader by which he means they would not be surprised by it. The problem with bias in relation to conflict of interest, Davis (1998) argues, is that the disclosure of the conflict leaves others uncertain as to whether the person’s judgement has or has not been affected by bias and therefore the reader is unsure whether or not they need to correct for it by taking it “with a grain of salt”. In other words, if a reporter declares they have a conflict of interest it can undermine the reader’s trust in the journalist because it introduces a lingering uncertainty about whether the person with the conflict of interest has or has not allowed their judgement to be affected by bias.

5.2.1. Partisanship

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is an uncertainty about whether the journalist has in fact become politically partisan and whether that bias influences his or her coverage of political stories. It is a suggestion that journalists who make the transition to parliamentary media and policy advising become loyal to the person they work for and partisan to the political cause. Concerns about the role of partisanship in journalism do emerge in the scholarly and general literature (Bedingfield, 2013; Donsbach, 2004; Hoffmann, 1995; McNair, 2009; Putnis, 2011; Waisbord, 2008). Some of these works (Bedingfield, 2013; Hoffmann, 1995; Putnis,

22 It needs to be noted that in some of the literature the concepts of political partisanship and general advocacy are combined (Waisbord, 2008). However, in this section of the thesis, discussion of partisanship is restricted to conceptions of political partisanship rather than advocacy for other interests or issues.
focus on the issue of journalists straddling the dual roles of “reporter and partisan activist” simultaneously (Bedingfield, 2013, p. 8). For example, during the 1950s William D. Workman worked for the Republican Party whilst reporting for the Charleston News and Courier newspaper (Bedingfield, 2013). In 1939, Theodore White was employed simultaneously as a “propagandist for the Chinese government and a correspondent for several major news organisations” (Hoffmann, 1995, p. 25). During the First World War Keith Murdoch “worked both as a confidential government informant and as a journalist” (Putnis, 2011, p. 61). However, there appears to be limited scholarly literature on the issue of partisanship and the return of political advisers to political journalism. The majority of discussion about political advisers becoming political journalists has been found in more general literature (Parker, 1990), personal memoirs (Savva, 2010; Stephanopoulos, 2000), and media commentary.

There is however, both Australian and international literature examining the partisanship of ministerial staff (Eichbaum, 2010; Fleming, 2001; Maley, 2002b; Tiernan, 2001, 2007, 2010). Most of this literature focuses on the role of the ministerial policy adviser, rather than that of the media adviser, but there are also general references to the partisanship of all personal ministerial staff. For instance, Tiernan (2010) makes a distinction between “impartial” departmental staff employed in ministerial offices and the ministers’ advisers, who she describes as being “explicitly partisan personal staff” (p. 254). Tiernan (2010) explains her use of “partisan” further by describing ministerial advisers as either “personal, or party loyalists” who “share their minister’s outlook and are invested in his or her success and that of the government as a whole” (p. 256). However, in an earlier article Tiernan (2001) is less tempered in her description and refers to ministerial staff generally as “partisan zealots” (p. 94).

The following reflections of the interviewees show that many of them did identify a level of personal loyalty toward the politician, but they did not necessarily identify a level of personal loyalty toward the party or the policies. The majority of the interviewees also argued against partisan zealotry because they saw it as an impediment to doing the job effectively. In the same way as the conception of ‘spin-doctor’ has been shown to be a partial representation of the role of the parliamentary media adviser, this chapter highlights that the expectation of political partisanship from parliamentary media advisers is also oversimplified.
When discussing the notion of partisanship within the context of party politics, it conjures an expectation that the partisan is loyal to a particular political party or political cause. In relation to the twenty-one interviewees in this study this conception did not necessarily fit. One of the ways an individual can express their partisan loyalty to a political party is by joining the party. In relation to this study, discussions with the interviewees revealed that roughly half of the participants (eleven) did not join the political party of the politicians they worked for. Of the remaining ten interviewees, five revealed that they did become members, two chose not to answer the question and the issue was not raised with the other three.

Another way of examining the partisanship of the interviewees would be to ask about their motivation for becoming a parliamentary media adviser. As discussed in the previous chapter the interviews reveal three main motivations for the journalists in this study choosing to make the transition from reporting to media advising. At the top of the list was a journalistic sense of curiosity about life on the inside of politics. Curiosity was nominated by nineteen of the twenty-one participants as a key driver behind their decision. Having reported on political life from the outside, all of the interviewees said they were keen to experience politics from the inside, on the other side of the closed doors. The next most common motivation (mentioned by fourteen of the interviewees) was respect or admiration for a particular politician – not necessarily the party – as Barrie Cassidy and Dennis Atkins explained:

**Barrie Cassidy:** I suppose it’s what motivates you. I was motivated by an individual not the party, by the leader not the party and by the leader and not the government. So I had a different view of it really. (Cassidy, 2011)

**Dennis Atkins:** I don’t think you need to be a true believer to be a good press secretary – a true believer of the political cause. I think you do need to believe in the person you’re working for. I only worked for politicians that I had a lot of respect for and a lot of regard for. (Atkins, 2011)

The third most common motivation mentioned by the interviewees was a sense of restlessness in their career and a desire to try something new. Two other key factors mentioned by several of the participants were financial and family reasons. Partisan political reasons were given by only two of the interviewees as having played a part in their decision to become a parliamentary media adviser. The first was *Scott who revealed that earlier in his life he had been a member of*
the same political party as the minister he came to work for. Since leaving journalism he said he had renewed his party affiliation. The other was David Barnett who said he was motivated to become Malcolm Fraser’s press secretary out of a sense of “patriotism” fuelled by concern about some of the policy directions being taken by the Whitlam government, of which he said he was initially a supporter.

Another way of interpreting partisanship would be to gauge whether the interviewee’s personal political inclinations were sympathetic to those of the politician he or she worked for. While that was likely the case for some of the interviewees it was not the case for three of them. In the case of *Adam* he said he approached both sides of politics for a media advising job but only one of the major parties had a vacancy. *Adam* said he would have been happy to work for either the Liberal or Labor Parties as long as he respected the politician in question. Rather than describing himself as being partisan or a ‘true believer’ of any political cause, *Adam* saw himself as a “gun for hire” or professional communicator whose job it was to represent the client’s interests to the best of his ability, much like a legal advocate is required to help the client communicate his or her case as clearly and convincingly as possible:

*Adam*: I have always seen working as a political minder as a position of advocacy. I don’t want to push the analogy too far, but a lawyer is paid to prosecute or defend people whether he believes people are guilty or innocent. It is part of the legal process that a good mind is brought to bear on the prosecution of that case and a good mind is brought to bear on the defending of that case. The actual beliefs of the actual proponents of each position are irrelevant. The legal process and justice is served by both the prosecution and the defence being given a good hearing... The analogy is vital to me because in a democratic society both sides need to be heard. Not just heard, but in the position of advocacy both sides need the opportunity to effectively communicate their message, couch their message in the most understandable terms and get it in to the market place. Both sides need help to be effective communicators for the democratic process to work... In practical terms within the broad sweep of the political debate in the Australian context I could comfortably work for either side of politics. (*Adam, 2011*)

Another interviewee who worked for a politician in a party they did not naturally identify with was Niki Savva. In her memoir entitled *Confessions of a Conservative Leftie* Savva (2010) described her political leanings to be similar to most members of the press gallery “left of centre” (p. 52). When a family crisis drove her to resign from journalism Savva (2010) wrote that she
put her own politics to one side to take a job based in Melbourne with the then Liberal Treasurer, Peter Costello: “I felt I could work for him, despite the fact that there were a number of coalition policies and positions that made me uncomfortable” (p. 105). Niki Savva (2010) said that under the circumstances, she accepted the job to work for Peter Costello and put her personal politics to one side because she thought he was a rare politician who was a “person of value” and a “decent bloke” (p. 105). Over time Savva (2010) said she did come to support a range of the initiatives put forward by the Howard government. However, she did not consider herself to be partisan and said she resented the fact that she was perceived by others to be a Liberal supporter:

_Niki Savva:_ I hate it, because I don’t regard myself conservative for starters. I am more left wing on social issues than the people who are leading us, so why am I conservative? Because, I went to work for Peter Costello? It brands me as a conservative forever. I am much more left wing than him, much more than Kevin Rudd and much more than Gillard professes to be. So yeah it irks me, but what can I do? Nothing. Big C! (Niki holds up her hand in the shape of ‘c’ on her forehead). (Savva, 2012)

Before Greg Turnbull became a parliamentary media adviser, firstly to Prime Minister Paul Keating and then to the Labor Opposition Leader, Kim Beazley, he said “I had never been active in Labor politics and I wasn’t particularly supportive of Labor’s side of politics” but he did have a high regard for Paul Keating and a very high regard for Keating’s previous press secretary, “so I felt you know, an affinity”. Rather than feeling sympathetic toward the Labor Party, Turnbull said he admired and respected the politician. As mentioned above, respect for the individual politician was a key deciding factor for all of the interviewees, whereas having an affinity with the political party was not. However, after a short time in the job Turnbull said he realized that he was perceived as being partisan toward the Labor Party, even though he did not feel that he was. Because of this perception of his supposed partisanship Turnbull believed parliamentary media advisers may as well join the political party of their bosses because they will be perceived to be partisan whether they are or not:

_Greg Turnbull:_ It doesn’t matter what you think you are. When you start working there people see you as that and you will have to advocate for them whether in your heart you believe they are right or wrong for them sometimes. The position I reached was I did join the Labor Party shortly after joining Paul’s office because the whole world assumes I’m a 100 per cent supporter of Paul Keating and the Labor Party and I have to talk that every day so why wouldn’t I join? So I did join the Labor Party. Mind you I un-joined
ten years later when I stopped working for first Paul Keating and then Kim Beazley. (Turnbull, 2011a)

During the course of the interviews with the twenty-one participants, each of them was asked whether they thought it was necessary to be partisan or a “true believer” as Greg Turnbull coined it, in order to effectively perform the role of parliamentary media adviser. There was a range of responses to this question. Four of the interviewees including Greg Turnbull, felt a press secretary did need to be a ‘true believer’ in the political cause of the side he or she worked for:

**Greg Turnbull:** When you are working on the personal staff of somebody, now looking back on it, I don’t even know why you’d do it unless you supported the person. You’ve certainly got to like them and probably support them ideologically because otherwise the pain’s just not worth it...If you go along thinking ...I’m only a little bit pregnant, I’m not really part of this political operation, I’m insulated from any consequences or I’m insulated from the true believers of any side of politics, then I think you pretty quickly get found out...I liken a lot of it to the caveat thinking some journalists have which is a little like barristers can defend the most hideous criminal ‘but that’s my brief’ they feel in no way aligned with their clients and I think that journalists try to reach for that journalists equivalent of legal privilege and say ‘well the fact that I travelled around the world with Paul Keating and advocated on his behalf shouldn’t tell anyone anything about my politics’, well I don’t think that works. (Turnbull, 2011a)

David Barnett shared a similar view. He believed that if the parliamentary media adviser did not start out as a partisan ‘true believer’ then he or she would become one by the time they finished, because he said “the job changes you”:

**David Barnett:** They are not the same person...well they are completely committed to a side of politics that they were not committed to. Well I suppose it was just a job, but eventually it isn’t just a job. (Barnett, 2011)

While developing a deep sense of loyalty might have been experienced by some of the interviewees, it was not the experience of all, as Andrew Fraser explained:

**Andrew Fraser:** Look it’s so hard to generalise. There are people I know who have left being press secretaries and have left with a burning desire to kick out the government they were working for because they were so corrupt...In short, what I am saying is that there is an assumption there that if you have stopped being a press secretary for the government that you are still going to carry around a candle for it and that’s not really true. It’s not always true in every respect. What’s important is that it is different in each experience. (Fraser, 2012)
In the case of Alex Wake, who grew up in a household sympathetic to the Labor Party, the experience of being a ministerial media adviser reduced any sense of partisanship she may have had toward that side of politics prior to taking on the role:

\textbf{Alex Wake:} I think I went in as a true believer and came out as an advocate. In terms of I went in kind of thinking the Labor Party was something that it really wasn’t and I think that was just the nastiness of it all. (Wake, 2011)

Between the poles of performing the role of parliamentary media adviser as either a “legal advocate” or a “true believer” emerged a hybrid position that the majority of the interviewees identified with. Half of the participants were critical of press secretaries who were “true believers” arguing their partisanship made them blinkered and uncritical in their advice which put their politician at risk. Politician’s offices, they said, were full of party members focused on internal party matters, so it was important for the media adviser to place attention on the outside world and maintain a sense of objectivity, or analytical detachment, to provide the advice the politician needed:

\textbf{*Kelly:} [True believers] are too myopic, too invested in what they do. So I don’t think they make the best decisions. I think they are tainted. (*Kelly, 2011)

\textbf{Barrie Cassidy:} I think that some of these people who are ideologically driven aren’t as effective because they can’t be as objective as they ought to be and in any case they are career politicians in effect. Most of them if they go into a minister’s office or prime minister’s office they are driven by the motivation to succeed in politics. I don’t think that’s the right motivation in the end. I found that some of the best people in government were the public servants who were stationed full-time in the minister’s office and the prime minister’s office because they had a far more objective, pure motivation. (Cassidy, 2011)

Rather than necessarily performing the role in a partisan fashion, the majority of the interviewees accepted that parliamentary media advisers did need to have a level of commitment to something in order to perform the job, such as a commitment to the politician and/or the policies.

\textbf{Marcus Priest:} I wasn’t a member of the party. I was committed to the issues we were working on. I had a very strong view on those, but I felt like I would be able to provide more independent and impartial advice if I was not a party member and if I wasn’t purely politically driven. (Priest, 2011)
*Tom: Because of the intensity of the job and how intrusive it is on your life and the hours and the travel and the demands and how around the clock it is... I don't believe you can be truly independent and survive in the job. So whether it is political conviction, or for me going in it was personal respect for [my minister] I had watched and admired [them] and that is what drove me. Or perhaps you can be driven by a belief that it should be a dispassionate person in that job and that's what drives you. But I think there needs to be some emotional connection that gets you through that job. Now obviously, then you have to overlay that emotion with ... being as clinical as you can. So the emotion might get you through the day, but you can't do the job if you can't give clinical advice. No-one can be clinical all the time but you have to have a certain level of detachment to be the devil’s advocate to say ‘no’. (*Tom, 2011)

These personal reflections demonstrate a wide variety of experiences and views held by the interviewees in relation to the issue of partisanship and the role of the parliamentary media adviser, which challenges the assumption by Tiernan (2001) that ministerial advisers are necessarily “partisan zealots” (p. 94). In contrast, this chapter reveals gradations in the perceived levels of affinity between the interviewees and the politicians they worked for. It also reveals that the majority of the interviewees saw partisanship on the part of a parliamentary media adviser as a handicap that blinkered their view and weakened their advice to their politicians. It is interesting to consider the varying levels of political partisanship articulated by the interviewees in the context of falling levels of partisanship in the general community. However, a full discussion of this topic falls outside the scope of this thesis.23

The interviewees’ perceptions of their own level of partisanship not only tests generalized assumptions about the views of political staff, those perceptions of partisanship also formed the basis of the interviewees’ judgement about whether or not they faced an actual or potential conflict of interest when they returned to reporting. Each of these issues will be discussed in turn below.

5.2.2. Actual versus potential conflict of interest

Davis (1998) argues there are two types of conflict of interest—potential and actual. A conflict of interest is potential if the person “has a conflict of interest with respect to a certain judgment but is not yet in a situation where he must make that judgment” (Davis, 1998, p. 593). For instance, in relation to a parliamentary media adviser returning to journalism a potential conflict of interest exists if the reporter is likely to report on a side of politics he or she is loyal to or write a story about his or her former political boss at some point in the future. In contrast, a conflict of interest is actual if the person “has a conflict of interest in relation to a certain judgment and is in a situation where he must make that judgment” (Davis, 1998, p. 593). For example if a parliamentary media adviser returns to political reporting and is required to write about the politician he or she worked for, the journalist would be facing an actual conflict of interest.

Fourteen of the interviewees returned to political reporting and/or commentating and thereby faced the risk of a potential or actual conflict of interest. This risk would have been present by virtue of the fact that as political reporters they faced the possibility of being required to report on issues relating to their former politicians, policy areas or political parties. As will be shown, very few of the fourteen said they found themselves in a situation where their potential conflicts of interest turned into actual conflicts of interest. Of the remaining participants, five became general reporters because they said they were keen to avoid reporting on politics and thereby managed to avoid facing both potential and actual conflicts of interest.

According to Davis (1998) a conflict of interest is difficult to manage because it is “like dirt in a sensitive gauge” (p. 593), which can affect the reliability of a person’s judgement in three key ways. Firstly, the person might either overestimate their judgement or underestimate the extent of the conflict he or she faces. Secondly, the person might betray the trust of others who rely on the person’s judgement if the conflict is not revealed. Thirdly, is a perception of unreliability and damage to reputation if the conflict is disclosed. Each of these three problems in relation to conflict of interest is discussed directly below.
5.2.3. Problem 1: Underestimating the extent of the conflict of interest

To begin with let us look more closely at the first problem identified by Davis (1998) whereby the person might underestimate the extent of the conflict of interest. Marcus Priest’s experience is a good demonstration of this. When Marcus Priest stepped directly back into a political reporting role at the *Australian Financial Review* newspaper just two weeks after leaving his policy advising role in the federal Attorney General’s office, he said he felt a strong sense of disloyalty to his former ministerial colleagues, a real sense of betrayal:

*Marcus Priest:* Gutted. Gutted. For the first three or four months I felt absolutely gutted having to write stories. It just felt wrong. I remember a couple of occasions I’d have a coffee just apologising to them – apologising to my former friends for doing this. ’I really don’t feel good about this’. It really churned me up. I have to say I felt really unsure about going back into the media. I felt like doing something just completely different and I was looking for other jobs, but because it was good pay and a solid position, I took it. But I felt really uncomfortable for about a year. I felt like I was betraying people by even using experience, knowledge that I had from government. I didn’t write so much about Attorney Generals, so it wasn’t that. It was more just writing in a way which was negative coverage. You felt conflicted. You felt like you were betraying people you used to work with. (Priest, 2011)

It was not until his former minister changed portfolios and Priest took on a new reporting role that his actual conflict of interest was reduced to a potential conflict of interest and he began to feel more comfortable:

*Marcus Priest:* When Rudd lost the post, it was a bit of a move on point for me because I felt like a lot of people then got turned over and then it went straight through to the election. I covered the election and it was a bit of a break for me as I was just covering it as an election and there was a big turn over in my former office. So I kind of felt like there was a break and I was sort of no longer tied to the government. Then at the end of the year I put my hand up to cover climate change because I wanted to cover something completely different that I didn’t have any ties with. So that completely moved me on. (Priest, 2011)

For Marcus Priest his conflict of interest was based on the personal relationships and trust he had built up with his former colleagues. The conflict of interest and sense of “betrayal” he experienced was exacerbated by going from the ministerial office virtually straight back into the newsroom to report not only on politics but also on his former minister:
Marcus Priest: Looking back on it I wish I had taken a break. Within weeks I went back into the gallery and it was all driven by financial security and I don’t know whether I could have taken more time off, but in hindsight I really wish I had taken more time off. I am just amazed at the time no one in government said to me ‘you can’t go back in’ or ‘you shouldn’t do this’. So I really wish I had (taken a break), looking back on it. (Priest, 2011)

In this case Priest’s situation fits with the first problem outlined by Davis (1998) of underestimating the extent of the conflict of interest he would feel by returning immediately to political reporting.

Barrie Cassidy was also confronted with a conflict of interest and accusations of disloyalty soon after he left the staff Prime Minister Bob Hawke. After five years working for Hawke from 1986 – 1991 as both a media and policy adviser, Barrie Cassidy decided to go overseas and join his wife, Heather Ewart, in Washington on her posting as a foreign correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. His wife’s departure coincided with a public challenge for the Prime Ministership by the Deputy leader of the Labor Party and federal Treasurer, Paul Keating. Having sounded out the Labor Caucus on behalf of the Prime Minister Barrie Cassidy said he could see the writing was on the wall for Bob Hawke and decided it was time to leave:

Barrie Cassidy: I thought I can’t go through anymore of this. So I went and told him I had decided to go to Washington...and I said: ‘by the way now that I am leaving I will be really frank with you. You can’t beat Keating next time around. So surely the best thing you could do now is to go under your own terms. You don’t want to be a Prime Minister who is cut down in office. You’ve got an opportunity to just refer to the future. Talk about Keating’ – this is probably the part that really hurt him – ‘talk about Keating’s qualifications for the job and the fact that he has clearly been the heir apparent for a long time’. He said, ‘I can see you’re really tired. I don’t need that advice’ (laughs). I said, ‘you’re right about that, I am tired’. Working sixteen hours a day for four years does knock you around a bit. So he didn’t listen. (Cassidy, 2011)

Barrie Cassidy then left Australia to meet up with his wife. When he arrived in the United States, Barrie Cassidy said he was contacted by the media:

Barrie Cassidy: John Laws phoned me in Washington and the time difference was pretty nasty, but anyway I said essentially the same thing and put it on the public record that he ought to go. Then there were headlines about how his previously loyal staff member had urged him to go. Hawke rang me up and said ‘that was a real kick in the guts coming from you’ and I said, ‘Look it’s precisely what I said to you before I left and what’s more,
now I am a commentator. I’m not a staff member and I suspect that when you leave politics you will operate in the same way’. I was wrong about the last thing. He is remarkable in the sense that he doesn’t undermine anyone. Never has. (Cassidy, 2011)

As in the instance involving Marcus Priest, the actual conflict of interest for Barrie Cassidy was also around betrayal of friendship and loyalty and arose because he opted to comment on his former boss and events he had recently been privy to:

**Barrie Cassidy:** It wasn’t easy, but I wouldn’t have done it either if I hadn’t already had that conversation with him. It just made it easier because I had fronted him and said it directly to him...So it took a couple of years after I came back before we really repaired the relationship. Now it’s good as gold. . I mean we always have a great time when we see each other. I just figured I just had to get over that. And if it was going to be OK with him, that’s good. And if it wasn’t, that’s just bad luck. It just had to be done that way. (Cassidy, 2011)

In order to re-establish his credentials as an independent journalist and commentator, Barrie Cassidy said he felt he could not allow himself to be held back by any feelings of loyalty he might have had to his former boss. He had made the decision to cut the ties with his time on the Prime Minister’s staff and commence his new career as a well-informed political commentator.

### 5.2.4. Problem 2: Betrayal of trust

The second problem with conflict of interest according to Davis (1998) arises when the person with the conflict hides it from others who are relying on the person’s judgement and thereby betrays the other person’s trust. An example of this might be a parliamentary media adviser who leaves the employment of a politician and successfully gains employment with a news organization as a political reporter without disclosing that he/she had been working as a political staffer immediately prior to taking on the reporting role. Based on Davis’(1998) definition this would constitute a betrayal of both the editor’s and audience’s trust, because both of them would be depending on the reporter to provide independent and fair coverage of political issues uncompromised by any undisclosed loyalties. None of the interviewees in this study fall strictly into this category. However, the interviews revealed a range of levels of disclosure from virtual concealment of having worked as a parliamentary media adviser to declaring it upfront, which will be discussed below. It will be demonstrated that the variation in the responses came down
to the third and following problem in relation to conflict of interest, that being the problem of disclosure.

### 5.2.5. Problem 3: Disclosure

Davis (1998) says the solution to the problem of betraying trust is disclosing the conflict of interest. For instance, if the returning parliamentary media adviser tells the hiring editor that they had previously worked for a politician then they will not have betrayed the editor’s trust. However, Davis (1998) says, disclosing that information might present a third problem, that being damage to reputation caused by a perception or expectation of bias (p. 591). That means by doing the right thing and disclosing a conflict of interest a person might damage his or her own reputation by creating an expectation of bias, regardless of whether the conflict is actual, potential or no longer exists. As Davis (1998) says, the conflict of interest can remain a technical problem even if it is no longer a moral one. By that he means, even though the conflict of interest situation has passed, for instance the government the journalist worked for is no longer in power and the minister has lost his or her seat, the simple disclosure of having worked for a politician of a particular persuasion can harm the reputation of that reporter. It was a prospect many of the interviewees were mindful of and led many of them to wrestle with the issue and question whether disclosure of their political experience would be the best course of action.

When discussing the problem of conflict of interest Davis (1998) stresses it is important to remember that simply having a conflict of interest does not mean that a person has done anything morally wrong. The issue he says is how the person manages that conflict situation and how it is resolved. As we will see, the interviewees adopted a range of strategies to manage their individual circumstances.

### 5.3. Strategies for managing conflicts of interest

Traditionally, Davis (1998) says there are two main strategies for dealing with conflicts of interest: *Escape* and *Disclosure*. 

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5.3.1. Strategy 1: Escape

By escaping a conflict of interest, Davis (1998) means diverting the conflict away from oneself or divesting oneself of the interest that is causing the conflict, such as selling shareholdings or resigning from a job. In the case of the interviewees in this study the option for escape came in the form of avoiding reporting on politics and thereby escaping the conflict of interest. That was the approach taken by four of the interviewees.

When Alex Wake finished working for the Beattie Government she felt uncomfortable about returning to journalism straight after her period as a ministerial media adviser so she looked for alternative forms of employment as well:

*Alex Wake: I was applying for jobs at the ABC, but I was really uncomfortable doing that because I have never thought it was appropriate to go back to journalism after being a press secretary. I just didn’t think it was the right thing to do. So I had also applied for a teaching job and took that, but I was in such a position that I would have taken the ABC job because I didn’t have a choice at that stage. Then I went teaching and four to five years later I ended up back at the ABC. Even still, I have this thing about not working back in political journalism, because I think it is still slightly problematic. It’s like you have declared your hand, even though I haven’t.* (Wake, 2011)

So Alex Wake escaped the conflict of interest by working overseas and teaching before returning to work as a radio news reporter in Australia. Despite this, more than twelve years on, Wake said she continues to beg off political reporting because of lingering concerns she had about perceptions of bias. By that Alex Wake meant members of the audience accusing her of bias because she once worked for a Labor politician.

*Helen also went overseas to work as a reporter before returning to journalism in Australia. She said she saw the time overseas gaining experience in other areas of reporting as a good “circuit breaker” between parliamentary media advising and journalism. When *Helen resumed reporting in Australia she said she took a job in an unrelated area which made her feel more comfortable and allowed her to escape any actual or potential conflict of interest:

*Helen: So I went away for six and half years. Then I came back and worked in an editing role and I was quite happy for that. I had no conflicts at all there.* (*Helen, 2012)
Having taken a six month break after leaving his job as a parliamentary media adviser to the former ACT Liberal government, Craig Allen was also keen to avoid political reporting when he returned to journalism, this time reporting for the local ABC News in Canberra:

*Craig Allen:* There was no way I was going to be put on the Assembly 24 round, nor did I want to be put on the Assembly round, because I didn’t think it would be fair on me or the people I worked with, because that would create the unreal expectation that I would call on favours. So in practice, I didn’t really have much to do with any elected representatives or their staffers once I became a journo. (Allen, 2012)

Craig Allen thus managed to escape the conflict of interest by not being assigned to the politics round and avoiding reporting on politics generally.

Although *Scott* was yet to return to journalism, he said he supported the idea of reporting in an unrelated area if he ever were to return. He said by working as a parliamentary media adviser he had declared his hand politically and therefore it would be more appropriate for him to do some other kind of journalism unrelated to politics. By doing so, he would also escape an actual or potential conflict of interest and avoid accusations of bias:

*Scott:* I think it’s a bit hard if you go back to political reporting. People have to work and people who have experience and are good journalists will still be good journalists when they come back from a stint at media advising, but I think it must be hard because everyone knows you worked for the Liberals or Labor and so it becomes a little bit harder, especially if you are writing news. Obviously it’s not so hard if you go back and write opinion and you still write opinion from the point of view that you had. I personally think I would feel a bit uncomfortable about it. I think if I had other choices I wouldn’t want to go back, certainly not into straight news reporting, especially having nailed my colours to the mast politically. That’s any kind of news reporting around politics. You could go back I guess and write on business or whatever. (*Scott, 2011*)

Unlike the other twenty participants in this study, Vivienne Wynter continued working as a freelance journalist while she was employed as a parliamentary media adviser for the Australian Democrats. With the agreement of her employer, Senator John Woodley, Vivienne Wynter said she only wrote freelance articles that were unrelated to politics and policy areas held by her Senator. By Davis’ (1998) definition, Vivienne Wynter actively chose the escape strategy to

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24 The “Assembly round” refers to the political round which reports on the ACT’s Legislative Assembly.
manage any potential and actual conflicts of interest, an approach she said she took in all of her work as a communications professional who straddles freelance journalism and public relations work:

**Vivienne Wynter:** *It is an ethical thing for me... In this modern world where you might have several jobs in communications, how do you manage the ethical divide between them? And for me I would never freelance on something I am being paid to work on at the same time. It’s common sense really.* (Wynter, 2012)

The above list of examples illustrates how avoiding writing about politics and related policy areas each of these interviewees managed to escape any potential or actual conflict of interest when they returned to journalism.

### 5.3.2. Strategy 2: Disclosure

Davis (1998) says the second main strategy to deal with a conflict of interest is disclosure which is the strategy recommended by the *Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance – Journalists’ Code of Ethics* (1998). Clause five of the code states that reporters must “disclose conflicts of interest that affect, or could be seen to affect, the accuracy, fairness or independence of your journalism” (MEAA, 1998). By disclosing the conflict of interest to those who are relying on the person’s judgement, Davis (1998) argues it allows them to “adjust their reliance accordingly (for example by seeking a ‘second opinion’)” (p. 593). However, “unlike escape, disclosure as such does not end the conflict of interest; it merely avoids negligence and betrayal of trust” (Davis, 1998, p. 593). For instance, if a journalist told an editor that the journalist had once worked for a politician; or the journalist declared to the audience that the journalist had a loyalty to a particular political party, politician or policy, that act of declaration would not have removed the conflict of interest, it simply would have alerted those people who depended of the journalist’s judgement to the issue of the conflict of interest. That knowledge would then have allowed those people to either reject what the journalist said or weigh it up based on that piece of information. That is the approach that Chris Kenny said he adopted when he returned to journalism after working as a media and policy adviser for state and federal Liberal governments. He believed the best way to tackle the conflict was being open with his audience about his past experience and his personal views:
Chris Kenny: So I think firstly…I am up front. When I put my bio on the website or write for someone, where it is relevant to a piece that I write, I chuck in my personal experience up front. Yes I have worked for a number of liberal politicians, have even been a member of that party. What do you want to do? Put me up against a wall and shoot me? I have that and it gives me an enormous insight into the way politics works with the experience that I have had and I am not ashamed of it and I am proud of it in fact and I think just be upfront about it so that people know where you are coming from. I am not party political but I do have, I suppose, a philosophical bent that is more small government, non intervention, than unions and big government and I am upfront about that when I write. So I think that is the best way to attack it: to be completely open and honest with your readers. (Kenny, 2012)

In his role of writing commentary and opinion Kenny said he discloses his allegiances and beliefs, where relevant, to avoid accusations of conflict of interest and bias. As will be discussed further in 5.4., the issue of disclosure can present a real dilemma. If the interviewees declared that they had worked for a politician they ran the risk of making the issue salient and important by inviting the suspicion that they might be biased, when in fact they might not be. However, if they did not disclose that they had worked for a politician and it was later revealed that they did, then they ran the risk of inviting suspicion that they had been hiding something. To avoid this dilemma, Chris Kenny chose disclosure. For instance, on his blog on The Australian newspaper website Kenny promotes himself as having an “unashamedly rationalist approach to national affairs” (Kenny, 2013). Instead of damaging his career Kenny said it had become a professional strength which had allowed him to develop an audience based on his political views.

5.3.3. Flying below the radar

Not all of the interviewees felt as comfortable as Chris Kenny about declaring their previous political experience. Some who were returning adopted low-visibility strategies to disclosure because of their concerns that their return to political reporting would invite perceptions of bias. For example, when Marcus Priest originally left the media to work for the Attorney General in the new Rudd government an item about his appointment appeared in The Australian newspaper’s gossip column Strewth:

Priest on board, 20/12/07
THE first reptile to jump ship to the Rudd Government is Marcus Priest of The Australian Financial Review.

However Priest, the legal affairs editor, won't be taking any media calls on behalf of his new master, Attorney-General Robert McClelland. He has instead signed up as a policy adviser. A decision on who gets to handle all those pesky media queries about national security and legal matters will be made in mid January.

In light of this experience of being ‘outed’ as a political staffer by the media, Marcus Priest said he tried to fly under the radar on his return to political reporting:

**Marcus Priest:** I kept my move very low key...I didn’t tell the press gallery I was coming back. So no-one wrote about it. So when I turned up in the press gallery people said ‘What are you doing here?’... A lot of people didn’t know who I was. A lot of people just thought I was the new guy...People in my bureau knew, but there wasn’t a lot of comment on it. (Priest, 2011)

*Helen* had also attempted to keep her past to herself in a bid to avoid the perception of being seen as partisan:

**Helen:** Very few people know that I worked... I think, that is my impression, that I worked for the Labor Party...A few people know because we have mutual friends in politics, but I don’t even know if the editor of the newspaper knows. I sort of really kept it pretty much to myself.

Caroline Fisher: Why did you do that?

**Helen:** Well, I don’t want to be type cast. I guess I think I’m doing a journalist’s job and I’m doing that with my journalist’s cap on ... so if they know, they know, and if they don’t... but I would be prepared to bring it up if there was something there, if there was either an appearance of conflict of interest or where there was genuine conflict of interest. (*Helen, 2012)

Having escaped her conflict of interest by avoiding reporting on politics and spending time overseas, *Helen* said she did not tell her editor about her previous political experience because it was not relevant to her current role. If however *Helen* found herself in a position where she did face a conflict of interest she said she would disclose that interest so as not to betray the editor’s trust. In order to avoid perceptions of bias and being “type cast”, *Helen* said she did not reveal information about her political experience unless it was necessary, again highlighting the problem of disclosure as a remedy for conflict of interest as described by Davis (1998).
For the majority of the interviewees, their time in politics took place more than a decade ago. For five of the participants, their experience was more recent. In discussing the issue of disclosure, many of the interviewees felt their employment as a political staffer was no longer relevant because so much time had passed. As a result, many of them felt they no longer had a conflict of interest and therefore the information did not need to be volunteered:

**Andrew Fraser:** If anyone asks me I’m never backward... I mean I don’t advertise it, because I don’t think it is that relevant anymore. Certainly in terms of political leanings and political affiliations if you like, my view is there are staff members with far, far stronger political affiliations than me and they don’t record that. So at a personal level I have no problems at all with that. (Fraser, 2012)

Similarly, Craig Allen did not advertise his time as a parliamentary media adviser either. Craig Allen is currently the weekend TV newsreader for ABC News in Canberra. At the time of interview his Curriculum Vitae on the ABC website did not include reference to his experience as a parliamentary media adviser to the former ACT Liberal government. Rather than trying to avoid the issue, Craig Allen said he did not think it was relevant to his current role as a newsreader and that he was concerned that if he included his previous employment as a parliamentary media adviser on his Curriculum Vitae it might impact on the audience’s perceptions of him. In essence, Craig Allen was concerned that disclosing his time as a parliamentary media adviser would cause damage to his reputation because the audience might begin to question his independence:

**Craig Allen:** I don’t want my audience to look at me any differently because everyone has their pre-formed political views and I don’t want to ostracize half the audience because I worked for a liberal government I want them to accept me on my performance as a presenter or journalist without any preconceived notion on their part... I think if I presented myself as a political journalist or analyst with a political role it’s far more relevant. In my current role I don’t think it’s relevant to what I do at all. But you know, as soon as that appears on your CV people might think differently of you. That’s how I’d feel about it anyway... But it’s been ten years now. I’d be quite comfortable saying that I spent three years as a political adviser to the then liberal government but it’s almost ancient history now. Its ten years of water under the bridge. It wouldn’t really worry me...It’s not something I have consciously avoided but I didn’t think it was particularly relevant to my role as presenter. Most of the people looking at my bio online are looking at it because of my on-camera work. They are interested in me as a presenter and I didn’t think it was relevant to that. (Allen, 2012)
5.4. The cost of disclosure: damage to reputation

What Craig Allen and the other interviewees are alluding to is what Davis (1998) describes as the cost of disclosing a conflict of interest. By that Davis (1998) means the act of disclosing one’s interest may solve one problem by avoiding a betrayal of trust, but it also ushers in another problem, that being damage to reputation (p. 591). By revealing that one has a potential or actual conflict of interest it can raise suspicion about the reliability of the person’s judgement in relation to that interest – a suspicion that the person will be biased in relation to that interest – even if the conflict no longer exists. It is in effect an invitation to moralism. It invites the judgement that the journalist has breached the journalistic ideal of independence and will therefore now be biased in his or her reporting. As discussed in chapter 1, the absence of contextual understanding of individual circumstances makes it easy for people outside of the situation to assume a simple position of moralism or judgmentalism and suspect the journalist of bias. Because of the risk of damage to his reputation, Craig Allen said he opted not to include his time as a political staffer more than ten years ago on his Curriculum Vitae. He chose to exclude it because he did not want to divide the audience over a conflict that did not exist and usher in an unnecessary perception of bias.

The following recent comment piece penned by the Managing Director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Mark Scott (2012) provides a useful illustration of the sometimes-lingering damage the perception of bias can do to the reputation of former political staffers who return to political journalism. In response to allegations of left wing bias at the ABC Mark Scott drew attention to long running accusations that veteran political reporter, Barrie Cassidy is biased in his commentary on the Insiders programme because of the time he spent as a media and policy adviser to former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke more than twenty years ago. In response to this issue Mark Scott wrote:

Some criticism of Insiders gets triggered by the observation that its outstanding host, Barrie Cassidy, once worked for Bob Hawke. There are many journalists who once worked in ministerial offices. But they should be judged on their performance not their resume. (Scott, 2012 orig. italics)
Similarly, in the case of Kerry O’Brien who said in his interview for this study that “people have dragged up the Whitlam connection” when they have wanted to accuse him of bias. O’Brien is philosophical about this saying it came with the territory and did not bother him:

*Kerry O’Brien: Oh no, look, I think people who have never put their foot inside a political camp but who have been vigorous journalists on the political front have all copped accusations of bias from one side or the other at times...it just kind of went with the job I guess...If people are passionate about their politics, some of them are going to view it through the prism of their own bias. *I mean my own attitude is whatever private views you have about politics if you have any desire to practice your craft successfully and that includes political coverage well then you are cutting off your nose to spite your face to play political games where you satisfy your own private political views. *I think you’d have a very short lived career or unhappy career.* (O’Brien, 2012)

On election night in 1996 when Paul Keating lost office to John Howard, satirical duo Roy and HG joined the panel of commentators on the 7.30 Report, hosted by Kerry O’Brien, and “addressed the ginger-haired presenter as ‘Red Kezza’, a nick name that has stuck” (Inglis, 2006 p. 372) and one that he wears with good grace and a sense of humour:

*Kerry O’Brien: Well ‘Red Kezza’ is somewhat ironic... used ironically by Roy and HG... but it stuck. It’s a nice combination. *I have red hair and... Although you’d have to say in this day and age to call someone a ‘red’ is a little outdated.* (O’Brien, 2012)

As the examples of Barrie Cassidy and Kerry O’Brien demonstrate, even when the circumstances that presented the ‘potential’ or ‘actual’ conflicts of interest have gone, a perception of bias can still linger. Barrie Cassidy finished working for Bob Hawke in 1991 which is more than twenty years ago, and Kerry O’Brien stopped working for Whitlam more than thirty years ago and still there is a perception of bias that lingers in the minds of some.

5.4.1. How long is long enough?

Other than the brief mention in clause five of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance – Journalists’ Code of Ethics (1998) there are no guidelines about how a journalist should go about disclosing conflicts of interest, whether that be past political employment or membership of an organisation. There are no guidelines about where that disclosure should appear and for how long. The following two examples highlight the ambiguity around the timeframe for disclosure.
On the night of the 2012 ACT election Craig Allen interviewed the former ACT Chief Minister Kate Carnell for ABC News in a live cross from the tally room.\textsuperscript{25} It was not disclosed to the viewers that Allen had been employed as Kate Carnell’s media adviser eleven years earlier. Given that Allen said he felt no conflict of interest in that he did not feel a sense of loyalty to the Liberal Party or loyalty to his former boss, then there should have been no need to disclose his previous employment. However, the journalists’ code of ethics states that a reporter should disclose conflicts of interest that “could be seen to affect, the accuracy, fairness or independence” of the reporter’s journalism (MEAA, 1998). That means interests that others might assume would affect the fairness of the journalist’s reporting, or, in other words, interests that might generate a perception of bias. The MEAA code requirement of disclosure raises the question about how long this disclosure needs to occur. For instance, should a reporter interviewing a former political employer – or any former employer, no matter how much time had passed – be required to reveal that connection to the audience even if it did not present the reporter with an actual conflict of interest? When asked about this particular situation Craig Allen said there was no other ABC reporter available on the night to conduct the interview, so he just got on and did his job as a professional reporter who had been tasked with interviewing all of the former ACT Chief Ministers in the tally room as part of the ABC’s rolling election coverage.

After eleven years of separation Craig Allen said he no longer felt the sense of loyalty he had whilst working for his former boss. He also said he had resisted all invitations to join the Liberal Party when he was a parliamentary media adviser because he did not see himself as a party political person.

In a different context however, Craig Allen did feel it was appropriate to disclose his work as a parliamentary media adviser because it was relevant to the story he was telling. When Kate Carnell resigned as Chief Minister in 2000 Gary Humphries became the new leader of the government in the ACT and Craig Allen became his media adviser. Following a recent divisive Senate pre-selection battle within the ACT Liberal Senator Humphries announced he would be

\textsuperscript{25} http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-10-20/kate-carnell-speaks-with-craig-allen/4324822
retiring from politics. Given the significant role Senator Humphries had played in Canberra’s political life the local edition of the ABC’s Stateline programme produced a profile piece looking back over the senator’s twenty-four year career. Craig Allen was assigned to that story and disclosed his connection with the Senator within the body of the story, because he said: “in the context of a longer, more personal profile piece it needed to be included”.

Another example where claims of a conflict of interest and perceptions of bias could have been raised involved an interview Kerry O’Brien conducted with Gough Whitlam for the 7.30 Report. Kerry O’Brien did the interview as part of coverage marking the 30th Anniversary of “the Dismissal”. During that interview it was not disclosed to the audience that O’Brien had been Whitlam’s media adviser in Opposition twenty-eight years earlier. When we talked about this during the interview Kerry O’Brien explained:

Kerry O’Brien: I would have been surprised if I didn’t raise it with my EP as to whether I should or not. But I think for a long time I could have reasonably taken the view that it was such common knowledge, it’s never something I have tried to keep secret, there is no point. I have talked quite openly about it many times. (O’Brien, 2012)

Kerry O’Brien’s history as a parliamentary media adviser is clearly stated in his biography on the ABC’s Four Corners website 26 so viewers can find out about his professional history if they are interested. After twenty-eight years and public acknowledgment of his former work history is ongoing disclosure of those facts still necessary, particularly if the conflict of interest no longer exists? Niki Savva said she was tired of having her former employment with Liberal Treasurer brought up and expressed her frustration about the situation this way:

Niki Savva: Whenever I am invited to go on some radio programme I say: ‘I just want to be Niki Savva columnist for the Australian’ but they say ‘you worked for Peter Costello’ and I say: ‘So? Barrie Cassidy worked for Hawke, Dennis Atkins worked for Goss... No one ever mentions it’. So why is there the need to constantly remind people? I am not ashamed of it. It is part of my life, but it was years ago. (Savva, 2012)

The experience of each of the interviewees was different in regard to perceptions of bias once they returned to journalism. The transcripts revealed that some of the interviewees like *Jill and

26 http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/presenter_kerry.htm
Vivienne Wynter felt they had not been confronted with concerns of bias after their return to reporting, whereas for others a suspicion of bias was unavoidable. When *Tom attempted to return to political reporting he said he was rejected by his former news organization. *Tom had worked for a high-profile, controversial politician and said he was told that he was “too hot to handle”:

*Tom: It took me a very long time to get a job. Because it was such a big defeat and because I had worked for such a high profile controversial minister it took me a long time to get a job and that was devastating. I did talk to some people in the ABC about coming back and I was told ‘No. Too hot to handle’. I was told that by a former Labor staffer ironically. He said, ‘no you’re too hot to handle’. So I tried to get jobs in the corporate sector and it took a long time. We were thrown out in March and I didn’t get a job until July. (*Tom, 2011)

### 5.4.2. Harder for Liberal Party staffers to return

*Tom was not the only interviewee who was unable to return to political reporting. In books written by former Liberal political staffers such as Parker (1990) and Savva (2010) there is a perception that Labor staffers found it much easier to return to political reporting than Liberal staffers. In his book The Courtesans, Richard Parker (1990), said the phenomenon of journalists moving between the Canberra press gallery and parliamentary media advising during the Hawke era was so prevalent it was like there was a “revolving door between the gallery and political staff” (p. 32) and the phenomenon was largely accepted. Whereas making a transition from the press gallery to the staff of a Liberal politician was not as easily forgiven.

The view that Liberal staffers have a harder time returning to political reporting than Labor staffers was also a view held by interviewees in this study who had worked for conservative politicians. When Niki Savva left Peter Costello’s office she said she tried to get a job back in the federal parliamentary press gallery but was unsuccessful. She wrote in her memoir: “a couple of attempts I made to get back into journalism went nowhere” (Savva, 2010, p286). This was a problem she had anticipated when she first took the job with Costello. As she saw it: “Only a very small number of senior journalists had left the gallery to work for the conservatives, and fewer still were ever welcomed back” (Savva, 2010, p. 108). Once she left politics, Niki Savva said it took about two years before she found regular work writing columns.
for *The Australian* newspaper and appearing as a political commentator on the ABC’s *Insiders* programme hosted by veteran political reporter and former media adviser to Bob Hawke, Barrie Cassidy.

*Niki Savva*: I knew once I took the job with Costello that I would be forever branded with it, I would have to wear it forever. I knew that it was always a lot harder for a journalist who had worked for a conservative politician to get back into the game...so I wasn’t surprised but I was a bit hurt I guess. I was disappointed in some people, basically, who didn’t want to know me. (Savva, 2012)

In her memoir, Savva (2010) refers to the experiences of another former Liberal media adviser, David Barnett, to illustrate the point:

When Malcolm Fraser’s former press secretary David Barnett was given a job in the Canberra bureau of Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* after Bob Hawke was elected prime minister, the NSW Right went ballistic, and exerted pressure on the paper’s Sydney executives to drop him. Every newly employed journalist is on three months’ probation, so it was no surprise when David found himself without a job at the end of that period (Savva, 2010, p. 60).

This story has become part of the anecdotal evidence given by other former Liberal staffers interviewed for this study who believe they have a more difficult time returning to the media than those who worked for Labor politicians.

Chris Kenny had been media adviser to Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, and became chief of staff to Liberal Opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull after the Howard government lost office in 2007. Then, when Turnbull lost the leadership to Tony Abbott by one vote over climate change policy, Kenny chose to leave politics. He said he was exhausted and needed a break. After a brief and unhappy time in the corporate sector in government relations he said he returned to the media but not as a political reporter. Because of his time as a political adviser to State and federal Liberal governments, as well as unsuccessfully running for Liberal Party pre-selection for the South Australian seat of Unley, he said it was a price that he accepted he had to pay because of the risk of perceptions of bias:

*Chris Kenny*: ...because of my background, I couldn’t go back to straight political reporting...I mean *The Australian* wouldn’t want me to. It wouldn’t look good for the
newspaper. It just wouldn’t work. I hasten to say I probably would do the job very well and I have good relations with many Labor cabinet ministers because I have dealt with them over the years and they would probably tell me more these days because I have been in negotiations with them over the years. But for appearances, I wouldn’t do that. (Kenny, 2012)

Instead he was employed by The Australian newspaper as an opinion and editorial writer. He shares the view with other former Liberal Party staffers that it might have been easier for him to return to reporting had he worked for the Labor side of politics.

**Chris Kenny:** I don’t want to sound too woe is me, but it is my considered opinion over many, many years as both a Labor voting journalist and then as a fiercely independent, swinging voter journalist and now as a person happy to identify himself as a rationalist or conservative if you like, having worked in the media, in media management and political management, that there are two different sets of rules in this country. That people can dip in out of the Labor Party and go back to journalism and it happens all the time and they can host national shows on the ABC and it’s not questioned. Well a Liberal wouldn’t be offered that opportunity. It wouldn’t happen... Kerry O’Brien, Barrie Cassidy, these people are never slated as left-wing commentators. It’s never even mentioned. But me and Niki Savva and whatever are pigeonholed like that. My view is not to fight against that but to try and make it part of my schtick I suppose. You’ve got to make a living. (Kenny, 2012)

Contrary to the view that Liberal staffers have difficulty returning, Dennis Shanahan, who worked for the NSW Liberal Attorney General, John Dowd in the Greiner government, did go straight back into political journalism, but not initially as a reporter. He was “laundered” through the system via a production role before returning to political reporting. Despite his ability to go back to political journalism Dennis Shanahan said he believed it is harder for Liberal staffers than Labor to return to political reporting:

**Dennis Shanahan:** I think what is interesting is there are more people who have been Labor advisers go from journalism to become Labor advisers and go back in to journalism than people who become Liberal advisers and come back in to journalism or go from journalism in to Liberal advising... I think it’s true. Anecdotally, I don’t have the evidence...but it is clear more people join Labor as advisers from journalism and go back than conservatives. I don’t know what it is. In my particular case it wasn’t anything party political, it was financial, but there is a decided trend there. (Shanahan, 2011)
As Dennis Shanahan said, anecdotally it would appear that fewer Liberal staffers do return to political journalism than Labor staffers and this study does appear to reflect that anecdotal trend. Of the twenty-one people interviewed as part of this research, six worked for Liberal politicians. Of those six people, two returned to mainstream political journalism having been initially laundered via backstage production roles; one went straight back in to general reporting; and three have not been able to return to political reporting and instead reinvented themselves as right-wing commentators to make a living. The remaining sixteen people I interviewed – all of whom worked for Labor state and federal politicians, bar one who worked for the Australian Democrats – returned to journalism directly or circuitously, as either political or general reporters. A range of different strategies were employed to manage their return to reporting, each of which are examined below.

### 5.5. Managing the return to reporting

For the eleven interviewees who were able to return to political reporting after their time as political staffers, different approaches were taken to manage the issue of conflict of interest and the perception of bias. In his article on conflict of interest, Davis (1998) says the best approach to dealing with these problems is by managing them according to the particular circumstances and people involved. In relation to the interviewees who did return to political reporting the transcripts showed that one of the factors that influenced the way his or her attempt to return to journalism was managed was whether the interviewee or the hiring editor was concerned about perceptions of bias and conflict of interest. The interviewees interpreted that level of concern as determining whether they: a) were “laundered” through the system before returning to political reporting; b) went straight back to political reporting; or c) sought a “cooling-off” period in between the two roles. Each of these management strategies is discussed in turn.

#### 5.5.1. Being “laundered”

Being “laundered” or “washed through” were terms used by the interviewees to describe a process used by editors to put some time between the returning journalist’s employment as a media adviser and an eventual return to political reporting. In relation to the remedies for
managing conflict of interest described by Davis (1998) being “laundered” resembles the “escape” strategy whereby the person manages to avoid actual and potential conflicts of interest by allowing enough time to pass for the conflict to subside. It also serves as a form of reputation management on the part of the news organization to avoid perceptions of bias for the news outlet itself as well as the reporter. For instance the interview transcripts revealed that the editor might initially place the returning journalist in a production role, such as being chief of staff in a bureau which has a co-coordinating and research role. Alternatively the editor might place the returning journalist in a reporting role unrelated to politics such as like legal affairs, property or business before allowing the returned journalist to make their way back to political reporting.

During his career “revolving” between the press gallery and media advising, Dennis Atkins said he was effectively “laundered” by two different editors. In 1981 Atkins was reporting on politics for The Sunday Mail newspaper when he was approached by South Australian Labor Senator Nick Bolkus to be his press secretary. When the Hawke Government was elected two years later Atkins then moved on to work for federal minister Mick Young. In 1985, Niki Savva – who was working at The Herald Sun in Melbourne – asked Atkins to be the chief of staff in Canberra, which he accepted. While not a frontline reporting role, the chief of staff position requires someone with strong contacts, knowledge and news sense to direct and manage story development. What could have been perceived as a conflict of interest was seen by his hiring editor as an opportunity to employ a journalist with valuable political contacts and knowledge of the incumbent Labor government:

*Niki Savva*: He was terrific. He was a really good operator. He had knowledge so I had no compunction, no hesitation. He was an asset. (Savva, 2012)

Three years later in 1988, Prime Minister Hawke’s office asked Dennis Atkins if he would work again for Nick Bolkus who had been elevated to the ministry, which Atkins did. When the Labor Party won government in Queensland twelve months later, led by Wayne Goss, Atkins was approached by the Premier’s chief of staff, Kevin Rudd, to run the new government’s media unit. Atkins said he accepted the challenge and performed the role as head of government communications for six years. When the Goss government lost office in 1995, Atkins was again directly approached by a newspaper to return to journalism, this time by The Courier Mail
newspaper in Brisbane. After three months of negotiations Atkins said he was again back in the media, but this time he was employed as a legal affairs reporter in a bid to “launder” him of his political identity before allowing him to meander his way back to political journalism:

**Dennis Atkins:** Chris [Mitchell, the editor] said, ’I can’t have you writing politics’. So he made me the legal affairs writer. I still look back on it and shake my head. I knew a bit about the law, but anyway I had fun doing that. Then after a year or so I wrote a mainly political gossip column and I did that for a few years and ...in the ’98 state election Chris had me writing a little political column and I did that in the ’98 federal election. And then in 2000 or 1999 he said ‘Do you want to go to Canberra?’ So I went down to Canberra for five years. By that time... there were still some people who thought that I was tarred by having worked for Goss, but not many. Most people I dealt with in politics got to know that I was going to deal with them fairly regardless of where they came from. (Atkins, 2011)

In both instances, Dennis Atkins was “laundered”. On the first occasion he was employed in the background role of chief of staff – albeit a pivotal role journalistically – and on his second re-entry in to journalism he was given the legal affairs round and thereby avoided any conflict of interest. Having been “washed through” the system twice Atkins said he supported the strategy of “laundering” to manage conflict of interest and perceptions of bias:

**Dennis Atkins:** I think it is good practice. I wouldn’t go as far as saying every editor should do it. But it’s what I would do if I were an editor hiring someone in that situation. (Atkins, 2011)

Like Dennis Atkins, Andrew Fraser had also been through the “revolving door” (Parker 1990) between journalism and political advising. During the 1980s Andrew said he left Brisbane to report on federal politics in Canberra. When the Goss Labor government was elected in Queensland he returned to his hometown with his young family to serve as the media adviser to two ministers over two terms. When the Goss government lost office, Fraser said he spent two years working as a freelance business journalist for two magazines, *Business Queensland* and *Asia Week* until the Beattie Labor government was elected in 1998. Fraser said he then returned to ministerial media advising – this time to Deputy Premier, Jim Elder – for an agreed period of two years, after which he would go back to journalism. Fraser said this second attempt to return to journalism took longer to re-establish himself as a reporter. After looking for a full-time job he said he was offered two days a week writing for the property section of *The Australian*
newspaper. In accepting the job Fraser said he interpreted the offer as a way for the editor to fill a small vacancy in the property section as well as “launder” him through the system to facilitate his return to political reporting:

**Andrew Fraser:** The then editor, Michael Stutchbury, said, ‘look we would like to have you on but we can’t quite at the moment’. But I gather with that a large part of it was being on probation. Nobody spelled it out to me but it was basically what it seemed to me. Interestingly, because I had been working for Labor governments for some time, I wrote almost exclusively about property and finance which weren’t things I was a natural at. It wasn’t really my past interest, but I sort of appreciated that that was the price I guess I had to pay. (Fraser, 2012)

After eighteen months, Fraser said he returned to fulltime reporting, including political reporting. He has remained with The Australian newspaper ever since and has been the Queensland political correspondent during that time. In the case of Andrew Fraser, he said he managed to return to political journalism after his two periods as a parliamentary media adviser by initially working in areas unrelated to politics, or being “laundered”, and then slowly making his way back. On both occasions the process of “laundering” helped him manage the issues of potential and actual conflicts of interest and perceptions of bias.

Kerry O’Brien was also effectively “laundered” before he returned to political journalism. Toward the end of his time working for the Deputy Labor Opposition leader, Lionel Bowen, Kerry O’Brien said he wanted to return to his former employer, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, but said he faced resistance at first:

**Kerry O’Brien:** When Gough lost I had the choice of trying to come back in to journalism or working within the Labor Party. My first choice was to come back to the ABC. My first conversation was with the head of current affairs Derek White, who was not enthusiastic. I then had a meeting with Talbot Duckmant, the head of the ABC, and I suggested to him that I understood that I could not go in to a frontline position reporting politics, not immediately, and I knew that the ABC was – as they had already demonstrated – very cautious if not timid about their relationship with the government. I suggested as a compromise that if there was a discomfort about me going back to current affairs reporting in Australia, then foreign correspondent might an option and I tried to interest him in the idea of opening a bureau in Africa. That might sound very presumptuous, but by then I was a serious current affairs reporter, I did have form on the board. I was just throwing that up as one possible option from them. I eventually got a letter from them saying ’terribly sorry we just don’t have a place at the moment’. I knew
there was resistance about me coming back even though they had no difficulty accepting at least one person I could think of, who had a press-secretary job with a Liberal minister. They had problems with mine. (O’Brien, 2012)

Unable to initially return to the ABC, Kerry O’Brien said he joined a friend’s production company and produced documentaries for twelve months before being offered two jobs in the mainstream commercial news media. While he said “I have never had a minute’s regret” about working for Gough Whitlam and Lionel Bowen, he said it did temporarily derail his progression as a journalist at the ABC:

Kerry O’Brien: It certainly held back, for a time, my sort of formal framework or core progression as a journalist had I stayed at the ABC throughout that period. It was only three years, but climbing out of that meant five years at the Seven Network because I went overseas as a correspondent before I was offered a job back at Four Corners. So that was five years away from my natural home if you like. What would I have done with my career in that time? Heaven knows, but I have absolutely no regrets. (O’Brien, 2012)

5.5.2. Straight back in:

Rather than take the circuitous route of “laundering” via unrelated areas of reporting such as legal affairs and property reporting, three of the interviewees took the direct route straight back to frontline political reporting. Unlike being “laundered” which demonstrated a level of concern by the editor about potential, actual or perceived conflict of interest and an attempt to ‘escape’ those conflicts, the three journalists who went “straight back in” to political reporting faced very few boundaries when they returned to political journalism. In terms of ways recognised by Davis (1998) to manage issues of conflict of interest, going “straight back in” to a situation where the conflict might arise is not nominated as a possible remedy. Instead of being able to escape the conflict of interest altogether, the interviewees were guided by their own judgement to manage each conflict if and when it arose.

When Marcus Priest went from policy advising for the Attorney General in the Rudd Government to political reporting for the Australian Financial Review newspaper two weeks later, he said his editor did not raise any concerns about conflict of interest or bias. However, Priest said he was aware of the potential for problems and navigated those delicate issues himself:
Marcus Priest: I wasn’t doing a round. I was writing across the spectrum, and I was worried about potential bias. I was just sort of very cautious in what I wrote and it has never come up. I have never been accused of bias, which I’ve been surprised about… I steered away from doing any coverage that involved my minister and in fact I probably will go back covering those areas now he’s gone. I have written a few stories and he’s been pretty sensitive…I’ve written about a possible cabinet reshuffle and I had to name him. I rang him beforehand and said, ‘I’m writing a story and I’m going to have to name you’ and he said, ‘Oh OK’, but a lot of my former colleagues said ‘Ooh how can you be writing that? That’s a bit close to the bone’ and I say, ‘well I have to do it. You know as well as I do he is a potential reshuffle candidate’. (Priest, 2011)

As discussed earlier, Marcus Priest was confronted with an actual conflict of interest when he returned to political reporting two weeks after leaving the office of the incumbent Attorney General. He described feeling “gutted” having to write about the minister and government he had just worked for. He said he felt he was betraying the trust of his former ministerial staffing colleagues. However, Priest said this situation eased once there was a change of leadership and reshuffle of cabinet which meant the actual conflict of interest was reduced to a potential conflict, a situation which Davis (1998) acknowledges is much easier to manage.

*Kelly also went straight back to political reporting when she left her minister’s office. While she was still working in the minister’s office, *Kelly said she had been approached more than once by her old newspaper to return to political reporting. In her negotiations with the hiring editor *Kelly said there was no discussion about actual or potential conflicts of interest or concerns about perceptions of bias:

*Kelly: No, not really. [The newspaper is] not that politically heavy anyway. They aren’t really interested in the machinations. They should be but they’re not. I wrote a lot of policy still – “retail politics” – the stuff that affects people. Less about two ministers fighting and more about “they have introduced a policy that will do this, this and that”. (*Kelly, 2011)

However, when it came to being asked to write about her former minister *Kelly said she recognised that she did have a conflict of interest and drew the line:

*Kelly: I just think it’s a conflict for everyone involved. I think 1) I shouldn’t be doing it because I have a bias straight away; 2) I think you sign a contract saying that you can’t divulge anything while you’re in government. I can’t remember but I think that is what I signed… Also how could I be credible? I couldn’t. (*Kelly, 2011)
*Kelly said the conflict arose because the chief of staff at the newspaper wanted her to write a story about her former minister’s private life and *Kelly refused:

*Kelly: I was offended because it wasn’t my ability they were asking for. It was because of my relationship. I flatly said ‘no’ and I let [my former minister’s] office know that they were sniffing around...I know it’s newsworthy. I would do the story if it was anyone else, I would do it in a heartbeat. But I couldn’t do it. I would be uncomfortable by the way it was written; I’d be uncomfortable with the headline. I just couldn’t do it to [my former minister]. (*Kelly, 2011)

In response to the chief of staff’s request *Kelly said she was forced to draw her own limits to avoid a conflict of interest. Based on *Kelly’s account it appears no concern was expressed about placing *Kelly in a morally difficult position. Instead, the senior editorial staff at the newspaper saw her personal conflict as a benefit to the newspaper that would help them get the story. It is this very type of conflict of interest generated by having good contacts, personal relationships in government, and insight into contemporary policy and political issues that makes a returning journalist so attractive to an editor. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, for the hiring editor it is a matter of making a cost-benefit analysis by weighing up the risk of perception of bias and conflict of interest against the benefit of hiring someone with strong contacts and the ability to break stories.

The third parliamentary media adviser in this study to return directly and immediately to political reporting is perhaps the most high profile Australian example. Greg Turnbull was media adviser to Prime Minister Paul Keating from 1991 – 1996 and then to Opposition leader Kim Beazley until 2001. During the 2001 federal election Turnbull said he and his Liberal counterpart were approached by Network Ten about coming to work on its Sunday morning political programme Meet the Press. When Labor was defeated Turnbull said he accepted the offer and went straight from the Labor Opposition leader’s office to political reporting “pretty seamlessly”. Aware this move might be viewed with some suspicion, Turnbull said he cancelled his Labor Party membership before he went back to political reporting to reduce accusations of bias and conflict of interest:

Greg Turnbull: I resigned the week before I started with Channel Ten. I mean I didn’t resign in disgust with the Labor Party, I resigned because I knew there would be hostility
to me going in to journalism and so I didn’t want to add to that by someone being able to prove I was a member of the party. I don’t think many journalists are members of political parties and if they are, I think they probably shouldn’t be, because it would get in the way a little bit. I am conscious that I’m arguing against myself, but the act of being a member of a political party is at odds with being an objective political reporter of news. (Turnbull, 2011a)

Accounts of that time (Charlton, 2003; Savva, 2010) claim that Prime Minister John Howard was so angry about Greg Turnbull’s immediate return to political reporting after ten years of working for two Labor leaders, he refused to go on the Sunday morning programme. However, this version of events is disputed by Turnbull and others who were parliamentary media advisers at the time:

**Greg Turnbull:** Well I’m not so egotistical to think that that’s true. But it is the case and I don’t want to name names, but it is the case that the Prime Minister’s press secretary was fairly vocally hostile...saying: ‘You can’t employ this guy, why did you do that?’.. That was just grizzle level... that’s not the same as a formal complaint... I think it might have been a straw on the camel’s back but I don’t think it was the bale of hay on the camel’s back. Look I must say in all of the time...I never had anyone allude to my background publically, except Alexander Downer. He was the only minister I ever took part in a press conference with who made reference to that and he did it two or three times. (Turnbull, 2011a)

The purpose here is not to establish the truth of this; the role of the above example is to demonstrate how concerns of bias can be generated when a parliamentary media adviser returns to political reporting. Similar concerns were raised in the media about U.S. President Bill Clinton’s media spokesman, George Stephanopoulos, who took a job with the American Broadcasting Corporation as a commentator and later as political correspondent27 after he left the White House. As discussed earlier, to an outsider the act of a journalist joining a political party might appear to be a declaration of loyalty and present them with either a potential or actual conflict of interest depending on the story they were covering. It is thus hardly surprising that an outsider might wonder how a journalist could go from being a card-carrying member of a

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27 For more on concerns of bias surrounding George Stephanopoulos’ return to journalism see (Calderone, 2009; Stephanopoulos, 2000).
political party one week to a non-partisan reporter the next. Greg Turnbull, however, argued that this was not as implausible as it sounded. His argument was that it was possible for a journalist to return to reporting ‘objectively’ and leave their personal beliefs behind by following the basic tenets of journalism ethics and behaving professionally. Everyone has their own opinions, Turnbull said, but as journalists they are required to keep their personal beliefs to themselves:

**Greg Turnbull:** I think it’s achievable and it’s achievable this way. Journalists are citizens too. They vote. They are allowed to have views. Some of them wear them on their sleeve more than others, but at the end of the day everyone has a right to their political opinion. It would seem to me to be pretty clear cut that your political opinion shouldn’t influence news – particularly news – I’m a bit of a purist about news. (Turnbull, 2011a)

By following the journalistic values of fairness and balance, Turnbull said he felt he was able to do his job professionally:

**Greg Turnbull:** I just think that there’s a protocol about the way news stories are reported and if you stick to that it’s not impossible to have a strong view. The best example in the last ten years of Australian political life is the border protection issue because everyone I know over the age of about eight has a view about the rights and wrongs of onshore processing and deterrents and boat people and refugees and we’ve all heard all of the arguments and that 2001 election was, very much about that, children overboard. Everyone has a view about that, so if you only wanted people who didn’t have a view about that to report on it nobody would be able to do stories. So I think that it’s perfectly acceptable that a journalist, not withstanding their strong political views about a particular issue, can actually separate that and put a credible news story to air in that it is objective and reporting the latest on this story. (Turnbull, 2011a)

Though Greg Turnbull said he was never accused of bias and was able to leave his personal views at home, the experiences of the interviewees have demonstrated that there is ample opportunity for parliamentary media advisers to be confronted with potential and actual conflicts of interest if they return to political reporting. As the interview data showed, those conflicts emerged for the interviewees because of their loyalty to their former politician and colleagues. However there was a second risk of conflict of interest that the interviewees who were employed as ministerial staff faced, and that risk was in relation to the misuse of information obtained by them during their time working for government, which is discussed directly below.
5.6. **Post-public employment separation restrictions or “cooling-off”**

Up until now this chapter has focused on loyalty as the possible source of actual and potential conflict of interest for the interviewees. However, there is a more common interpretation of conflict of interest which is in relation to financial interests. For instance, a concern about conflict of interest on financial grounds might arise when politicians do not declare that they or their family members hold shares in a company that benefits from government contracts, or changes in policy. In that sense the minister would be using “insider information” to benefit themselves or others. An example of this involving the purchase of a mining lease was recently investigated by the Independent Commission Against Corruption (I.C.A.C.) in New South Wales. In the case of ministerial advisers, concerns were also recently raised about the chief of staff to New South Wales Premier, Barry O’Farrell, who accepted a job with Woolworths as its government relations manager while still employed in the Premier’s office. The Opposition called for the adviser to stand down citing a recommendation from I.C.A.C. for ministerial staff to avoid taking on lobbying roles for a period of twelve months after government employment in order to avoid a conflict of interest based on the use of insider information.

While Davis (1998) does not refer to the use of insider information directly in his explanation of conflict of interest, codes of conduct for ministers in various parts of Australia and many OECD nations do refer to this scenario and take different approaches to reduce the risk of it occurring. With increasing employment traffic between government and the private sector an OECD report into *Post-Public Employment: Good Practices for Preventing Conflict of Interest* (2010) states there is a growing recognition of the risk of conflict of interest by employees using insider information when they leave government employment. This is seen as a risk which can lead to the integrity of government being undermined (OECD, 2010). In order to manage this risk and preserve public trust in government, the OECD report documents that it is increasingly common for jurisdictions to introduce codes of conduct or legislation requiring a “cooling-off” period, or time restriction in between leaving the employment of government and commencing work in policy related areas that might present a conflict of interest (OECD, 2010, p. 67).
The type of time restrictions required of government ministers and their advisers varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. For instance in Australia all jurisdictions, other than Victoria and the Northern Territory, there are post-employment restrictions in place in relation to government ministers (McKeown, 2012). However, only four out of eight Australian State and Territory governments have post employment restrictions relating to ministerial advisers. Under the federal *Standards of Ministerial Ethics* (Australian Government, 2010) ministers are obliged not to engage in lobbying activities for a period of eighteen months or take advantage of information “which they have had access to as a minister, where that information is not generally available to the public” (p. 5). Under the commonwealth *Lobbying Code of Conduct* (Australian Government, 2013) federal ministerial advisers face a shorter “cooling-off” period of twelve months after they cease employment. During that time ministerial advisers are obliged not to “engage in lobbying activities relating to any matter that they had official dealings with in their last 12 months of employment” (Aust. Govt., p. 4). It is important to note that these time restrictions are only put forward in codes of conduct which have not been legislated and therefore are difficult to enforce. Nonetheless, whether legislated or not, jurisdictions around the world are adopting post-employment time restrictions as a way of attempting to manage conflict of interest and misuse and government information.

While the post-employment restrictions in Australia do not apply to ministerial advisers seeking employment in the media, the risk of a conflict of interest regarding the use of “insider information” obtained whilst working for government is still relevant. In the case of ministerial advisers returning to political journalism the potential for using information or contacts acquired while in government is what makes them attractive to future employers. For instance they might have knowledge of sensitive information to apply for under the Freedom of Information Act, or they might simply have a contemporary knowledge of events that is seen as useful to a news editor – a point Niki Savva made about hiring Dennis Atkins, after his time working for Hawke government: “He was terrific. He was a really good operator. He had knowledge so I had no compunction, no hesitation. He was an asset”.

Given the potential for conflict of interest in relation to issues of loyalty and the use of insider information faced by parliamentary media advisers seeking employment as political journalists
this study explores whether a formalised scheme of post-employment time restriction or “cooling off” period might provide a useful remedy. In terms of Davis’ (1998) definition of conflict of interest, a time restriction or “cooling-off” period could be seen as a management strategy to help the parliamentary media adviser avoid or ‘escape’ an actual or potential conflict situation.

In relation to the two potential sources of conflict of interest – loyalty and the misuse of insider information – the interviewees’ comments revealed that the former was more likely to present a risk than the latter. Based on the interview data the study participants did not recall having any difficulty resisting the temptation to divulge sensitive information. While some of the interviewees did possess contemporaneous privileged information when they returned to journalism, none of them implied that they had trouble keeping it secret. For example, when Barrie Cassidy left Prime Minister Hawke’s office he said he was asked to write articles about the leadership battle between Prime Minister Hawke and his Deputy, Paul Keating, which he did. In doing so Barrie Cassidy said he did not disclose sensitive information:

_Barrie Cassidy: I didn’t reveal any secrets, they were just anecdotes that were meaningless in a political sense but interesting just the same._ (Cassidy, 2011)

The transcripts revealed the interviewees felt they were either ethically bound not to reveal information from their time of political employment and/or they were aware that the disclosure of sensitive government information could invite penalties under the _Crimes Act 1914_. Rather than reveal that information and breach confidentiality provisions, the interviewees say the inside knowledge they had gained provided a deeper understanding of issues that informed their work as reporters by helping them better frame questions, know where to look for information and how to interpret political responses.

In response to questions about the concept of a “cooling-off” period, most of the interviewees did not support the idea of a formalised period of exclusion for parliamentary media advisers before returning to political reporting, however two of the interviewees did see it as a possible remedy for dealing with conflicts of interest arising out of a sense of loyalty. Marcus Priest, who (as noted above) felt “gutted” when he had to report on his former boss soon after returning to political reporting, said a period of time-off in between the two roles might have helped to
alleviate that moral dilemma. In hindsight Priest said he wished that someone had urged him not to return to political reporting so soon after leaving his advising role with the Attorney General:

_Marcus Priest:_ ...it was all driven by financial security and I don’t know whether I could have taken more time off but in hindsight I really wish I had taken more time off. I am just amazed at the time no one in government said to me ‘you can’t go back in’ or ‘you shouldn’t do this’. So I really wish I had, looking back on it. (Priest, 2011)

Barrie Cassidy also found it beneficial to have a period of time off in between working for Prime Minister Hawke and his return to political reporting. Based on his experience Barrie Cassidy said he believed a period of separation was essential for a journalist to regain perspective:

_Barrie Cassidy:_ Absolutely. For a start you just need to wash it out of your system. It’s not just the public perception, that matters, and all the sort of stakeholders see that and so they haven’t removed you from where you were. But within your own mind I think you need to do it. Just so that you can build that bridge, have a bit of reflection about what was really working and what wasn’t and be a bit more objective about things. So I think that’s the way it worked for me. (Cassidy, 2011)

Barrie Cassidy’s interpretation of this experience, however, was not universally supported by the interviewees. In his interview, Kerry O’Brien said a blanket rule requiring time-off was not necessarily the best way to manage the issues of conflict of interest and bias. Although Kerry O’Brien said he did experience difficulty in his initial attempts to return to the ABC, he said he was confident about his ability to step back into the role of political reporting and perform the job professionally:

_Kerry O’Brien:_ I think it depends entirely on the person and the organisation. I mean I would not have had any trouble walking straight back in to a job. I would have been able to... I think I would have backed myself to have slipped quite comfortably back into the role of the even-handed reporter but I can understand that if there is a perception that because you’ve gone from there to there in a minute that you are going to take some of the baggage of that across and if those perceptions are substantial enough then that is potentially going to retard your value. I understand the mentality at work but I don’t think it’s necessary. It depends on the person. If the person is mature enough and has their integrity and understands the importance of broader credibility then I don’t think there is an issue. Barrie Cassidy is classic of that. (O’Brien, 2012)

The reference made by Kerry O’Brien to being able to “slip back” into “even-handed” reporting is a reference to conceptions of professionalism and ethical practice in journalism as prescribed
by the journalists’ code of ethics (MEAA, 1998). Based on similar grounds, Greg Turnbull and Dennis Shanahan argued that having a “cooling-off” period between the roles – whether voluntary or enforced – was unnecessary:

**Greg Turnbull:** ...you know the radical view is ‘no, if you’ve worked for a politician you are always biased and you can never be a political reporter again’ and I certainly don’t support that. Or, that there should be a certain period of time, well for how long? If you are a zealot about it, one month, one year, three years, that’s just like time in the sin bin and then you can come back and be as partisan as you like? Is that how it works? I don’t think so. (Turnbull, 2011a)

Dennis Shanahan agreed that having time off would not necessarily result in a person changing his or her beliefs. Instead, he argued the emphasis should to be on a person’s ethical and professional conduct once the person has returned to reporting:

**Dennis Shanahan:** I think [a “cooling-off” period is] probably desirable, but if you’re a card-carrying member of the Greens and you go and work for the Greens and then you come back and work for Green Left Weekly, is it going to make any difference if you have a three-month “cooling-off” period or twelve months of gardening leave? No, it won’t change your attitude. That’s why my point is this: We have to carry with us our ethics and our standards individually and no “cooling-off” period is going to make any difference. I would have done the job I did here if I had come down the day after. As it was I had a six-week break. Is that six weeks ‘washing through’? Is the fact that I came to more of a desk-editing job is that more washing through than becoming political correspondent? I think the individual and how they do the job is the test of that. (Shanahan, 2011b)

Like Dennis Shanahan, other interviewees felt they were able to do their jobs as professional fair journalists by relying on their journalistic ethics and rules of storytelling, once they returned to journalism from parliamentary media advising. While they did not perceive themselves as being biased in their reporting once they returned, some of the interviewees said they were very mindful that others might perceive them to be. In a bid to counter those perceptions several of the interviewees said they attempted to correct for perceptions of bias in the way they reported. This issue is discussed below.
5.7. Correcting for bias

The study found that a common strategy employed by several of the interviewees was to be seen not just to be fair in their reporting but to be “scrupulously fair” in an attempt to correct for any external perceptions of bias:

*Dennis Atkins:* Certainly early on when I started at The Courier [Mail newspaper], yeah, I was being scrupulously fair. I don’t think I was overcompensating. Although some people in the Labor Party thought I was. You do feel an increased pressure on you to be fair and even-handed. If you are going to make criticism, especially commentary, about the conservative side of politics, then it has to be soundly based. It can’t just be a rant or something like that. (Atkins, 2011)

*Sarah:* After twelve months being back in the gallery, I felt OK, fine, I have proved my credentials. I have taken my time to be seen to be balanced. I can relax. No one has accused me of bias. No one has overtly shut me out because of where I had worked. (*Sarah, 2012)

In the desire to be seen as “scrupulously fair” *Helen and Greg Turnbull were also mindful of the risk of overcompensating for perceptions of bias and as a result end up not being fair to the side of politics they had worked for:

*Helen:* I am very conscious of where I think there is a conflict of acknowledging it to myself and really trying to balance things. To try and step outside and to ask myself ‘am I making an impartial judgement here? – Am I dealing with this issue any differently than I would deal with an issue that didn’t involve someone I knew in politics or some party position that I personally have some sympathy for? More of the issue here is I might be harder on someone that I know or on a Labor party position and I have to ask myself ‘am I being too hard? Am I putting too much of the opposite counter argument in an effort to be balanced? Am I overcompensating?’ I have had that going on in my head about some of the decisions I have made. (*Helen, 2012)

*Greg Turnbull:* Yeah, certainly compensating. If I was doing a story about John Howard shortly after leaving Kim Beazley’s staff and it was not a good story for the government I would certainly think ‘OK, have I got that right? Have I covered myself by making sure I’ve got the corresponding view’ and, as I say, the test of that is that I never had to deal with any complaints. Now that could be that I over compensated too much. I don’t know. (Turnbull, 2011a)

Having disclosed their political experience and opened themselves up to possible accusations of bias, the issue of a double-standard was raised by a few of the interviewees. By double-standard
the interviewees meant they perceived different levels of accountability being applied to political reporters who had previously been parliamentary media advisers and reporters who had strong personal political leanings but were not required to declare them because they had not worked for a politician. The interviewees felt that because they had worked as parliamentary media advisers it made them vulnerable to perceptions of bias, whereas other reporters with an undeclared sympathy for particular causes or political leanings would remain unchallenged.

Some of the interviewees argued that because these journalists were not required to disclose their leanings, they did not feel a pressure to be “scrupulously fair” because no one was watching them suspiciously:

**Chris Kenny:** *I have thought about this quite a bit before I came back in and my view is there are two important elements. One, is that all journalists carry their own ideological baggage – though many of them who have never worked for any political party who have extremely political views and I see it coming through in their coverage sometimes and I don’t like it – but they tell you and their audiences that they are completely political neutral. They are neutered. They are political eunuchs which is a nonsense. This is the nonsense that far too many journalists try to portray. Some journalists are like that. You really wouldn’t know. They are just straight up and down and good on them, but there are a lot of political journalists who pretend to be political eunuchs and we all know that they are not.* (Kenny, 2012)

In the context of this study, the debate amongst the interviewees about whether post-separation employment restrictions were necessary in relation to political staff seeking employment as political journalists came down to whether the interviewee believed they could be ‘objective’ or not. Inspired by the traditions of empiricism the journalistic principle of objectivity has come to be defined by six key elements of reporting: factuality, fairness, non-bias, independence, non-interpretation, neutrality and detachment (Ward, 2004, p. 19). In short, getting the facts right and putting one’s personal views aside when telling a story. Some of the interviewees felt their experience as a parliamentary media adviser led them to strive harder to reach this ideal than perhaps other reporters who had not worked as press secretaries:

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28 Discussion about the role of objectivity in journalism is extensive and a detailed examination is beyond the scope of this thesis. For more on objectivity in journalism see (Maras, 2013; Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1972; Ward, 2008).
Greg Turnbull: An illustration of someone who doesn’t get the need for objectivity as a journalist was (X)... Everything about (that person) would tell you (her) opinion about a certain issue. ‘Oh Greg this is terrible, how could Labor do this?’ Save it for a dinner party. (She is) an example of people who are crusading journalists with those views. To me that is a person who is more eligible to be disqualified from news journalism than someone who has happened to have worked for a politician because for me that is crossing the line. If you want to be an activist join a lobby group. Don’t masquerade as a news journalist to press your personal views. Maybe that’s why people would look at somebody like me and say he shouldn’t have been allowed to be a journalist. All I can say is that is never what I was doing as a news journalist. After years of being acculturated into it, I think I get the objectivity required to do a news story. (Turnbull, 2011a)

What these examples highlight is the value of the comparative insights the interviewees have into the role of the journalist and the role of parliamentary media adviser which challenge external perceptions of both. Rather than seeing issues of bias and conflict of interest as being limited to parliamentary media advisers who have returned to political reporting, the interviewees perceived the issue as being much broader and applying also to reporters with undeclared conflicts of interest. Instead of allowing their political or personal sympathies to colour their work, some of the interviewees thought they were under enormous scrutiny, more than their journalism peers who had not worked for politicians. Instead of being at risk of positive bias toward their former political boss, the interviewees were aware of the risk of overcompensating in their pursuit to be seen as “scrupulously fair”.

So far this chapter has focussed on the difficulties associated with conflicts of interest and perceptions of bias, but the return to journalism also allowed the interviewees to see it with fresh eyes. The following final reflections from the interviewees will bring the journey between the two roles to a close, and also point to the future.

5.8. A new perspective on journalism

The transcripts show that some of the interviewees such as Dennis Shanahan, *Jill and *Helen never really enjoyed the experience of parliamentary media advising and felt a sense of relief when they returned to reporting. As *Jill expressed it:
*Jill: I just felt from a storytelling point of view and a journalist point of view it went against my basic instinct. I think it went against the grain of who I was. It was partly why I look back on the time with disdain. (*Jill, 2012)

For others, the re-entry to journalism was an anti-climax. After what many of the interviewees described as a challenging, exhausting and stimulating period working as an adviser at the heart of political decision making, several said they felt disappointed on their initial return to journalism. For *Adam reporting felt trivial in comparison to dealing with weighty policy issues:

*Adam: Returning to journalism felt superficial because whatever the broad public perceptions – and we love to denigrate our politicians – they are involved in the serious business of public administration and doing good for the nation. OK there are dickheads there and there are people who are ambitious…but essentially they are people, the politicians and the advisers and the public servants, who are engaged intellectually in trying to grapple with problems for the public good. And they are dealing with all the issues and examining issues with a deal of intellectual rigour. Journalists generally speaking are skating across the surface. In a superficial way they are moths. We have left the back porch light on and there’s a whole lot of moths flying around. (*Adam, 2011)

*Sarah said the superficiality of news coverage made her question the importance of journalism.

*Sarah: I have to say the first year or so I went back to [a tabloid newspaper] …I thought ‘Oh god, this is so trivial. And what really is the value in this?’ (*Sarah, 2012)

Similar reflections were made by former Labor MP and journalist Maxine McKew. In her first interview after losing the seat of Bennelong she said journalism did not compare with politics:

I worked hard and conscientiously as a journalist. But that cannot compare with the work that you do as a representative …Journalism is a doddle compared to the life of an MP … The responsibility is significant. There is little I can think of in my journalistic career that is on a par with that. What you do in public life matters, it has consequence. And I really miss it. (McKew quoted in Davies, 2011)

Marcus Priest recalled a sense of grief about no longer having access to important information once he was back in the newsroom:

Marcus Priest: I think you go through stages, like stages of grieving when you leave. When I first left I could feel this pressure lift off my shoulders and I didn’t have to worry
about anything. So it was two weeks of feeling great and liberated and then you start thinking ‘Oh god. What’s going on? I want to know what is going on’. It’s like you got off the merry-go-round and you can see it all whizzing by and you want to know what’s going on. As a journalist you have to find those things out and all the doors are locked to me. I want to know what’s going on. And when you are writing you know you are writing only about ten percent of what is going on. You know it’s superficial you know there is information out there that would make it interesting and that makes it worse. (Priest, 2011)

In contrast to these feelings of anti-climax expressed by some of the interviewees, the transcripts also reflected an overwhelmingly positive interpretation of having worked as a parliamentary media adviser. The participants who returned to some form of reporting said their time as parliamentary media advisers had been beneficial to their journalism. As Barrie Cassidy explained it, his time as a prime ministerial staffer made him a “far better political journalist than I would have been had I never been through this experience”. The interviewees attributed this benefit to the deep understanding they were able to develop about the political process and the complexity of governing:

Niki Savva: I know more about how things work, what motivates them, how things fit together, even if I don’t know the people in particular. (Savva, 2012)

Marcus Priest: Oh it’s made me a much better journalist. I understand the process of government. I see stories where other people don’t see stories. (Priest, 2011)

Marcus Priest said his experience as a policy adviser helped him look beyond the ‘spin’ in media releases and ask more insightful questions. Alex Wake shared a similar reflection:

Alex Wake: I think I am a much better journalist for it. I think I understand journalism better. I think I understand politics better. Often I will hear a story and go ‘that’s such a beat up’. I am a much better predictor of what’s going to happen with the public mood. I see much more how stupidly important the media is in making government decisions. (Wake, 2011)

These views are supported by the reflections of William Safire, a former aide to US President Richard Nixon, who joined the New York Times newspaper in 1973 after he left the president’s staff. Writing about the benefits of his time in government, Safire noted:
Having learned to skirt an issue or fuzz up a statement on the inside helps a journalist detect such manipulation of words when on the outside. When on the inside, you develop lifelong relationships with people you trust (and you remember those less trustworthy). After you have crossed the street, these friendships can lead to confidential sourcemanship: the art of getting information from insiders, or predecessors of insiders, that you as a journalist are not supposed to get (Safire in Kovach, 2007, p. 117).

In addition to being better able to detect the presence of ‘spin’, Craig Allen said his experience as a parliamentary media adviser taught him to look further into stories and not accept a person’s claims at face value:

*Craig Allen:* I think that one of the things I took out of working in those offices is that the story is always far more complex than journalists would like to think it is. As an example you might have somebody who knocks on your door as a journalist and says ‘the government screwed me over, they are not helping my family’. From another perspective as the media adviser you recognise this is a dispute that has been going on for ten years. This person might have mental health issues. I guess I learned as a journalist coming out of that process to be a little more sceptical and not as accepting of a story being as black and white as a person would have me believe. They are often very murky. (Allen, 2012)

Although *Jill* said she thought the experience had made her a better journalist, her brief time as parliamentary media adviser left her feeling less trusting of politics:

*Jill:* I came back to journalism with much more scepticism about politicians. Sadly, I think I had a much more naive view of the world before I became a press sec and I think at times I felt disappointed. When I returned to journalism there were many times when I felt I just couldn’t believe the politicians and what they were saying. (*Jill, 2012*)

Not only did the interviewees say the experience provided them with a greater understanding of politics and the complexity of governing, all of the interviewees who returned to journalism, said the experience had given them a greater appreciation for how hard politicians worked and what motivated them. In several cases, with the exception of *Jill*, this lead to a greater respect for politicians and reduced their cynicism about the political process:

*Kerry O'Brien:* I haven’t pondered it much because I learnt such a lot about the political process which I think has lead me to be much more understanding about the nature of politicians. Maybe sometimes you wouldn’t pick it in my questioning but I have never had any trouble having a broad based respect for politicians on both sides because I have seen close up the politicians at work, where they are much more candid behind closed doors amongst their own ranks. I think I understand much more the wear and tear
of the kind of necessary compromise that is just a fundamental part of democracy. Democracy does not work without compromise. Compromise as you know is a wearing process and a necessary one. Where the argument comes in, is discerning between acceptable compromise and unacceptable compromise; between well motivated compromise and cynical compromise. Even if the motivation for compromise is cynical it doesn’t mean it’s the wrong outcome. So ...as a political journalist I think I have been much less inclined to cynicism than any number of my colleagues – sceptical, yes; strongly sceptical, yes. Cynical, I hope no. I think that is incredibly important. I have seen some quite senior journalists disguise their lack of instinctive understanding of politics by resorting to cynicism as their sort of foundation: ‘No politician is to be trusted’; ‘the basis of all political decision making is self-interest’, that kind of stuff because I know that stuff is not right. (O’Brien, 2012)

The final word goes to Greg Turnbull who reflected on his experience as a parliamentary media adviser this way:

**Greg Turnbull:** The view I support is that working in a political office for a politician is educational for a journalist. It can be beneficial. It broadens the journalist and it can add to their effectiveness and their ... if you like the quality or depth of experience in their reporting... So I think going in to journalism from doing that helps, adds value to your journalism, in the sense that you can interpret when talking to a press secretary. You can sort of read between the lines a little bit more than you might have otherwise been able to do. It helps your ability to interpret what’s happening. So I think it’s actually good for democracy and for journalism for people to do that. (Turnbull, 2011a)

What is so interesting about these closing remarks from Kerry O’Brien and Greg Turnbull is that they both believed that crossing to the ‘dark side’ of parliamentary media advising and back had enabled them both to improve their performance as ‘watchdog’ journalists. Not only because they had both gained greater insight into the workings of government and the techniques of ‘spin’, but because the experience had reduced their cynicism in the political process, which can have a corrosive effect on political discourse (Brants, 2010; Cappella, 1997; Van Dalen, 2011). Their reflections highlight the benefits of changing roles that Bowman (1949) referred to more than sixty years ago. Bowman (1949) wrote that walking in another person’s shoes provides us “with opportunities to observe the dynamics of others and of ourselves” and offered “the raw material from which the texture of new insight can be woven” (pp. 195-196). Turnbull and O’Brien reflected that those new insights had made them better and less cynical political journalists, which Greg Turnbull considered to be good for democracy.
5.9. Chapter summary

Throughout the final leg in the journey from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again, this fifth chapter continued to explore the themes of moralism, idealism and trust. Via the candid reflections of the interviewees about their attempts to return to journalism, this chapter examined the impact that concerns about conflict of interest and bias can have on the ability of parliamentary media advisers to return to journalism, particularly political reporting, once they leave politics. In doing so, this chapter revealed a disconnect between the ideal of disclosing conflicts of interest in journalism as espoused by the journalists’ code of ethics (MEAA, 1998) and how the interviewees perceived conflicts of interest were managed in practice. The interviewees recalled that concerns about conflicts of interest and perceptions of bias were raised with them by some of the hiring editors, but not all. In response to the editor’s level of concern, the interviewees perceived they were either employed by the editor or “laundered” through a role unrelated to politics before making a circuitous return. In other cases, the interviewees said they returned directly to political reporting without the issues of conflict of interest or perceptions of bias being raised with them. Similarly, some of the interviewees said they were personally concerned about potential conflicts of interest and perceptions of bias and ‘escaped’ the problem by avoiding reporting on politics once they returned to journalism; whereas other interviewees were not concerned and went straight back to reporting on politics immediately. The variation in the approaches taken by the interviewees and their hiring editors highlights the inconsistency between ideals of journalistic independence and requirements of the journalists’ code of ethics for disclosure of conflicts of interest, and the reality of practice.

This chapter also highlighted the ongoing theme of trust that has featured throughout this thesis. Instead of trust arising out of the relationship between reporter and source, this time the issue of trust arose between the returning journalist and the public. As discussed early in the chapter, the issue of trust with the public arises when a journalist has a conflict of interest. Because the public relies on journalists to be impartial and independent, if a journalist has a conflict of interest it threatens that independence and thereby can jeopardize the public’s trust in the journalist. One way to avoid this breach of trust is for the journalist to declare the conflict of interest. However, in doing so, this chapter highlighted the act of disclosure can also cause
damage to the journalist’s reputation. This tension between disclosure as a remedy for public trust as well as a source of possible reputational harm also highlighted a tension between idealism and moralism. In order to observe the ideal of disclosure the interviewee was also aware they would be inviting the judgement and moralism of others in the form of suspicion of bias. That suspicion of bias might have been well founded, but it might also have been unfair. The conflict of interest might have no longer existed or the journalist might have had the confidence in their professionalism to report accurately and fairly despite his or her previous political experience. In the absence of knowing the individual contextual circumstances, it would have been easy for others to make the moralistic assumption of bias based on an expectation that the journalist had developed a partisan loyalty and could no longer fulfil the journalism ideal of independence. In order to avoid that judgement, one of the interviewees revealed she had never disclosed to her editor that she had previously worked for a politician; whereas other interviewees were careful about how, when and to whom they provided that information. As we saw in chapter 2, it was the threat of stigma or dishonour generated by moralism that made some of the interviewees wary about making the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising in the first place. In this final chapter we saw it was the threat of moralism and judgmentalism that influenced some of the interviewees to avoid reporting on politics once they did return to journalism. However, those who did return to political reporting believed the insights they gained while performing the role of ‘spin-doctor’ improved their understanding of politics and journalism and made them better able to perform the role of democratic ‘watchdog’.
6. Conclusion

This qualitative study has been an examination of the under-explored phenomenon of the career transition from journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back again. It began by analysing the oppositional and antithetical conceptions of the two roles. As discussed in chapter 1, on the one hand, the idealised stereotype of the ‘watchdog’ journalist has come to dominate the professional ideological conception of the reporter. On the other hand the morally dubious caricature of the Machiavellian ‘spin-doctor’ has come to define the role of the parliamentary media adviser. The thesis then went on to test those dominant idealistic and moralistic conceptions against the perceptions of twenty-one journalism practitioners who had performed in both roles. Through the candid reflections of the practitioners, this study has found those dominant conceptions to be oversimplified and “at best a partial truth” (Tiffen, 1999, p. 207). In challenging those dominant idealistic and moralistic conceptions the practitioners’ contributions inject a level of realism into the debate about the nature of the two roles, the differences and similarities. Through an examination of the interviewees’ perceptions of their lived experience moving between journalism to parliamentary media advising, this phenomenological study has made the following findings:

Finding 1: No two experiences were the same

The most immediate finding of this study was the diversity of the experiences recalled by the twenty-one journalists who took part. While common themes did emerge no two recollections of the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again were the same.

Finding 2: Varying levels of tension between the roles of journalist & parliamentary media adviser.

Contrary to the dominant traditional conception of the two roles being in conflict, the interviewees presented several different perspectives ranging from complementary to adversarial. The majority of the interviewees characterised the relationship as symbiotic and fluctuating...
through periods of co-operation and conflict. The diverse theoretical descriptions put forward by the interviewees were also reflected in the literature.

**Finding 3: Journalism & parliamentary media advising are ethically compatible**

The study found that the majority of the interviewees saw the roles of journalist and parliamentary media adviser as being ethically compatible. The interviewees said they believed there was nothing inherently unethical about parliamentary media advising and nor inherently ethical about journalism. They believed both roles could be performed ethically or unethically and it was up to the individual. As *Adam* explained it: “The key factor is the personal ethics and values of the individual that they bring to the job; it’s not the job itself that is the problem”.

**Finding 4: ‘Not lying’ central to ethical comfort shifting between the roles**

The study found that ‘not lying’ was central to the ethical comfort of the interviewees whilst in the role of parliamentary media adviser. By providing *factually accurate* information – albeit *selective* – the interviewees said they had ‘not lied’ and therefore did not feel ethically conflicted moving from journalism to parliamentary media advising. However, the sixth finding shows, conceptions of truth were malleable depending on the contextual circumstances.

**Finding 5: Conceptions of journalism values and practice changed for some, but not all**

The study found that the experience of moving between journalism and parliamentary media advising did have an impact on *some* of the interviewees’ conceptions of journalism practice and values, but *not all*. Several of the interviewees said they were shocked by the poor standards of journalism they witnessed once they became parliamentary media advisers, whereas others were not surprised. All of the interviewees adopted a disposition of both *administrative caution* and *caution toward the media* in relation to the use of information when they became parliamentary media advisers. A range of situational factors were found to have an influence on the interviewees’ sense of caution toward the media included: the fortunes of the politician they worked for; the issue at hand; whether they worked for a minister or backbencher, government, the opposition or minor party; the size of the jurisdiction; and, possibly, the era during which
they were employed. The study also found that several of the interviewees came to distrust particular reporters in response to perceptions of unethical or poor journalism practice by individual journalists, which is discussed below in finding 6.

**Finding 6: The importance of trust to truth and disclosure**

The study found that perceptions of trust played a role in how honest and open the interviewees were with particular journalists. The interviewees recalled that the level of trust they had in a reporter influenced the amount of information the interviewee was prepared to give them and the way in which it was presented. This was more evident in the transcripts of some of the interviewees who had worked as media advisers from the 1990s onwards. As will be discussed later in the conclusion, this tentative finding needs further research. The interviewees described a range of thirteen tactics around the management of truth and disclosure and the circumstances in which they were used. Those tactics were: ‘spin’ or ‘putting the best foot forward; Never tell a lie; “I don’t know”; Truth but not the whole truth; Don’t ask, don’t tell; Avoiding the media; Boring them to death; Playing a dead bat; Shut them down; Timing the strategic release of information; “Get rid of it now”; Too much rather than too little; and Triage.

**Finding 7: Similarities between the roles of journalist and parliamentary media adviser**

The study also found that the interviewees perceived many similarities between parliamentary media advising and reporting. Those similarities included shared writing skills, knowledge of the media, news sense and “media logic”. Several of the interviewees perceived a shared commitment to factual accuracy and said both roles were engaged in selectivity and interpretation of information. Two went so far as to say both journalists and parliamentary media advisers and reporters were involved in storytelling and engaged in ‘spin’ by virtue of the fact both actors were always looking for the best way to frame their stories. The ethical division of ‘informing’ versus ‘persuading’ put forward by Spence et al. (2011) was also discredited by several of the interviewees who perceived ‘informing’ and ‘persuading’ to be functions of both reporting and media advising. In response, the interviewees variously described this type of categorisation as “crude”, “black and white”, “sanctimonious” and “simplistic”.
Finding 8: “True believer” versus “legal advocate” theories

The study found competing theories offered by the interviewees about the best way to perform the role of parliamentary media adviser. One approach was described as being a “true-believer” of the party, politician and policies. The other was described as the “legal advocate” approach in which the journalist was a non-partisan communications professional who could work for any political party. The transcripts revealed the majority of the interviewees thought being a “true-believer” undermined the journalist’s ability to provide effective and objective media advice to the politician. Instead the majority of the interviewees thought a hybrid version of the two approaches was necessary to ensure the parliamentary media adviser was committed to the job, but also able to provide the politician with dispassionate advice.

Finding 9: Silence in the journalism literature about areas of overlap with PR

The study found a virtual silence in the journalism scholarship about areas of similarity, overlap and continuum with public relations. While there was a breadth of public relations literature pointing to this fact, the journalism scholarship tended to avoid the discussion. This silence in the journalism scholarship about areas of commonality with public relations is an area ripe for further inquiry.

Finding 10: The benefits of the transition experience to political communication

The study found the majority of the interviewees perceived to have derived several benefits from making the transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again. Those perceived benefits included: an increased understanding of politics and the complex processes of government; a greater awareness of ‘spin’ techniques; and reduced cynicism about politicians and their motivations. While one interviewee said the experience had increased her cynicism in politics, another argued it was good for democracy.
At the end of the journey from ‘watchdog’ to ‘spin-doctor’ and back again we are left with the insightful – and at times provocative – reflections of the twenty-one journalists who have worked in both roles. Based on their experience as practitioners, the interviewees’ unique comparative insights challenge commonly held conceptions of the two roles and provide an opportunity for both journalists and parliamentary media advisers to increase their understanding of the other’s role and reflect on the way in which their own actions might be perceived by the other. Perhaps most importantly, the insights contained in this thesis provide an opportunity for journalists and parliamentary media advisers to gain a deeper understanding of the connection between trust and candour and the impact that loss of trust can have on the free flow of information. At a time of low recorded levels of trust between journalists and politicians, the insights in this study provide an opportunity for both journalists and parliamentary media advisers to reflect on the contribution they are making in their daily interactions to building or eroding that trust.

Having arrived at the end of the journey through the two roles, this thesis has raised some important questions that go to the heart of journalism’s professional identity. What is clear from this study is that journalism and parliamentary media advising lie on a continuum of storytelling with informing in the public interest at one end and advocacy for private interests at the other. Somewhere between the two lie each journalistic story and each political press release. In pointing out the inadequacies of the dominant dualistic conceptions of the two roles, this thesis raises the questions: ‘What should replace the antithetical framing of ‘watchdog’ and ‘spin-doctor’? If the oppositional framing of advocacy and informing do not stand up to scrutiny, then in what way is journalism different to parliamentary media advising? If a more realistic rather than idealistic or moralistic approach is to be taken, how does one define the differences between the two roles?’ In an age when the boundaries between professional communications roles are blurring and freelance communicators increasingly straddle the fields of public relations and journalism, the answer to these questions is important to journalism’s professional identity. Developing a conception of the differences between these two roles that reflects the realism of practitioner experience – rather than a distinction based on moralism and idealism – is the focus of my immediate future research interest.
While there are possible benefits to be derived from this qualitative study, it does have limitations. For some of the interviewees their experience of moving between journalism happened many years ago. As a result, the passage of time might have affected their memory and allowed the interviewees to rewrite their version of history. In any qualitative study, personal interpretation of experience by the interviewees is unavoidable, but it is manageable within the context of a phenomenological framework. After all, phenomenology is interested in the meaning the interviewees made of this transition and how they theorised it, rather than the event itself. Although this is a focussed qualitative study, it offers a unique perspective on an important relationship between journalists and parliamentary media advisers via the reflections of twenty-one individuals who have performed in both roles. Its strength lies in the rich variety of individual experiences that are contained within it and which challenge oversimplified conceptions of journalism and parliamentary media advising.

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the journey from journalist to parliamentary media adviser and back is under-explored in the academic literature. To the best of my knowledge there is no other thorough contemporary analysis of this career phenomenon. In response to that perceived gap in the existing literature this study makes an original contribution to knowledge in the fields of journalism, public relations and political communication. In order to follow that journey this study has cut an arc across different academic disciplines by drawing on literature from journalism, political communication, public relations, philosophy, ethics and social psychology in order to explore the range of themes that emerged. Because of the necessarily interdisciplinary approach this study has taken, aspects of it will be transferable to a large range of research including – but not limited to – further explorations of media-source relations; journalism ethics; the changing nature of the role of the journalist; journalism’s relationship with public relations; career transitions from journalism to politics, public relations and the public service; post-employment separation arrangements for political advisers; as well as issues of conflict of interest, perceptions of bias and partisanship in journalism.

This study has also opened up some avenues of rich future inquiry particularly in relation to the issue of trust between journalists and parliamentary media advisers. Those areas include further research to determine whether there is a difference in perceptions of trust between parliamentary
media advisers and journalists prior to and post the mid 1990s – a suggestion of which emerged in this study and was mentioned in chapter 4 of this thesis. Establishing a definite trend would make an important contribution to understanding the contemporary tensions between parliamentary media advisers and journalists and test whether this trend tracks a rise in concern about the “spiral of cynicism” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) and the demise of the public sphere that has dominated the political communications literature for the past fifty years. There is also a growing trend of politicians employing media advisers without journalism experience. This arose as an issue during the field research phase, but was beyond the scope of this study to pursue. However, anecdotally, this appeared to have an impact on the journalist’s respect and trust in media advisers who had not worked as reporters and requires further investigation.

Other areas of future research include whether guidelines are needed in relation to post-employment separation to assist with managing issues of conflict of interest and bias when a parliamentary media adviser becomes a political journalist; plus, whether guidelines around the disclosure of conflicts of interest by journalists would be helpful in managing the issue of conflicts of interest and the damage that can be caused by disclosure.

Finally, through the candid reflections of twenty-one journalists who made the transition from reporting to parliamentary media advising, this thesis highlights the inadequacy of the stereotypes of the ‘watchdog’ journalist and the parliamentary media adviser as manipulative ‘spin-doctor’. This thesis shows they are inadequate because they represent “at best a partial truth” (Tiffen, 1999, p. 207). Though aspects of both stereotypes resonate with the roles they have come to define, they do not represent the way either of the roles is performed all of the time. The stereotypes are partially true because they fail to acknowledge the diversity of individual experience and the complexity of contextual circumstances in which the roles are performed. Based on the reflections of twenty-one practitioners, this study challenges the oversimplified antithetical categorisations of the journalist as ‘informer’ and parliamentary media adviser as ‘advocate’ and demands more nuanced interpretations of the two roles be adopted that recognise the overlap and continuum between the roles. The interviewees in this study recognised that journalism and parliamentary media advising were two separate roles, but not on the basis of ethics. As the interviewees stated, they did not see either role as inherently
unethical, or ethical. They believed the ethics of a role was determined by the way it was performed. This thesis argues the ongoing use of oversimplified idealistic and moralistic antithetical terms to distinguish journalism from parliamentary media advising is unhelpful. Via the insights of these twenty-one journalists, it is hoped a more realistic interpretation will be adopted of these two key roles at the heart of political communication.
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Appendix 1: The interviewees: biographical summaries

Please note: The names that appear with an asterisk (*) are pseudonyms for the interviewees who chose to remain anonymous. When both the first and last names of the interviewee appear, this indicates that he/she elected to have their comments attributed to them. The biographical summaries appear in alphabetical order.

*Adam: Adam worked in both print and broadcast journalism for nine years before becoming a media adviser in the 1990s. He took the job for family reasons and saw it as an opportunity to learn something new. After three years he returned directly to journalism in a non-reporting role. He now works in public relations.

Craig Allen: Craig was a broadcast journalist with *Network Ten* for seven years before he went to work for the ACT Liberal government as a media adviser in 1998. During his three year employment with the government he worked for three ministers. After the election in 2001 Craig took six months off before successfully applying for a reporting job with the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* in Canberra where he is now a senior reporter and weekend newsreader.

Dennis Atkins: Dennis Atkins had been working as a print journalist for six years before he took his first job as a media adviser to Senator Nick Bolkus (1981-83). When the Hawke government was elected he joined the press secretarial pool, primarily working for minister Mick Young (1983-85). Dennis was then approached by the *Melbourne Herald Sun* newspaper to be their chief of staff in Canberra where he worked for three years before moving to Queensland to become the Director of Communications for the newly elected Goss Government in 1989. After six years Dennis left politics and returned to journalism to work for *The Courier Mail* newspaper where he has been ever since. Dennis now writes and comments on federal and state politics and is a regular guest on the ABC’s *Insiders* programme.

David Barnett: David Barnett began as a copy boy on the *Sydney Sun* newspaper in 1949. One year later he became a cadet reporter at the *Sydney Morning Herald*. David spent 13 years working overseas for a variety of print and wire services including *Agence France Press* (AFP) and *Australian Associated Press* (AAP). On his return to Australia In 1971 David established a bureau for AAP in Canberra where he worked for four years covering the Whitlam era. Spurred on by a sense of nationalism, David said he sought the job of media adviser to Malcolm Fraser in opposition and then continued to work for Fraser when became Prime Minister (1975 – 1982). David made a brief return to the federal parliamentary press gallery and later wrote columns for *The Canberra Times*, *The Yass Tribune* and articles for the ABC website *The Drum*.

Barrie Cassidy: Barrie Cassidy’s journalism career began at the age of 12 when he started covering football for the local newspaper. When he finished school Barrie received a cadetship at *The Border
Mail newspaper in Albury which quickly lead to a job on the afternoon Melbourne Herald newspaper. There he covered police and courts and soon became “gallery reporter” writing about state parliament. In this role, Barrie said his interest in politics grew. He became the gallery reporter for the ABC and went to night school to study politics. In 1980 he was moved to Canberra to cover federal parliament for ABC News and Current Affairs. In 1986 Barrie was approached by Prime Minister Bob Hawke’s office for the second time to become the leader’s media adviser (and later his policy adviser), which Barrie did for five years. After the first Keating challenge for the Prime Ministership in 1991 Barrie left for the United States to join his wife Heather Ewart who was a foreign correspondent with the ABC. After three years in the United States, Barrie returned to Australia to host The last Shout and Meet the Press for Network Ten and later became the chief political reporter for the 7.30 Report on the ABC. Barrie Cassidy currently hosts both Insiders and Offsiders for ABC Television and is a regular contributor to The Drum.

Andrew Fraser: Andrew Fraser worked as a print journalist for seven years – including in the federal parliamentary press gallery – before he returned to Brisbane to work for the newly elected Goss Labor government in 1989. During that time Andrew was media adviser to three ministers. In 1995 Andrew returned to print journalism for two years working for two magazines, Business Queensland and Asia Week. When the Beattie government came to power in 1998 Andrew joined the staff of Deputy Premier Jim Elder as his media adviser for two years before returning to freelance reporting and teaching journalism at the University of Queensland. After several months he joined The Australian newspaper initially writing for the property and finance pages and later returned to political reporting. Andrew has been with The Australian newspaper ever since.

*Helen:* Helen had worked as a print journalist before trying her hand at ministerial media advising. After two and half years in a political office she left to go overseas. Since returning to Australia, *Helen has been working in newspapers.*

*Jill:* Jill had worked in television news for almost three years when for personal reasons she sought a job as a media adviser in government. After three months in departmental communications, she moved to the minister’s office for six months as a junior press secretary. Since her departure from media advising *Jill has been working as a broadcast journalist.*

*Kelly:* After eight and half years of reporting experience *Kelly took a job in departmental communications. Very soon she was working in a ministerial office as a policy adviser but also advising on media strategy and assisting with media inquiries. After two and half years *Kelly returned to political reporting.*

Chris Kenny: Chris Kenny began his working life as a park ranger in South Australia. Interested in politics and media, Chris went to university as a mature age student to study journalism. He worked in television and print, including the ABC’s 7.30 Report, Adelaide’s Channel 10, The Adelaide Review, The Sunday Mail and The Adelaide Advertiser. Chris wrote two books State of Denial about
the Bannon government and Women’s Business about the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair. In 2000 Chris became Director of Strategic Communications to Premier John Olsen and later his Chief of staff. In 2002 he moved to federal politics and joined the office of Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer as his media adviser. Chris also unsuccessfully stood for Liberal Party pre-selection for the South Australian seat of Unley. In 2006 Chris returned to the media working in print and radio and A Current Affair in Adelaide. In 2006 he went back to politics as chief of staff to the Liberal leader Malcolm Turnbull. When Turnbull lost the leadership Chris left politics and took a job in the private sector for six months before joining The Australian newspaper as an editorial writer and columnist. Chris also hosts weekly programmes Saturday Agenda and View Point on SKY News.

Kerry O’Brien: Kerry O’Brien began his career as a cadet reporter at Channel Nine. On advice from a mentor, he then worked on a regional newspaper, metropolitan paper, wire service, and then went back to television to gain as much experience as possible. He later joined the ABC and became a current affairs reporter on This Day Tonight and Four Corners. With fourteen years experience under his belt Kerry went to work for Labor Opposition leader, Gough Whitlam, in 1977 and the for Labor Deputy leader, Lionel Bowen from 1978-1980. In 1980, unable to return to the ABC, Kerry joined a friend’s production company making independent documentaries before securing a job at Channel Seven as a foreign correspondent. After five years with the Seven Network Kerry returned to the ABC’s Four Corners and later became the host of the 7.30 Report. During his career Kerry has won six Walkley Awards including the Gold Walkley for excellence in journalism. In 2010 Kerry retired from his role as presenter and editor of the 7.30 Report and is now presenter of the Four Corners programme.

Marcus Priest: Throughout his career, Marcus Priest has worked as both a newspaper journalist (The Courier Mail newspaper, The West Australian and Australian Financial Review) and as a lawyer, oscillating between the two. In 2007 Marcus was offered the roles of media and/or policy adviser to the Attorney General, Robert Mclelland in the Rudd government. Having witnessed how poorly media advisers can be treated by the media and given a chance to focus on indigenous issues, Marcus chose policy. After two years, Marcus returned to journalism reporting on politics for the Australian Financial Review in 2009. In 2013 he left the newspaper and returned to the legal profession.

*Tom:* Tom was passionate about politics and had been working as a journalist for seven years when he was offered the chance to work as a ministerial press secretary. After three turbulent years in that role, Tom attempted to return to the media but was unsuccessful.

*Sarah:* Sarah had been a reporter for seven years before she took her first job as a media adviser. During her career Sarah has worked for three politicians and returned to the media and public relations in between.
Appendix 1.

*Scott:* *Scott is an experienced journalist. At the time of interview had been in the role of ministerial media adviser for six months. He did not intend to return to the media.

Niki Savva: Niki Savva had been a journalist for thirty years – the majority of them reporting on federal politics – when family reasons drove her to accept a job as media adviser to the federal treasurer, Peter Costello, so she could be closer to home. When the Howard government lost power in 2007 Niki said she had difficulty returning to mainstream reporting, instead she penned her memoir *So Greek: Confessions of a Conservative Leftie* which was published in 2010. Niki now works as a columnist for *The Australian* newspaper and appears regularly on the ABC’s *Insiders* programme.

Dennis Shanahan: Dennis began his career as a copy boy at *News Limited* forty years ago and then moved to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) as a cadet reporter. After ten years, Dennis continued to write for the *SMH* while lecturing in journalism at Charles Sturt University. After two years of teaching, Dennis returned to fulltime reporting covering state politics for the *SMH*. With seven children to care for, Dennis left the *SMH* in 1988 for financial reasons and accepted an offer to be the media adviser to the NSW Attorney General, John Dowd. After six months he returned to journalism as the chief of staff in the Canberra bureau of *The Australian* newspaper. He has reported on politics ever since and is now the federal political editor for the same paper. Dennis has a Masters degree in Journalism from Columbia University.

Stephen Spencer: When Stephen graduated with a communications degree he went to work in radio at 2CH. At the age of 22 he was sent to Canberra to cover his passion – politics – and worked for 2GB, 2WS and AAP. With thirteen years experience Stephen accepted an offer to join the staff of the Labor Opposition leader, Simon Crean, as his media adviser. When Crean lost the Labor leadership to Mark Latham, Stephen left politics to work for the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission as a speech writer to Graeme Samuel. In 2007 Stephen returned to the federal press gallery as a news producer for *Network Ten*.

Greg Turnbull: Greg began as a cadet reporter on the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1978 the morning after the Hilton bombing. He said it was an exciting start and he was hooked from day one. Until 1988 Greg worked in print and broadcast journalism, including as a political reporter in Canberra, when he left briefly to become the Media Operations Manager for Expo ’88 in Brisbane. From 1989 – 1992 Greg returned to journalism as a reporter for the ABC’s *7.30 Report* in Brisbane. When Paul Keating became Prime Minister, Greg was offered the role as his Senior Media Adviser (1992 – 1996) and moved back to Canberra. After Labor lost the election Greg continued on as media adviser to the Labor Opposition leader Kim Beasley until 2001. After a second election loss, Greg accepted an offer to work for *Channel Ten News* as their political correspondent and co-presenter of *Meet The Press*. Greg is now working as the Communications Director for the Pharmaceutical Guild.
**Alex Wake:** Alex Wake began her journalism career at the age of 17 as a cadet on a country newspaper. After a few years Alex went to the United Kingdom and worked on *The Star* newspaper. When Alex returned to Australia she joined the ABC in Queensland as a radio reporter and worked there for seven years. In 1998 when the Beattie government was elected Alex accepted a job as Senior Media Adviser to the Education Minister, Dean Wells. After three and a half years in that role Alex went overseas to teach journalism in the United Arab Emirates. On her return to Australia, Alex began lecturing in journalism at RMIT University and recommenced working as a journalist for ABC Radio Australia, where she works today. Alex is close to finishing her PhD in Communication through Deakin University.

**Vivienne Wynter:** Vivienne began her career in journalism at ABC Radio National in Queensland before moving to *4BC* radio. After four years in commercial radio Vivienne accepted a position as media adviser to Australian Democrat Senator John Woodley in 1996 where she worked until 2001. During that five years working as a media adviser for the Senator, Vivienne also continued working as a freelance journalist. In 2001 Vivienne left politics to work as a freelance communications professional in public relations and journalism. Vivienne also teaches public relations and journalism at Griffith University.
Appendix 2: Information Sheet for participants

PhD research project working title: Conflicting roles? An examination of what happens when a journalist crosses over to ministerial media advising and then returns to journalism.

Caroline Fisher, Faculty of Arts & Design, University of Canberra, u3059269

Project Description

The aim of this research project is to explore what happens when a journalist shifts to the role of ministerial media adviser and then returns to practice journalism. In particular:

What happens to journalists’ perceptions of journalism ethics, values, and sense of professional identity when they switch from the roles of journalist, to media adviser, and back again.

More specifically:

i. What conceptions of the professional ethics of these two roles (journalist and media adviser) did they start with?

ii. How (if at all) have their conceptions of the professional ethics of these two roles been changed by this experience?

iii. Did they experience any conflicts or tensions in their professional ethics or personal values, in changing between these two roles? If not, why do they think there were no conflicts?

iv. How (if at all) do they think their conceptions of journalistic practice have been changed by this experience?

There are a lot of stereotypes and strong opinion about the roles of journalist and ‘spin-doctor’, but there is little heard from the people who have performed both of these roles. This research aims to give a voice to the people who have worked on both sides of the political communication fence, but who have rarely been given the opportunity to talk about their experiences. Each person’s experience of this career transition and what it meant for them will be different and this study aims to reflect that diversity. The study will be based on approximately 20 face-to-face interviews with journalists who have followed this particular career path, including an account of the researcher’s own experience of this career transition.

Identification options for participants:

If you agree to be involved in the study and grant an interview you can:

a) Choose to be identified and your comments attributed to you.
b) Choose not to be identified and have your comments used anonymously.

In the event that this study is later developed into a book, the researcher will contact you to confirm whether you wish to remain identified or to be made anonymous.

**Information about the Researcher:**

Caroline Fisher is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra in the Faculty of Arts and Design. Caroline worked as a news reporter/producer for the ABC before becoming a ministerial media adviser to the Hon. Anna Bligh, after which she returned to work at the ABC. Prior to beginning her PhD Caroline was teaching broadcast journalism at the University of Canberra. 2

**Research Plan 2010-2013:** The research will be conducted in three phases:

**Phase 1:** Review of relevant literature in relation to political communication, public relations and media relations, journalism to provide a comprehensive context for the new research material.

**Phase 2:** Conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews to answer the research aims, namely what impact the transition from journalist to political media adviser and back to journalist has on the reporter’s values and professional identity and practice of journalism.

**Phase 3:** Analysing the research and survey data and writing up the results. The results will be published as a PhD thesis, academic articles and hopefully one day a book.

**Ethics and consultation:**

In order to proceed, this project will have received approval from the University of Canberra Human Ethics Committee. For more information please contact Caroline Fisher via email Caroline.Fisher@canberra.edu.au
Appendix 3: Statement of Informed Consent

PhD research project working title: Conflicting roles? An examination of what happens when a journalist crosses over to ministerial media advising and then returns to journalism.

Caroline Fisher, Faculty of Arts & Design, University of Canberra, u3059269.

I have read the attached information sheet and I am interested in participating in an Individual interview about my experience as a journalist and political media adviser.

I understand that:

1. The proposed study has been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to discuss and ask questions about it. I have retained a copy of the information sheet which explains the purpose of the study and the implications of participation.

2. My contact details provided will be kept securely by the researcher, Caroline Fisher. The details will not be for any other purposes than specified in the information sheet and will be destroyed upon completion of the research period.

3. All information will be confidential and will not be provided to anyone other than the researcher and the researcher’s primary PhD supervisor subject to any waiver agreed by me.

4. My consent to participate in this study is voluntary. I can withdraw from the project at any time and I do not have to give a reason for the withdrawal of my consent.

5. The interview may take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

6. The interview will be audio recorded with my consent and notes will be taken during the interview. These records are also research data and they will be used for subsequent reference. The audio recordings will be transcribed and analysed.

7. If I request not to be identified all identifiers such as names, addresses etc will be removed from the transcripts.

8. I will be given the opportunity to review my contribution to the interview once it has been transcribed and may make additional comments.

9. I understand that all questions, answers and results will be treated with absolute confidentiality subject to any waiver agreed by me.

10. I give consent for journal articles, conference papers and book manuscripts to be developed from the study and I understand that participants will not be identified unless they give permission to be identified.
11. If I have any complaints concerning the research project they may be given to the researcher or, if an independent person is preferred, to the University of Canberra Committee for Human Ethics, ph (02) 6201 5111.

Name: __________________________ Signature: ________________________________

Date: __________________________

I would like my name and position and any quotes or remarks used attributed to me:

(Please circle) Yes / No
Appendix 4: Aide Memoire

Please note this is a general guide only, the wording and order of these discussion points varied with each interview.

**Introductory remarks by researcher:** Remind the interviewee about purpose of the study and discuss the contents of the consent form. Inform the interviewee once recording of interview begins.

**Their personal story:** Can you please begin by describing your transition through the role of journalist to media adviser and back. Please start with your motivation for becoming and journalist and then describe what led you to deciding to change roles. I will let you tell your story with as little interruption as possible and once you have finished I will follow up with some more specific questions about points you raised as well as some separate questions.

**Role conflict:** Based on your experience do you see the roles of journalist and media advisers as being in conflict? Please elaborate.

Do you perceive any differences/similarities between the roles?

**Ethical conflict:** Did you experience any feelings of ethical conflict or discomfort moving between the roles? Please elaborate.

Changing views/behaviour/J values

Did your experience change the way you viewed journalism as a profession and the way it is practiced?

Did your experience as media adviser change your view of journalism values, such as truth, fairness, the public’s right to know

Did you notice any change in the way you dealt with journalists/media inquiries whilst in the job? For instance, did you begin with a generous open attitude toward journalists and did this change to become more cautious or wary? Or vice versa?

**Tactics:** In making decisions about media inquiries such as how much information to give a journalist, what sort of things did you take in to consideration? (I.e. ethical considerations i.e. public’s right to know, or more pragmatic issues such as the journalists deadline, the importance of the issue etc)

**Ethical culture:** How would you describe the culture of your politicians and office?

Did you receive an Induction or training as a media adviser?

How would you describe your own personal values?
Code of ethics: The Fitzgerald Inquiry suggested a specific Code of Ethics be introduced for media advisers, based on your experience what is your view about that?

Re-entry back to journalism: How do you explain the ease/difficulty with which you were able to return?

Did you experience any ethical discomfort making that transition?

Perception of bias: Did you hold concerns about perceptions of bias?

Have you experienced any lingering stigma as a result of your time as a press secretary?

Conflict of Interest: Did you face any conflicts of interest once you returned to reporting?

How did you manage that?

Cooling-off period: Do you think a formalised cooling off period would be beneficial for political advisers seeking to enter political journalism?

Partisanship: Ask their views on the ‘true believer’ versus ‘legal advocate’ approaches to media advising.

Is there anything else they would like to add?

Thank them for their time. Let them know they will receive a copy of the full transcript for their approval via email within the next few days. Advise them that they are allowed to make any changes they wish and to contact me anytime if they have any concerns about the project.