

MEDIA CREDIBILITY SURVEY

Why Australians Don't Respect The Media

Two interconnecting surveys conducted for The Reader show what Australians think of their media ... and what media practitioners think of themselves

Australians don't trust their journalists or their media. They believe the media "often get their facts wrong" and "invade people's privacy unnecessarily." And journalists themselves not only acknowledge that they're held in low esteem, and believe they're perceived as being left-wing, but many admit they *are* left-leaning. The journalists concede that they make mistakes and that "sometimes" those mistakes go uncorrected. They concede that media proprietors use their outlets as vehicles of influence. They say the biggest negative pressure on their work is the "predominance of public relations and spin." And they agree there's now too much emphasis on the coverage of celebrities in the Australian media.

These are among the key findings to emerge from The Reader's first Media Credibility Survey, which polled the public and the media to get both sides of the story. Roy Morgan Research conducted three surveys during August and September, asking a total sample



of 1,963 Australians over 14 what they thought about the media, and the journalism program at RMIT, Melbourne, polled 129 media workers, mostly from newspapers, about what they thought of themselves. These were the key findings ...

The media is held in very low esteem.

Newspaper journalists are given only a 10% rating for their honesty and ethical standards – compared, for example, with doctors (81%) and police (57%). TV reporters (16%) and talkback announcers (18%) fare slightly better, and all poll ahead of federal politicians (9%). And Australians believe that 69% of newspaper journalists and 74% of TV reporters unnecessarily invade people's privacy.

The media isn't accurate.

Almost two thirds of Australians believe that newspaper journalists "often get their facts wrong," while 56% say the same about magazines, 53% have doubts about TV stations and 38% agree that not all radio stations report the news fairly and accurately. The outlets most often identified by consumers as "not accurately and fairly" reporting the news are the Herald Sun (Melbourne), The Daily Telegraph (Sydney), Woman's Day, Channel Nine, Channel Seven, and John Laws.

Journalists admit the public doesn't like them.

An overwhelming majority of journalists believes the public is disdainful of their work. 80% of the journalists polled either agree or strongly agree with the proposition that "the community has a negative perception of journalists and the work they produce." And they put that down to public perceptions of sensationalist reporting (79%), inaccurate reporting (60%), the power of media companies (43%), and the adversarial nature of journalism (41%).

And they think they're biased. But journalists think that the perceived bias of media companies is another factor contributing to their bad image. News Ltd is identified by 40% of journalists questioned as "the most politically biased media organisation in Australia," followed by the ABC (25%). Asked which media outlets are "the most accurate and credible,"

Who We Asked

The consumers: A sample of people aged over 14 across Australia were asked their views on the media in a series of phone polls conducted by the Roy Morgan Research Centre – 621 people 4-8 August (Morgan Poll Finding No. 3790), 664 people 18-19 August (Morgan Poll Finding No. 3789), and 678 people 1-2 September (Morgan Poll Finding No. 3778).

The journalists: A sample of 129 people working in print and electronic media answered a questionnaire online in August 2004. The questionnaire was constructed by the journalism department of RMIT university, which identified a cross-section of 388 journalists, editors and news directors, of whom 33% responded. Within the sample, 82% work in print media (27.9% from News Ltd, 21% from Fairfax), and 17% from electronic media including the ABC; 29% were earning \$36,000 to \$55,000, and 25% were earning \$100,000 plus; 23% had been in the profession less than five years and 27% had been in the profession more than 20 years; 35% were aged 25-34 and 31% were 35-44; 66% had university degrees (just under half of which were journalism degrees).

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62% of journalists nominate ABC radio, 52% nominate ABC TV, and 38% The Financial Review. And *all* journalists questioned believe they are influential in changing public opinion – although 24% say it depends on the individual journalist as to their influence.

The media veers to the left. Asked how the community perceives journalists, 75% of media practitioners polled think they are seen as left wing or small l liberal, while 16% think they are seen as right wing or conservative. As to the reality, 55% of journalists polled describe themselves as left wing or small l liberal, 36% put themselves in the centre, while only 9% describe themselves as conservative or right wing.

Although that’s not necessarily the public view. But when Australians are asked about media bias, 55% say newspaper journalists are not “too left leaning,” and 54% say they are not “too right leaning.” Political bias becomes slightly more of an issue when it comes to talkback radio announcers – they are described as “too right wing” by 26% of Australians (with Alan Jones nominated as an example of a right wing commentator by 22% of NSW people). But in total, 47% of Australians say the talk jocks are not too right wing, and 27% cannot say.

Mistakes are often made, but not always corrected. Does the media “satisfactorily correct its mistakes”? No, say most journalists (56%) – who in turn admit to making mistakes themselves “often” (13%), “sometimes” (52%) or “rarely” (35%). But when it comes to correcting those mistakes, 36% say it happens “always,” 62% say “sometimes,” and 2% say “never.”

The owners use their media to get what they want. A large majority of journalists polled (73%) agree that media proprietors “use their outlets to push their own business and/or political interests to influence the national debate.”

There’s too much paparazzi journalism. “Celebrity and entertainment news has been given too much prominence at the expense of other, harder news” – 74% of journalists polled agree with that proposition. And 78% believe that celebrity and entertainment news “has more to do with ratings and circulation than reporting.”

Journalists say they need a code of ethics. A third of journalists say they first found out about media ethics from a university course, and 29% found out from the Australian Journalists Association’s Code of Ethics. When confronted by an ethical dilemma, 40% seek the advice of a colleague, 29% ask the editor, and 17% make up their own minds. And 65% agree that “ethics is the one area in Australian journalism that needs an enforceable code supported by editors and proprietors.”



Journalists on Journalism

“The problem is that journalists are seen as a homogenous mass. It reflects a huge spectrum of people, who range from being extreme right to extreme left, from being courteous to being rude and arrogant.” *(National business writer)*

“Journalists have a strong sense of social justice but don’t necessarily put a label on it such as left or small l liberal.” *(National rounds reporter)*

“I think the perception of journalists as being stirrers and questioners makes a lot of people unhappy. There’s a lot of people in the community who don’t like things to be questioned.” *(Melbourne TV news executive)*

“Everyone is under the hammer so much to produce, produce, produce. It’s incredible.” *(Business reporter on national daily)*

“You can certainly get your career fast tracked if you’re a right wing columnist.” *(Canberra press gallery journalist)*

“There’s not enough money for right wingers in the trade. It’s purely economical ... all the right wingers are lawyers and bankers.” *(Cartoonist on metropolitan daily)*

“The Australian has become so anti-Labor ... to the point where it crosses the line of journalism into activism.” *(South Australian rural journalist)*

“Never overestimate the public. People want entertainment. People don’t want to read about major issues.” *(Melbourne print media reporter)*

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Journalists on Journalism

"You look at business which wants to hide things, government which wants to hide things, bureaucracy which wants to hide things, they can generally be regarded as conservative. Therefore these people, when they're confronted with activist journalism, or journalism at its best, would tend to regard it as actions of someone left leaning." (*Editor of a metropolitan daily*)

"I probably get about 50 calls a week from PR companies spruiking some product or issue and following up press releases." (*Rounds reporter on national daily*)

"The Gallery is definitely more politically conservative these days than they were under the Hawke or Keating governments." (*Canberra press gallery journalist*)

"We're too remote and we're not a good reflection of the wider community: 90%+ of journalists have a degree of some sort and that is not typical." (*Wire service reporter*)



How Australians View The Media

How would you rate these professions for honesty and ethical standards?

Profession	2001	2004
Doctors	75%	81%
Police	58%	57%
Talkback announcers	17%	18%
TV reporters	18%	16%
Newspaper journalists	13%	10%
State MPs	14%	10%
Federal MPs	16%	9%

Do you believe that ...

	Newspaper journalists	TV reporters	Talkback hosts
Are often biased	86%	73%	75%
Often get their facts wrong	63%	54%	55%
Invade people's privacy unnecessarily	69%	74%	26%
Are too left-wing leaning	22%	20%	17%
Are too right-wing leaning	22%	17%	26%

Which newspapers do you believe do not accurately and fairly report the news?

All of them	16%
Herald Sun (Melbourne)	11%
Daily Telegraph (Sydney)	9%
The Australian	6%
The Sydney Morning Herald	6%

Which magazines ...

Woman's Day	11.5%
All magazines	9.5%
Woman's Weekly	9.5%
New Idea	8.5%
Women's magazines	8.5%

Which TV stations ...

Channel 9	21.5%
Channel 7	20.5%
Channel 10	17.5%
All commercial TV stations	16.5%
ABC	6.5%

Which radio stations or presenters ...

John Laws	6.5%
All radio stations	5.5%
Alan Jones	5.5%
2UE	3.5%
All commercial radio stations	3.5%

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How Journalists View The Media

“The community has a negative perception of journalists and the work they produce.”

Strongly disagree	0%
Disagree	17%
No opinion	2%
Agree	67%
Strongly agree	13%

What factors contribute to such perceptions?

Sensationalist reporting	79%
Inaccurate reporting	60%
Power of media companies	43%
Adversarial nature of journalism	41%

Which is the most politically partisan media organisation in Australia?

News Ltd	40%
The ABC	25%
The Australian	12%
Fairfax	6%
PBL	6%

How influential are journalists in changing public opinion?

Not at all	0%
Moderately	39%
Very	36%
It depends on the journalist	24%

How do you think the community perceives the political affiliations of most journalists?

Left	64%
‘Small l’ liberal	11%
Centre	10%
Right	9%
Conservative	7%

How would you describe your political affiliations?

Left	33%
‘Small l’ liberal	22%
Centre	36%
Right	2%
Conservative	7%

“Celebrity and entertainment news has been given too much prominence at the expense of other, harder news.”

Strongly disagree	2%
Disagree	18%
No opinion	5%
Agree	34%
Strongly agree	40%

“Media proprietors use their outlets to push their own business and/or political interests to influence the national debate.”

Strongly agree	9%
Agree	64%
No opinion	8%
Disagree	17%
Strongly disagree	2%

What are the biggest negative pressures facing journalists in this country?

The predominance of public relations and spin	81%
Lack of diverse media voices	58%
The rise of entertainment news	38%
Falling regard for journalism in the community	31%
The proprietor’s interests	23%

Where Australians Get their News

Which one media is your main source of information on:

	Australian news and current affairs	International news and current affairs
TV	56%	66%
Radio	18%	11%
Newspapers	22%	17%
Magazines	1%	1%
The internet	3%	5%

Source: Morgan poll Finding No. 3789

Full details of these polls can be found at www.thereader.com.au, www.roymorgan.com.au and <http://fifthestate.rmit.edu.au>