

Subtlety lost

By Craig Emerson

At Sydney University in the early 1970s a course simply called "Government" was offered to economics, arts and law students. It was a time of social upheaval and the election of the Whitlam Government had ended 23 years of conservative rule. The Murdoch press had backed a change of government.

My tutor in Government, Lex Watson, a gay rights activist, had set us a task: to identify bias in the media. But as left-wing as Lex was, the six-week project wasn't about left versus right, it was about the techniques used by the print media to slant a story to suit an editorial position.

During those six weeks I learned many of the established techniques, simply by comparing the treatment of the same story in different newspapers. Placement on an odd-numbered page gave a story greater prominence than on a left-hand side, even-numbered page. A front-page story in one newspaper might have been well back in another. An otherwise balanced story might be thrown out of balance by the editor's headline. And oh so important, an archived photo of a scowling or cheerful politician could be retrieved from the files to capture the editor's intent.

The story I followed was Attorney-General Lionel Murphy's authorised police raid on ASIO headquarters. As an 18-year-old, I wasn't equipped to make a judgement on the merits of the case, but I sure could identify all the tricks deployed by the different newspaper outlets.

How is this remotely relevant today?

Well, the tricks – er, techniques – haven't changed all that much. They are utilised every day and new ones deployed as well. But what has changed is the level of subtlety: today there is none.

While media outlets 40, 30, 20 or even 10 years ago would feel compelled to cover something considered a good story, if today's editors judge it doesn't accord with their own position they will simply ignore it – or at best stick in with the comics for the kids, but ahead of the sports section lest the punters cotton onto it.

Before going to some recent striking examples, it should be made clear that editors' tricks don't necessarily constitute bias by the journalists. Journalists can only file or record stories; whether and where they are aired depends on the hierarchy ruling them. But nor would it be correct to say that all journalists are scrupulously balanced in their reporting. They know the tricks of the trade as well, and some don't hesitate to use them.

In defence of journalists, online technology demands that they do much more than they were expected to do 40 years ago. A breaking story requires instant reporting not only by the electronic media but by print journalists as well.

And if competing head-to-head with radio and television weren't enough, print journalists these days are expected to engage with social media, blogging, tweeting and video-streaming their stories as they continually update their web sites.

So, while information technology has liberated them from the old, clunky news-gathering and filing processes, the extra time is dedicated not to analysis but delivering the same content into an increasing number of formats.

Even still, considered commentary is often required within hours.

These great expectations of journalists are being applied at a time when traditional print media is in decline and jobs are insecure. Pressure on advertising revenues in an increasingly atomised market leaves little money to fund dedicated investigative units.

Editors are calling the shots as never before and journalists are expected to comply with editorial direction.

As in the early 1970s it's useful to follow just a couple of stories to illustrate the bigger point.

Story One is the Gillard-AWU saga. Story Two is the Ashby-Slipper-LNP court case.

Story One has been around since 1995 when a dude named Gude raised it under privilege in the Victorian Upper House. No wrongdoing was established against Gillard 17 years ago and – after many months of investigative reporting by The Australian's Hedley Thomas – no wrongdoing has been established against her to this day.

But this hasn't stopped the print media running front-page stories that the Prime Minister still has questions to answer, such as 'did she write a letter almost 20 years and why doesn't she recall it?'

Nor has it stopped the Opposition claiming the Prime Minister of Australia is a criminal, despite Opposition Leader Tony Abbott's failure in the 15 minutes granted under parliamentary privilege to make the case. The best he could come up with was "conduct unbecoming", but this was good enough to warrant front-page coverage and a torrent of commentary about both sides' mud-slinging.

Almost every Coalition question in the final parliamentary week (the single exception being a question on a UN Palestinian resolution) was on the 17 year-old AWU allegations. All Labor questions were about policy. During that final Parliamentary week, the Government introduced or finalised legislation relating to education reform, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the Murray-Darling Basin plan, the recovery of lost superannuation savings, gambling reform and a trade deal with Malaysia. None of these were adjudged a significant story by newspaper or television editors.

The media claim of mud-slinging all round was based on the Prime Minister's so-called misogyny speech. This was an extemporaneous speech given in response to a motion by the Opposition Leader during which he asserted the Prime Minister condoned sexist text messages sent by the Speaker, Mr Slipper. The Prime Minister remonstrated that she would not be lectured on sexism by Mr Abbott who, she asserted, had a poor track record on his treatment of women.

Many journalists and editors took exception to the Prime Minister defending herself in this way. The Australian editorialised against it and claimed, with no evidence, that the more than two million YouTube viewers of the speech were inner-city lefties or foreigners.

Story Two broke on 21 April 2012 with a Daily Telegraph splash setting out "explosive allegations" of sexual harassment and misuse of Cabcharge entitlements by the Speaker, Mr Slipper, "in a major new crisis for the Gillard Government". It received similar treatment by other News Limited newspapers and was followed up by the electronic media. The story ran for weeks, indeed months.

So when the Federal Court brought down its scathing judgement on the James Ashby sexual harassment complaint against Mr Slipper, media interest in the story surely would have been both intense and sustained. Logically, if unsubstantiated claims about the Prime Minister's behaviour as a lawyer almost 20 years ago were hot news at end-November 2012, then proof that Coalition identities had lied just a few months ago would no doubt make irresistible copy. After all, the judge had found that Ashby and former Coalition Cabinet Minister and LNP candidate for Slipper's seat, Mal Brough, had collaborated to damage Slipper, advance Brough and change the numbers in the House of Representatives to the benefit of the LNP. In a hung parliament, this was tantamount to changing the Government of Australia.

Alas, it was not to be. Some outlets thought the adverse findings against Ashby and Brough were newsworthy. They included most ABC news and current affairs outlets, the commercial television news bulletins, The Australian (in parts) and the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.

But the News Limited tabloids, especially The Daily Telegraph – having splashed day after day with the original Ashby allegations against Slipper – went cold on the story. The Daily Telegraph couldn't find space for the story in its first 16 pages, assessing Bundy the Dog riding on a motorbike more newsworthy. The other News Limited tabloids, having given the Ashby allegations great prominence, similarly buried the court's verdict.

This is straight media bias. It is also unprofessional. Coalition frontbenchers had been caught lying about the Ashby case. Manager of Opposition Business, Christopher Pyne, had lied about his meetings with Ashby. He at first claimed he might have passed the time of day with him and other Slipper staffers, when in truth he'd met at length and later asked for contact details – also initially denied until later exposed.

Shadow Treasurer, Joe Hockey, told anyone who claimed he knew of the Ashby complaint in advance to "go to hell". Yet his office told the media that over Easter, when the complaint was being formulated, he'd met Clive Palmer at Coolom alone. But Mr Palmer revealed that was a lie – Mal Brough was there too. Hockey's meeting with Brough might have been perfectly innocent but, if so, why lie about it?

Mr Abbott, too, has serious questions to answer. For at least the first week after the story broke in The Daily Telegraph, Abbott – and also Pyne – said they had "no specific knowledge" of the Ashby allegations against Slipper. On the day the story broke, Abbott held a doorstep interview at which he said: "I think everyone in the Parliament was aware of rumours about the Speaker ..." But when subsequently asked at another doorstep what "no specific knowledge" meant, Abbott terminated the interviews and walked away. Later he changed his story, telling the ABC's AM Program on 9 May 2012 "The first I knew of all these things was when I read the newspapers on the Saturday morning." Despite changing his story, Abbott has never been properly challenged about his prior knowledge of the Ashby complaint.

Just what prior knowledge did Abbott have? On 30 November 2011, just after Slipper had become Speaker, Abbott suggested to Tony Jones on Lateline "Let's see how things pan out. Who knows what's going to happen in the first half of next year." How prophetic. The court found that on 10 October 2011, Slipper and Ashby exchanged text messages in which each referred to Brough in terms of vulgar and sexualised abuse. The day after Abbott's Lateline prophecy, Slipper offered Ashby a job, and 22 days later Ashby began working for Slipper. By 2 February 2012 Ashby had begun working on his sexual harassment claim against Slipper.

All these might well be a series of coincidences. But they have proved to be of no interest to the media.

Abbott's and Pyne's evasiveness in refusing to elaborate on their shared formulation of having "no specific knowledge" of the Ashby complaint is indicative of a successful Coalition media strategy.

That strategy is to create ample room for ambiguity and then be unavailable to the Canberra Press Gallery until the issue blows over. Pyne issued only written statements and was unavailable for several days. Abbott walked away from doorstops when questioning turned to the meaning of "no specific knowledge".

Deputy Opposition Leader, Julie Bishop, has successfully used this tactic too. At the height of her parliamentary attack accusing the Australian Prime Minister of criminality, Ms Bishop held two media conferences on 27 November 2012. Asked how many times she had discussions with self-confessed fraudster Ralph Blewitt, Ms Bishop replied it had been only once, in a face-to-face meeting on Friday 23 November in Melbourne. Ms Bishop said she had received a phone call from former radio presenter Mike Smith, who'd happened to be at a café with Blewitt. As Ms Bishop happened to be not only in the same city but in the vicinity of the cafe in a Comcar, she dropped in for a cup of coffee. It seems 2012 has been the year of Coalition coincidences.

When it emerged that Ms Bishop had, in fact, had a prior telephone conversation with Blewitt on Wednesday 21 November, she issued a written statement conceding she may have spoken to him but wasn't sure as it had only been for a few seconds and the line had dropped out. Blewitt subsequently claimed he'd spoken to Bishop for about three or four minutes.

Bishop immediately went to ground, cancelling her attendance at an Abbott book launch and at a National Press Club luncheon address by the Prime Minister of PNG. Ms Bishop remained unavailable for Press Gallery interviews, consenting only to friendly interviews with Alan Jones and Paul Henry where the subject of the number of conversations with Blewitt conveniently was not raised.

It was not until 14 December – 17 days after her Canberra press conferences – that Ms Bishop reappeared for a long-form interview on the AWU matter. I had been tweeting all that time that Ms Bishop was avoiding media scrutiny of the discrepancy in her account of discussions with Blewitt, even offering to donate \$1,000 to Lifeline if she reappeared. On Friday 14 December Ms Bishop appeared on Sky to be interviewed by David Lipson. The discrepancy was not raised.

Then, on Saturday 15 December, Ms Bishop appeared on ABC24 with Latika Bourke. Not only was the discrepancy relating to Blewitt not raised, the Ashby-Brough-LNP matter was completely ignored.

Several conclusions reasonably emerge from these two examples. First, matters relating to events almost 20 years ago are adjudged by several media outlets as being more newsworthy than those relating to the year 2012.

Second, despite the Prime Minister holding two full media conferences, answering questions in Parliament and giving the Opposition Leader ample time under parliamentary privilege to set out his case for why the Prime Minister of Australia was a criminal, media outlets persist with their claim that the issue is unresolved and the Prime Minister still has questions to answer.

Third, despite a scathing court judgement that the Ashby complaint was designed to benefit LNP candidate Brough and change the balance in the House of Representatives (and hence, the Government of Australia), the News Limited tabloids and the Saturday edition of ABC24 do not consider this to be newsworthy.

Fourth, the Coalition tactic of going to ground when a Shadow Minister lies to the media, or is at best evasive, is very effective.

None of this has the subtlety of the early 1970s. If editors consider a news story doesn't accord with their editorial position they simply don't run it. And if journalists want to protect favoured politicians from answering questions about their untruthfulness, they simply don't ask them.

In making these observations, I am not asserting there is a general bias in the media. Some editors and a few journalists are blatantly biased. That has always been the case. But the real problem is the abandonment of professional standards to give effect to that bias. All subtlety is lost.