



Public broadcaster or green activist?

How the ABC spins Australia's energy choices

James Paterson

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Executive summary

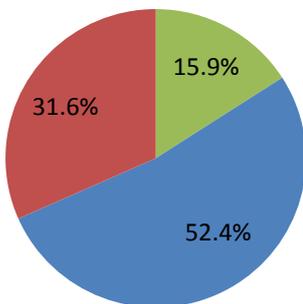
The ABC has a persistent and systemic left wing bias in its coverage of contemporary Australian political issues. This report marks the first time that a comprehensive, independent and scientific assessment of ABC bias has been undertaken.

The IPA commissioned Australia's premier media analysis firm, iSentia, to conduct a third party assessment of ABC bias by examining the ABC's coverage of Australia's energy choices. iSentia used internationally recognised methods to analyse bias over 2,359 separate reports and stories on energy issues broadcast by the ABC between 15 September 2013 and 15 March 2014.

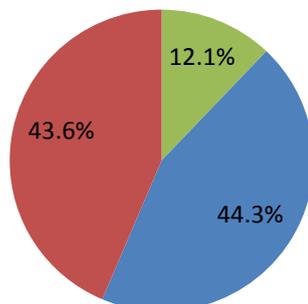
The iSentia data reveals that the ABC treated the renewable energy industry highly favourably, the coal industry unfavourably, and the coal seam gas (CSG) industry highly unfavourably.

How favourably does the ABC cover energy industries?
(% of total industry stories)

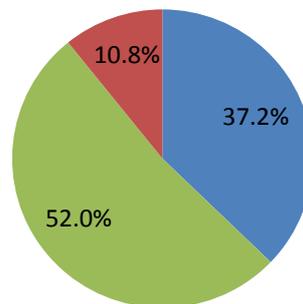
Coal mining



Coal seam gas



Renewable energy



■ FAV ■ NEU ■ UNFAV

iSentia found that the dominant message broadcast by the ABC about CSG and coal mining was that the industries have a negative impact on the environment. These dominant messages far outweigh any assessment of the economic benefits of coal and CSG.

By contrast the dominant message broadcast from the ABC was that renewable energy investment should be prioritised. Coal mining and CSG were positioned by the ABC as harmful, and renewable energy positioned as beneficial.

The report concludes that the ABC's coverage of energy issues is so biased it amounts to campaigning by the taxpayer-funded broadcaster.

The research also demonstrates that bias is a systemic problem at the ABC, and is not confined to any one program, region or medium. The systemic nature of bias at the ABC demonstrates that only structural change will resolve these persistent problems. Only privatising the ABC will resolve the public policy failure that sees more than \$1 billion of taxpayers' money annually spent campaigning for left wing causes.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
About this paper.....	7
How media bias manifests itself.....	8
The mechanics of bias: agenda setting and framing.....	8
Public broadcasting, framing, and systemic bias	12
Framing the energy industry	14
Coal seam gas.....	15
A case study in framing: <i>Lateline</i>	16
How the ABC frames energy: a content analysis	19
Coal mining.....	21
Renewable energy.....	25
Coal seam gas.....	29
Conclusion	33
ABC bias is consistent across platforms and regions	35
The privatisation solution to the ABC bias problem	38
Bibliography.....	40

The Institute of Public Affairs has long argued that the ABC presents biased coverage of key issues.

Introduction

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was founded in 1932 as Australia's national public broadcaster. It has a budget of \$1.22 billion, funded through Australia's compulsory taxation system.

The ABC's supporters claim it has a mandate to broadcast for all Australian citizens. Writing in *The Guardian*, the media commentator Amanda Meade wrote that "The ABC is not just a news and current affairs department and a single TV station. It serves the community on every level, from emergency services to community information to reflecting and nurturing Australian culture."¹

In *The Conversation*, the media commentator Denis Muller argued "The ABC is required by law to provide an impartial news service. This means that the ABC does not have a corporate opinion on matters in the news."²

However, the ABC has long been accused of political imbalance and bias across a large range of issues. The Institute of Public Affairs has long argued that the ABC presents biased coverage of key issues.³

This paper follows a number of earlier papers by the IPA charting ABC bias.

A 2004 paper found that the ABC's coverage of the Iraq War "was negative, defeatist, anti-American and skewed heavily against the Australian government."⁴

In a 2007 paper, the IPA revealed the failure of the Australia Network to broadcast Australian values. That paper looked at three core Australian values - liberal democracy, human rights, and free markets - and found that "the ABC is limited in its support for these values, surprisingly neutral and on occasions not supportive."⁵

This paper adds to that body of research by exploring a narrow question – how does the ABC treat one specific issue, that of Australia's future energy mix? It does this by looking at three energy industries – the coal industry, the renewable energy industry, and the coal seam gas (CSG) industry.

¹ A Meade, 'In Defence of an Independent ABC', *The Guardian*, 4 December 2013.

² D Muller, 'Do Australians really need the ABC?', *The Conversation*, 17 December 2013.

³ See for instance, M Warby, 'Media Bias: It's As Easy As ABC', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 September 1999; C Kerr, 'The ABC's Paralysis on Bias', *IPA Review*, vol. 57 no. 1, March, 2005.

⁴ T Blair & J Morrow, *Anti-American Biased Collective: Your ABC and the Iraq War*, vol. 16, *Occasional Papers*, Institute of Public Affairs, Melbourne, 2004.

⁵ T Wilson, *The Values Deficit: How the ABC fails to deliver Australia's message around the world. Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Public Diplomacy*, Institute of Public Affairs, Melbourne, 2007.

The paper utilises an exclusive study conducted by the media monitoring firm iSentia on behalf of the Institute of Public Affairs. iSentia, formerly known as Media Monitors, is Australia's largest and most highly respected media analysis firm.

Why energy policy? Australia's energy mix and the public policy settings which shape that mix have been one of the most contentious political issues over the last decade. Technical questions around emissions levels, efficiency, cost, and the nature of climate change are mixed up with moral, ethical and philosophical questions about the relationship between human society and the environment, the role of the state, and individual choice.

These sharp divisions in public debate provide a useful window through which to see broader biases within ABC coverage.

The policy choices Australia makes in energy policy will also fundamentally impact our future prosperity. The IPA believes government should adopt an agnostic approach to energy sources, allowing the best technology to prevail without distortionary subsidies. However, this report could easily be replicated with similar results in many other areas of ABC coverage.

Biases are of course inevitable in any communication of an issue. However, bias – particularly the systemic bias demonstrated in this research – conflicts with the obligation of public broadcasters to present issues in an impartial way because they rely on the financial support of all taxpayers.

This is one of the reasons that the ABC should be privatised.⁶ Privately owned broadcasters are freer to pursue a political or philosophical agenda, while being tested by the commercial marketplace and the marketplace of ideas. It is not appropriate to have a 'public' broadcaster broadcasting a consistently biased message. As I argued in *The Age* in January 2014,

The ABC is not such a faultless organisation that it should be above criticism. As a media outlet totally funded by taxpayers, it deserves much greater scrutiny, and has special obligations to be rigorously fair, balanced and impartial. As an organisation, it has shown itself to be tone deaf when it comes to the legitimate concerns of many Australians, that it leans to the left and is not a welcome home for conservatives or classical liberals - particularly among its salaried employees.⁷

⁶ This is a long held position of IPA researchers. See for example J Paterson, 'The Best Way For The Right To Win Culture Wars Is To Privatisise Them', *The Australian*, 11 November 2011; J Roskam, 'Sell off the ABC and show the way', *Australian Financial Review*, 29 November 2013; S Davidson, 'Do Taxpayers Really Need To Pay For The ABC Any More?', *Crikey*, 26 November 2009.

⁷ J Paterson, 'Ignore The Hysteria: It's Time We Privatised The Tone-Deaf, Left-Leaning ABC', *The Age*, 30 January 2014.

It is not appropriate to have a 'public' broadcaster broadcasting a consistently biased message.

About this paper

This paper reviews the theoretical scholarship on media bias. Too often discussions of bias are made without a firm grounding in how bias manifests itself in media content. Therefore, the first part of the paper outlines the theoretical foundations of media framing. Every communication has implicit and explicit framing, which influences the way an audience ‘reads’ that communication. Understanding the inevitability of framing helps explain how bias can become systemic within a media organisation.

Media framing is of particular public policy significance when it occurs in a public broadcaster. The ABC (and SBS, although the focus of this study is on the former) has a mandate to broadcast in the interests of all Australian citizens. If the ABC consistently frames its stories in one direction that favours one particular world view, or consistently emphasises one side of an argument over another, it will have failed to uphold its mandate.

The paper then outlines the significance of the energy industry and the debates that surround it. The paper focuses on three forms of energy generation – coal, renewable, and CSG. Each have different environmental profiles and economic value. Every communication about these three forms of generation has to use some form of framing to explain those differences.

The paper then outlines the findings from the iSentia research on how the ABC frames energy issues. It finds that framing is not only highly detectable, but is consistently biased in one particular direction. The ABC plays up environmental consequences of energy generation from fossil fuels – real and imagined – and downplays the economic benefits of fossil fuels.

Finally, the paper concludes with a recommendation about how policy makers should respond to findings about ABC’s systemic bias. If framing and bias are inevitable features of any media communication, as the evidence suggests they are, then what role does public broadcasting have in a liberal democracy?

The findings in this paper strengthen the argument that the ABC should be privatised.

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How media bias manifests itself

Any functioning liberal democracy requires a vibrant and energetic media to report information necessary for citizens to make decisions and to hold the powerful to account. The media exerts a significant influence on public policy formation.

The media influences how citizens understand the world around them. The media is the primary means through which information about current affairs is delivered, as well as information about science, industry, political philosophy and economics.

The media also influences the way the political system operates. The decisions made in newsrooms to favour one news story over another, to give emphasis to one aspect of a story, to 'spin' a story in a certain direction can create substantial pressure on politicians. That political pressure can turn into legislation. Just as the media is the conduit for citizens to understand the political class, so too the media is a major conduit through which the political class understand popular sentiment.

The mechanics of bias: agenda setting and framing

Communications scholars have described two mechanisms by which the media influences how the public understands issues. These are *agenda setting* and *framing effects*.

Agenda setting describes the result of a process whereby issue advocates compete for scarce media attention.⁸ There are a limitless number of issues and limited space for those issues to be given publicity. Editors, producers and individual journalists have to economise the attention they give particular issues, particular perspectives, and particular arguments.

Those decisions are driven by the political and economic environment in which they operate, by corporate or editorial interest, or by personal preference. Actors outside the system try to influence those decisions. These include non-profit bodies, lobbyists, the corporate sector, and of course politicians and their staff. Usually the ultimate goal of agenda setting is to drive political or social change through the conduit of media coverage. Agenda setting usually relates to the quantity of coverage of a given issue. One famous description of agenda setting says that the media "may not be successful much of the time in

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⁸ JW Dearing & EM Rogers, *Agenda-setting*, Communication concepts, Sage, Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1996.

The media frames issues in order to impose news or entertainment value.

telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”⁹

Framing effects describe the way issues are presented. The media frames issues in order to impose news or entertainment value. To frame “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”.¹⁰ Like agenda setting, framing is also a consequence of the fact that any given space for news content is limited, and therefore decisions have to be made about what messages ought to be communicated. Information has to be presented in an accessible way, and has to have a justificatory element. In media, “Frames structure ... they impose a pattern on the social world, a pattern constituted by any number of symbolic devices.”¹¹

Frames, as Robert Entman points out, have four elements when presenting issues. They define problems – what is the essential conflict at the heart of the story? They diagnose the causes of that problem. They make moral judgments about the rightness and wrongness of the actors and causes. And they (often but not always) suggest or imply remedies.¹²

Frames construct understanding in multiple interdependent spheres of influence. The communicator – the journalist or producer – consciously or unconsciously imparts their judgment about how to frame an issue. The text and medium has frames “manifested by the presence or absence of certain key-words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.” The audience filters their understanding of the news story through their own frames; their ideological and political predilections, their social and economic status, their personal preferences, and their accumulated knowledge about the issue itself. A final frame is through the culture – “stock of commonly invoked frames”, as Entman puts it.¹³

Framing need not constitute the actual words presented in a news item. It can constitute the tone though which an issue is presented – for instance, how a broadcast item is presented by an announcer. How are advocates for each side of an issue presented? It is common for frames to be imposed on

⁹ cited in ME McCombs & DL Shaw, ‘The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1972.

¹⁰ RM Entman, ‘Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm’, *Journal of Communication*, vol. 43, no. 4, 1993.

¹¹ SD Reese, ‘Prologue - Framing Public Life: A Bridging Model for Media Research’, in Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, & August E. Grant (eds.), *Framing public life : perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, N.J. 2001.

¹² Entman, ‘Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm’.

¹³ ———, ‘Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm’, pp. 52-53.

commentators by the use of filming in dark or light rooms, or through the use of makeup.

Frames can be imparted by the medium through which the issue is presented. Is the core conflict in an issue essentially moral, or essentially technocratic? Presenting an issue with a focus on data presentation would suggest the latter. Even the placement of a story in a news hierarchy can impart a frame. A story about the energy industry can be placed in the economics or environment section of a newspaper. Either decision will impart an implicit message to an audience about how to understand the conflict at the heart of the story. As one scholar has written, “the tendency, for example, to classify issues into categories, such as ‘the economy’ and ‘crime,’ obscures the important questions of how they are defined in the first place.”¹⁴

One of the most significant and basic ways in which stories are framed is through the choice of interviewees. In a very real way, it is through the chosen guests and experts that the journalist communicates with their audience. This is an inevitable result of the practice of journalism. There is a belief within the press that it acts merely as a conduit for events and information in the wider world, and that it is the role of the press to objectively represent that world. But given tight space constraints, journalists are usually unable to present directly the evidence for or against certain controversial suppositions. It is unrealistic to expect a three minute news package to present the sort of primary source evidence that one would expect from a scholarly investigation. As a consequence, journalists are forced to rely on an appeal to authority; presenting interviewees who viewers are likely to interpret as familiar with that primary source evidence.

That reliance makes the choice of interviewee an important feature of framing. When presented with a news story about a controversial political issue, journalists have to decide whether to interview advocates or opponents and in what order they should interview them. The balance of interviews frames the story, as do the statements and arguments of the interviewees that are published or aired. Take a story on CSG. A story that interviewed economists, engineers, and industry representatives would be very differently framed compared to a story that interviewed protesters, environmental activists and Greens politicians. We will see how such stories are presented below.

The significance of framing rests on the psychological observation that, all else being equal, an audience will respond differently to an issue depending on the frame in which the issue is presented. Audiences have a choice about how to respond to information. Where there is more than one possible frame available through which that information can be communicated, the presenters’ choice of frame influences the way in which the audience responds

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¹⁴ Reese, 'Prologue - Framing Public Life: A Bridging Model for Media Research'.

Analysis of how the media frames political issues has been a core element of the debate over climate change

- even if the underlying information remains the same.¹⁵ The framing effect means “decision makers respond differently to different but objectively equivalent descriptions of the same problem.”¹⁶

Such effects have obvious implications for the way the media interacts with public opinion and public policy. News framing can affect the way issues are understood in the public sphere. As one study argues,

Many citizens hold competing values: They care, for example, about public health and about civil liberties. In this there is no cognitive inconsistency, at any rate not in the abstract. But the considerations they care about can come into conflict in particular situations. The effect of framing is to prime values differentially, establishing the salience of the one or the other. Framing thus tends to guarantee a disjunction between acts and (some) attitudes, not because the attitude is not sincerely held, but because it has not been primed while a competing value has.¹⁷

Understanding framing is particularly important for issues which have less pre-existing salience in the public sphere. Audiences interpret new information through their understanding of older information. If, for example, the introduction of a new technology is framed through a preconception about the danger of technological change – say, to the environment or to jobs – this will colour how audiences understand the virtues of that technology.

Framing and agenda setting have long been interests of left wing academics. The socialist icon Noam Chomsky (along with his co-author Edward Herman) made his political fame with an argument that the mass media adopts a propagandistic frame through which the foreign policy goals of the American government are pursued. While Chomsky claimed that “the media's adherence to an official agenda with little dissent is likely to influence public opinion in the desired direction, but this is a matter of degree...the propaganda model describes forces that shape what the media does; it does not imply that any propaganda emanating from the media is always effective,” nevertheless they titled their book *Manufacturing Consent*.¹⁸

More recently, analysis of how the media frames political issues has been a core element of the debate over climate change, environment and energy

¹⁵ A Tversky & D Kahneman, ‘The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice’, *Science*, vol. 211, no. 4481, 1981.

¹⁶ IP Levin, SL Schneider, & GJ Gaeth, ‘All Frames Are Not Created Equal: A Typology and Critical Analysis of Framing Effects’, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, vol. 76, no. 2, 1998.

¹⁷ PM Sniderman, RA Brody, & PE Tetlock, *Reasoning and choice : explorations in political psychology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge England ; New York, 1991. p. 52.

¹⁸ ES Herman & N Chomsky, *Manufacturing consent : the political economy of the mass media*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2002. p. xii.

policy. The *Sceptical Climate* report, published in two parts by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism in 2011 and 2013, argued that the media – particularly News Limited newspapers – framed the climate change debate in a manner that favoured climate change sceptics over the “consensus position” on climate change science and policy.¹⁹

Public broadcasting, framing, and systemic bias

Media bias has old roots; the notion of an ‘objective’ mainstream press is only relatively recent, dating back to the mid-twentieth century. Media bias is not a public policy problem in and of itself. Efforts to constrain it are almost always unjustifiable attacks on freedom of speech, as Australia saw with the Gillard government’s attempted media reforms.

However, media bias is a problem for public broadcasters, whose legitimacy and *raison d’être* is founded in their democratic function. Rather than being funded by advertisers and subscribers, public broadcasters are funded through compulsory taxation.

Australia has two separate public broadcasters: the ABC and the Special Broadcasting Service. Both are required by legislation and convention to provide, on balance, an impartial and objective presentation of controversial issues. The ABC’s editorial policy states very clearly that it “has a statutory duty to ensure that the gathering and presentation of news and information is impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism.” The policy rightly takes into account the impossibility of absolute objectivity, but tries to ensure an impartiality standard across the whole organisation over time:

Judgements about whether impartiality was achieved in any given circumstances can vary among individuals according to their personal and subjective view of any given matter of contention. Acknowledging this fact of life does not change the ABC’s obligation to apply its impartiality standard as objectively as possible. In doing so, the ABC is guided by these hallmarks of impartiality:

- a balance that follows the weight of evidence;
- fair treatment;
- open-mindedness; and
- opportunities over time for principal relevant perspectives on matters of contention to be expressed.

¹⁹ W Bacon, *Sceptical Climate Part 2: Climate Science in Australian Newspapers*, Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, 2013; ———, *Sceptical Climate Part 1: Climate Change Policy*, Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, 2011.

Media bias is a problem for public broadcasters, whose legitimacy is founded in their democratic function.

A consistent framing of certain issues in certain directions would demonstrate that a public broadcaster is not upholding its charter.

The ABC aims to present, over time, content that addresses a broad range of subjects from a diversity of perspectives reflecting a diversity of experiences, presented in a diversity of ways from a diversity of sources, including content created by ABC staff, generated by audiences and commissioned or acquired from external content-makers.

Impartiality does not require that every perspective receives equal time, nor that every facet of every argument is presented.²⁰

Likewise, SBS is under an obligation to strive for impartiality:

The commitment to balance and impartiality requires SBS to present – over time and across the schedule of content broadcast or published on the relevant service...– a wide range of significant views, not misrepresenting them or unduly favouring one over another. It does not require SBS to present all viewpoints on an issue or to allocate equal time to different points of view. Neither does it preclude a critical examination of controversial issues or the expression of critical and provocative points of view...

In relation to news content, for major issues that are matters of controversy, balance should be provided over the period in which the controversy is active. Balance will be provided through the presentation, as far as possible, of principal relevant viewpoints.²¹

Each public broadcasting code recognises the necessity for impartiality across its broadcasts. However, in practice these editorial policies offer journalists little guide, allowing individual journalists and producers to direct content according to their own values and views.

Every story is framed in its own way. However, a consistent framing of certain issues in certain directions would demonstrate that a public broadcaster is not upholding its charter.

²⁰ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Principles and Standards, Editorial Policies*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, New South Wales, 2011.

²¹ Special Broadcasting Service, *SBS Codes of Practice*, Special Broadcasting Service, New South Wales, 2014.

Framing the energy industry

There are few more controversial issues in Australian public policy than energy policy. The politics and economics of climate change, and the extent to which they are caused by greenhouse gas emissions from energy production and consumption, have been a central element in at least three federal elections (2007, 2010 and 2013). The federal Labor leadership spill in June 2010 centred around two major policy decisions concerning energy policy – the decision to postpone its emissions trading scheme plans and the political fallout from its announcement of a mining tax.

Energy policy is controversial because it involves two competing political values: economic growth and living standards, and the environment and its protection. It is therefore necessary to have a brief overview of the issues surrounding energy policy.

Energy use and economic growth are tightly coupled. Economic growth is in part limited by energy available, and shocks to energy supply – whether caused by natural factors, such as natural disasters, or political factors, such as the OPEC oil crisis of the 1970s or the introduction of public policy to constrain energy use – will reduce output and therefore economic growth.²²

The link between energy use and living standards is also clear. Economic growth is correlated with long term changes in the standard of living. Economic growth is not the sole condition necessary for high living standards such as health, education, social well-being, civil and political freedoms, human rights, and economic rights, but it is necessary, and often strongly correlated. In this sense the public policy framework which governs energy is directly implicated in the broader question of economic growth and living standards.

Furthermore, government energy policy also has practical economic consequences for individuals and households. Policies which increase or lower energy costs materially affect cost of living and therefore living standards. In 2012 low income households in Australia spent \$77 per week on energy.²³ This cost is substantial.

Energy use has, however, been linked to environmental degradation, particularly climate change. The International Panel on Climate Change claims that energy produced by human fossil fuel combustion and industrial processes are likely to lead to global temperature warming of 1.5-2°C by the end of the twenty first century.

Policies which increase or lower energy costs materially affect cost of living and therefore living standards.

²² DI Stern & CJ Cleveland, 'Energy and economic growth', *Encyclopedia of energy*, vol. 2, 2004.

²³ ABS 4670.0 - Household Energy Consumption Survey, Australia: Summary of Results, 2012

There is a definite and unambiguous trade-off between reducing emissions and cheap and reliable energy.

Climate change mitigation policies that seek to reduce reliance on fossil fuel energy raise the cost of energy. Coal provides around 80 per cent of electricity generation in Australia. This is because Australia has abundant coal reserves, which is reflected in the low cost of coal energy provided to the corporate and household sector. By contrast, low-emissions technologies such as wind, hydroelectric power, and geo-thermal energy are more expensive. One further factor to consider is the availability of various energy sources. Energy generation that depends on environmental factors such as wind and sunshine is less available than alternative forms. Table 1 illustrates the relative costs of different sources of energy generation and their relative availabilities.

Table 1: Costs of different forms of electricity generation²⁴

Long run marginal costs		
	Cost per megawatt hour	Capacity factor (availability as percentage of time)
Brown coal	\$35	80-90%
Black coal	\$36	85-95%
Wind	\$80-120	30%
Solar (photovoltaic)	\$190	20-22%
Hydroelectric	\$60-150	15%
Gas (open cycle gas turbine)	\$65-96	Up to 90%

As Table 1 shows clearly, there is a definite and unambiguous trade-off between reducing emissions and cheap and reliable energy. The existence of that trade-off creates a clear decision point for any media communication on the energy industry. Journalists have to make implicit or explicit choices about how they frame stories on energy. Will the story focus on the economic effect of energy policy or the environmental effect?

Coal seam gas

One controversial public issue in the energy sector is the CSG industry. The controversial nature of CSG presents a challenge for journalists seeking to deliver news in a balanced light. It is therefore necessary to have a brief overview of the issues surrounding CSG.

CSG is a form of unconventional gas supply, alongside shale gas and tight gas. It is easy to frame the issue as one between environmental activists and small farmers on one side, and large energy corporations on another. These sorts of off-the-shelf narratives make for seductive frames, but do not reflect the

²⁴ A Moran, *Submission to the Renewable Energy Target Review Panel*, Institute of Public Affairs, Melbourne, 2014.

reality and potential of the industry and its environmental significance. The ABC has done a poor job at presenting the CSG industry in a balanced way.

CSG is controversial because it is often extracted by hydraulic fracturing ('fracking') rock, a process which allows the gas to escape. Water, sand and chemicals are pumped into rock at high pressure. Fracking has taken place since the 1940s, however it is only in the last decade that it has come to be used at a significant scale around the world.

Opponents of CSG extraction argue that the chemicals used in fracking can contaminate water aquifers, that the wastewater generated by the process is dangerous to the environment, human health, agriculture and livestock and that CSG will do little to help mitigate climate change. A further argument concerns access rights to CSG, which is often located on farmland.

Although activists have raised concerns about the possible health impacts of CSG in Australia and elsewhere in the world, it has not been proven to be harmful to human health.

The CSIRO considers that "hydraulic fracturing, when conducted correctly, is unlikely to introduce hazardous concentrations of chemicals into groundwater or to create connections between fresh and coal containing aquifers."²⁵

Furthermore, environmentalists routinely fail to recognise the substantial benefits that widespread use of CSG will have for their own stated objective of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The emissions from CSG are half that of traditional coal.²⁶ CSG is an economically viable, lower emissions technology.

Fracking and CSG extraction are new technologies that offer great promise for energy generation in Australia for many decades. It is likely that nonconventional gas supplies in Australia are nearly twice that of conventional natural gas. However, new technologies are highly susceptible to fear campaigns – often described as 'moral panics'. Fracking has brought about substantial opposition and scare campaigns, which have in turn been met by legislative controls on CSG extraction and, in some cases, moratoriums on the practice.

A case study in framing: Lateline

Some instances of bias can be subtle. Journalists may work hard to make certain that news scripts have equal time for both sides of the argument, yet

²⁵ Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, *Coal seam gas developments - predicting impacts*, 2012.

²⁶ Department of the Environment, *National Inventory Report 2012: The Australian Government Submission to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, vol. 1, Australian Government, Canberra, 2014.

Every individual interviewed by the ABC was supportive of the CEFC and opposed its abolition

visuals, tone, language, and positioning may frame a story towards one side or another.

Unfortunately at the ABC, such subtlety is rare. As an illustration, take one six minute story aired on ABC current affairs program *Lateline* on 25 September 2013, 'Clean Energy Finance Corporation told to stop lending'.²⁷ The Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC) is a government organisation that invests in private renewable energy projects. It was formed in July 2013, two months before the 2013 election was scheduled.

The 'news' of the *Lateline* story was that the Commonwealth Treasurer Joe Hockey had written to the CEFC instructing it to cease making new investments as the government intended to abolish the body. Furthermore, legal advice had emerged suggesting the Treasurer had no power to direct the CEFC to stop funding until it had been abolished.

Lateline took these two pieces of information as a hook for a broader discussion about "what does the corporation do, and if it's shut down, will it be missed?" The answer to the latter question was unambiguously 'yes'.

The story was framed in an overwhelmingly positive light for the CEFC and overwhelmingly negative for the government's plans to abolish the body. The opening juxtaposition between the Treasurer's instruction and a 'rebuttal' framed the story immediately: the legal advice was "independent", "backed by one of the country's top constitutional lawyers", and suggested there was no alternative for the CEFC but to continue new lending. It would have been hard to frame the advice in a more positive light. The top constitutional lawyer in question was Professor George Williams, from the Gilbert + Tobin Centre of Public Law. Professor Williams is indeed one of the top constitutional lawyers in Australia but he was not the author of the advice. Instead, the advice was written by the Queensland barrister Stephen Keim on behalf of the Australian Conservation Foundation, a non-profit environmental lobby group.²⁸

Professor Williams was only asked to comment by *Lateline* on the advice, which he did positively. Yet the story framed the advice as if he was intimately involved with its production, and furthermore failed to disclose that the advice was in fact commissioned by a highly-political, highly-ideological, and highly-contentious environmental lobby group.

Apart from Williams, whose comments were limited to the legal advice, every individual interviewed was supportive of the CEFC and opposed to both its abolition and the Treasurer's instructions. The first individual was Oliver Yates, the chief executive officer of the CEFC, who argued the CEFC's case at length. The second interviewee was a representative of Pacific Hydro, a firm which

²⁷ *Clean Energy Finance Corporation told to stop lending*, 2013.

²⁸ S Keim, *Re Australian Conservation Foundation re Clean Energy Finance Corporation* ("CEFC"), 19 September 2013.

had received a loan from the CEFC. The Shadow Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus was also interviewed, who was also opposed to the CEFC's abolition, and was granted airtime to argue that the government was bullying the government-owned corporation, and that the Treasurer's action "had put at risk...thousands of jobs".

There were no counter-views to this argument. The Australian government has argued that the CEFC is a burden on the budget and its abolition necessary to get the budget back to surplus.²⁹ Furthermore, the federal environment minister has argued that the CEFC is being used "to prop up existing projects owned by other governments."³⁰

There are other arguments against the CEFC. The marketplace is a better test of the virtues of investment than government-backed investment firms. If the government backs ventures which are unable to acquire funding on the open market at a suitable rate it strongly suggests that the government is bearing extra risk; that is, providing an implicit subsidy to the firm. This is on top of the existing subsidies to renewable energy, which are also a burden on the budget.

Furthermore, there is a glaring policy contradiction that setting a price on carbon would allow the marketplace to determine the future energy mix yet nevertheless believing that the market cannot provide funding for renewable energy. And finally, the CEFC and other renewable energy policies are unlikely to bridge the dramatic difference in energy prices between renewable and fossil fuel sources.

These perspectives were not aired. Rather, viewers were told, by the CEFC itself that "these projects are generating and in essence we're generating emission reductions at a profit." It was strongly suggested that the CEFC was no burden on the budget because the funds were loaned at the exact same rates as commercial lenders. The invested money "will come back with interest and a green dividend". The head of the corporation was given the first and last word.

According to analysis by iSentia, the *Lateline* report presented its message using the language of hope, reason, and pragmatism. The frame through which the renewable energy was presented was overwhelmingly positive. The news – that is, the letter written by Joe Hockey and the legal advice – was merely a hook for a larger argument in favour of the corporation.

The news was merely a hook for a larger argument in favour of the corporation.

²⁹ J Hockey, 'Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook', National Press Club, 17 December 2013.

³⁰ G Hunt, 'Rudd Should Suspend CEFC Activities', 1 July 2013.

How the ABC frames energy: a content analysis

In March 2014 the Institute of Public Affairs commissioned the media analysis firm iSentia to investigate the way the ABC treats the coal energy industry, the renewable energy industry, and the CSG industry.

The sample was limited to a six month period between 15 September 2013 and 15 March 2014. The coverage analysed was broadcast coverage in all metropolitan markets, as well as regional stations in New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland.

This is not an absolute audit of all coverage within the period. Nevertheless, the survey sought to provide a reasonable representative sample of ABC coverage, including rural media.

In total 2,359 broadcast reports were collected. The least reported industry was coal, which featured in 452 reports. Second was the renewable energy (790 reports). The most stories, and by a significant margin, covered the CSG industry. iSentia analysed 1,117 CSG stories. (This is only a proportion of the total of stories on CSG in the period under question. The volume of broadcast material on CSG was so large that iSentia took a representative sample of CSG reports.)

Table 2: Broadcast ABC reports analysed by iSentia between 15 September 2013 and 15 March 2014

	Reports analysed	Percentage of total coverage
Coal industry	452	19.2%
Renewable energy industry	790	33.5%
Coal seam gas industry	1,117*	47.4%
Total	2,359	100%

* represents a sample of total coverage

iSentia uses the internationally-recognised standard methodological approach to analyse media content, CARMA[®]. This methodology is designed to provide an aggregate favourability/unfavourability ranking scale between 0-100, where 50 is neutral. It takes into account the elements of framing theory discussed above, including placement, positioning, imagery, discussed topics, messages, sources, and tone. The CARMA[®] methodology focuses as much as possible on objective criteria. Where the analysis is necessarily subjective, messages are identified through specific phrases and variations to ensure consistency. iSentia also uses multiple researchers to minimise subjectivity as much as possible.

Box A outlines the categories that iSentia uses to describe industry positioning.

iSentia uses the internationally-recognised standard methodological approach to analyse media content

Box A: iSentia industry positioning descriptors

OPEN – includes positive references to community/public consultation, provision and disclosure of scientific data.

SECRETIVE – includes negative references to community consultation and disclosure, withholding information, etc.

CO-OPERATIVE – works with stakeholders, including governments.

UNCO-OPERATIVE – does not work with stakeholders

FAIR – when positioned as an equal among stakeholders.

TOO POWERFUL – when positioned as too influential, esp. with govt policies and decisions, wielding disproportionate influence, etc.

BENEFICIAL – includes economic benefits, jobs, royalties, tax contributions, etc.

HARMFUL – includes environmental, public health, economic and social impacts.

Furthermore, iSentia classes media content according to the tone and approach. Box B outlines iSentia's classes of language.

Box B: iSentia language descriptors

REASON – Characterised by the use of rational argument, reference to research or data, appeals to evidence, etc. Tone is measured and calm.

CYNICISM – When there is an emphasis on doubt regarding solutions or positive outcomes. Tone may be unfriendly, and sound exasperated or weary.

PRAGMATISM – Constructive language that commonly looks for solutions and positive outcomes for all stakeholders. May include the acceptance of government decisions and policies. Tone is constructive, matter-of-fact, even welcoming.

FEAR – When negative outcomes and concerns are heightened or emphasised, including the use of negative adjectives. Tone may be emotive, angry or distressed.

HOPE – when the language is optimistic and positive, but perhaps more simplistic rather than pragmatic. Focused on favourable outcomes. Tone may be friendly.

HUMOUR – when any form of humour is used to illustrate an argument.

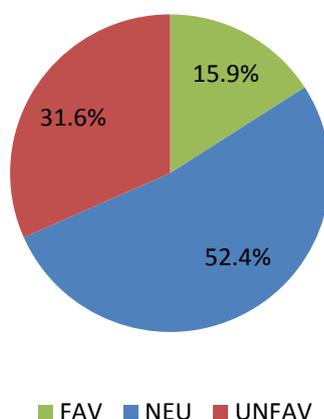
Coal mining

The ABC treats coal mining negatively. Its coverage of the coal mining industry is characterised by an imbalance of language and a focus on negative environmental messages rather than positive economic ones.

The ABC's coverage of the coal mining industry is characterised by an imbalance of language and a focus on negative environmental messages rather than positive economic ones.

iSentia analysis demonstrates that for every favourable story the ABC broadcasts on coal mining, it broadcasts two unfavourable ones. Chart 1 clearly shows this imbalance. While the ABC broadcast 72 stories that were favourable to coal mining (15.9 per cent of the total) it swamped them with 143 stories which were unfavourable (31.6 per cent of the total).

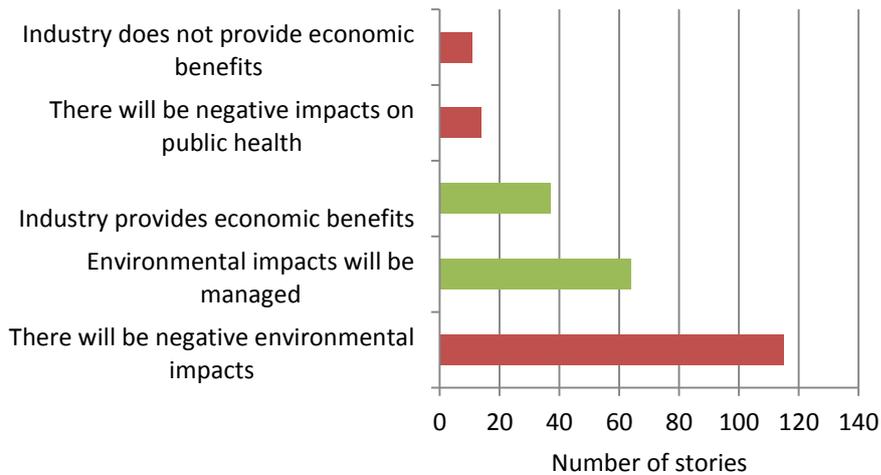
Chart 1: Overview of media coverage of the coal industry



The source of this disparity becomes clear when we look at the leading messages of the broadcasts. As Chart 2 demonstrates, the overwhelming focus of ABC stories on coal was the environmental impact. There were 115 stories which suggested that the coal industry has a negative environmental impact. The stories which suggested that the environmental consequences of coal mining could be managed were far fewer – just 64.

Coal mining is a significant source of Australian economic prosperity. Yet by contrast, few ABC stories focused on the economic significance of coal. Only 37 suggested that coal provides economic benefits. This is striking compared to the 115 that focused on negative environmental impacts. Furthermore, 11 stories suggested that the coal industry does not provide economic benefits – an argument hard to fathom given that coal is supplied on the open market and that the coal mining industry is driven by market, rather than state, imperatives.

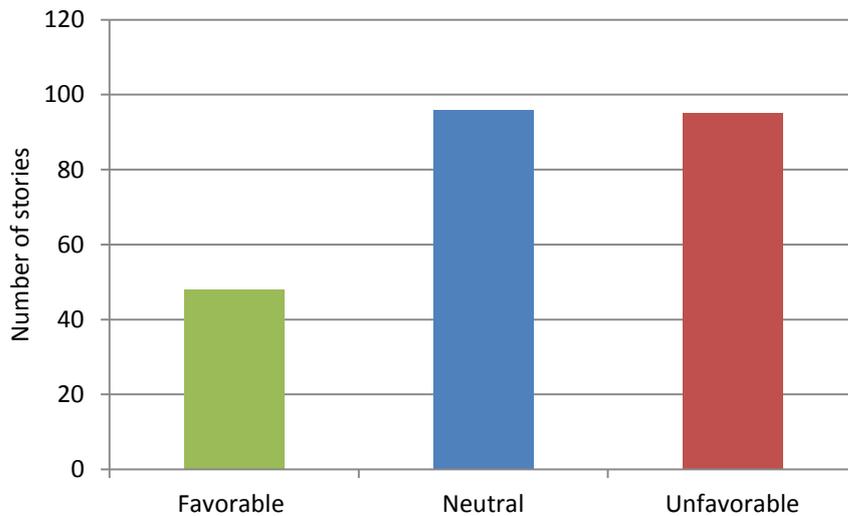
Chart 2: leading messages for coal



The economic value of the coal industry was rarely discussed

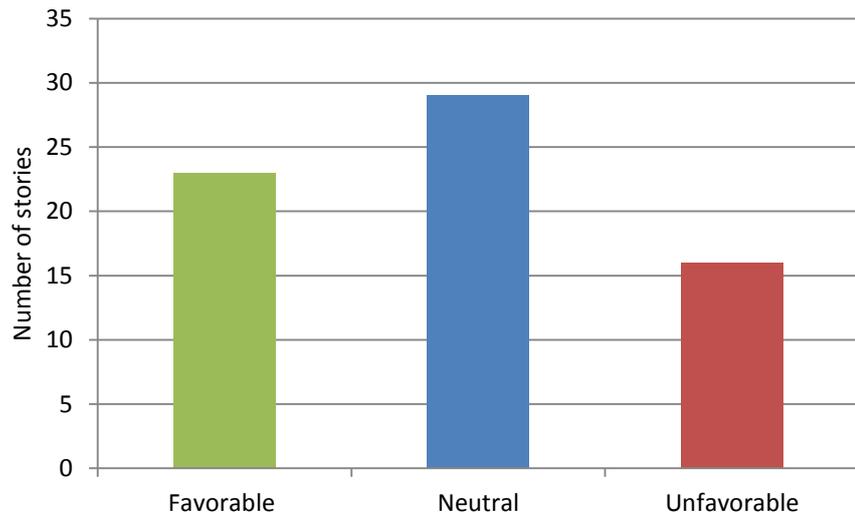
How does this hostility manifest itself? iSentia categorises broadcasts by the leading topics within each broadcast.

Chart 3: How the ABC depicts the environmental impact of the coal industry



As we have seen, the economic value of the coal industry was rarely discussed. In that small sample of 68 stories, still a high proportion of stories focused on the negative economic impact of the coal industry, as Chart 4 demonstrates. Stories which recognised the positive benefit of the industry were significantly outnumbered by those which treated the issue neutrally.

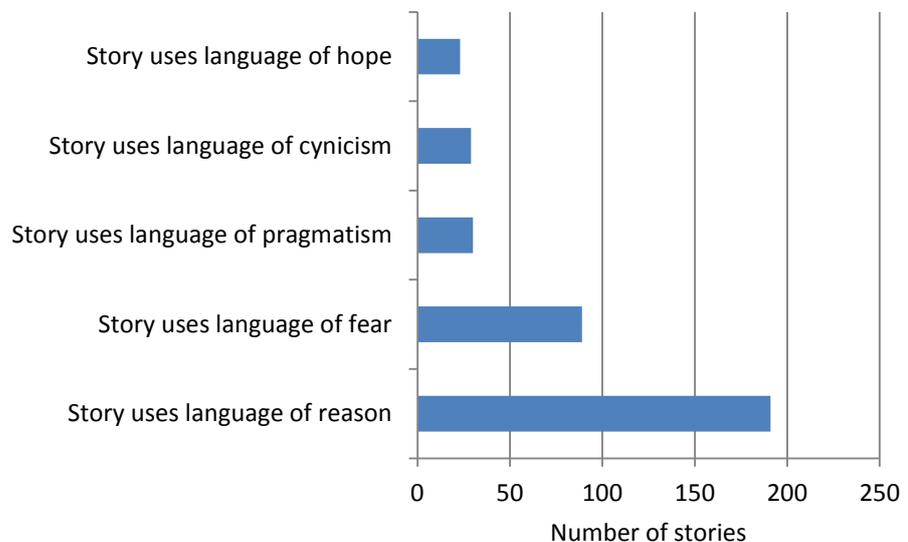
Chart 4: How the ABC depicts the economic impact of the coal industry



As part of its analysis iSentia looks at the tone of the language used in individual stories. For instance, if a story features detailed facts, rational argument, appeals to evidence and the tone is measured and calm, we can say the language used is an appeal to reason. When a story is characterised by an emphasis on negative outcomes, a reliance of negative adjectives, and an emotive, angry or distressed tone, we can say the language used is an appeal to fear. (Box B on page 20 details the full iSentia criteria.)

Chart 5 details the characteristics of language use in coal stories. The ABC broadcast 191 stories that used a language of reason and 30 that used the language of pragmatism. By contrast, 89 used the language of fear, and 29 used cynicism. Only 23 stories were characterised by hopeful language.

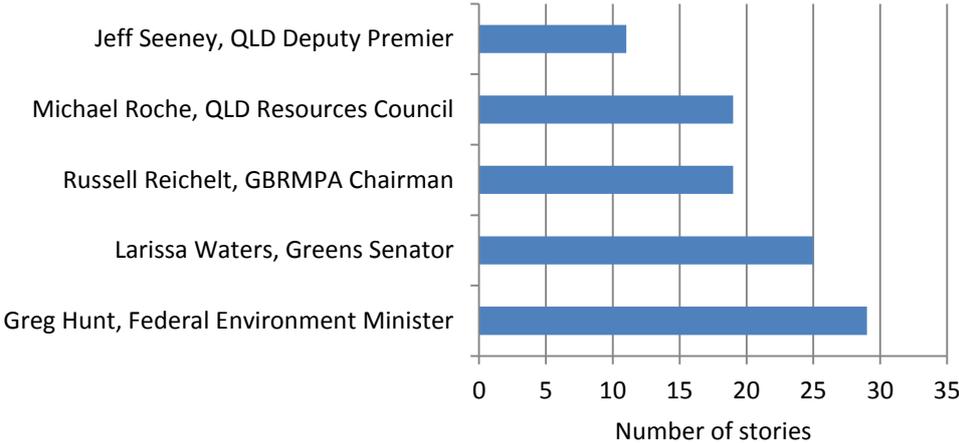
Chart 5: Language use in coal mining industry stories



The choice of interviewees is one key mechanism by which frames are applied to stories. iSentia collected the most frequently quoted spokespeople in the coverage, and categorised their comments by whether they were favourable or unfavourable to the industry concerned.

Chart 6 details the most quoted spokespeople in coal mining stories. The Federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt was the most quoted, giving comments in 29 stories. Of those comments, 9 were favourable to coal mining and 10 were neutral. The second most quoted person was Larissa Waters, a Greens Senator from Queensland. She gave 25 comments, all of which were unfavourable. Russell Reichelt, chairman of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Michael Roche, Director of the Queensland Resources Council, and Jeff Seeney, Deputy Premier of Queensland, all gave comments that ranged between neutral and favourable. The choice of interviewees reflects the fact that the coverage on coal mining was dominated in the sample period by the Abbot Point controversy.

Chart 6 : Leading spokespeople on coal mining industry stories



Favourable stories about renewable energy outweigh unfavourable stories by a ratio of 5 to 1.

The mixture of interviewees a story quotes is significant. Just as the framing theory suggests, iSentia analysis demonstrates that those who are interviewed is strongly correlated with the overall favourability rating of the story. Stories which quoted Greg Hunt had an average favourability rating of 51.7 – that is, they were above average favourability towards the coal mining industry. Stories which quoted Larissa Waters were had an average favourability rating of 46.

Renewable energy

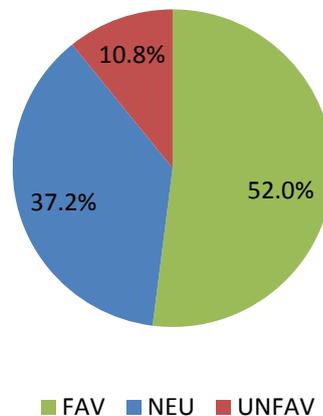
The ABC is highly favourable towards the renewable energy industry.

Favourable stories about renewable energy outweigh unfavourable stories by a ratio of 5 to 1. Where the ABC broadcast 411 stories which iSentia considered to be favourable it only broadcast 85 stories that were unfavourable.

Furthermore, of the three industries measured by iSentia, the renewable energy industry has the lowest level of neutral reporting at just 37.2% – in other words, renewable energy is an industry for which the ABC has the firmest view, and that view is favourable.

The most repeatedly leading message on the ABC about renewable energy was that “renewable energy should be prioritised”.

Chart 7: Overview of media coverage of renewable energy industry

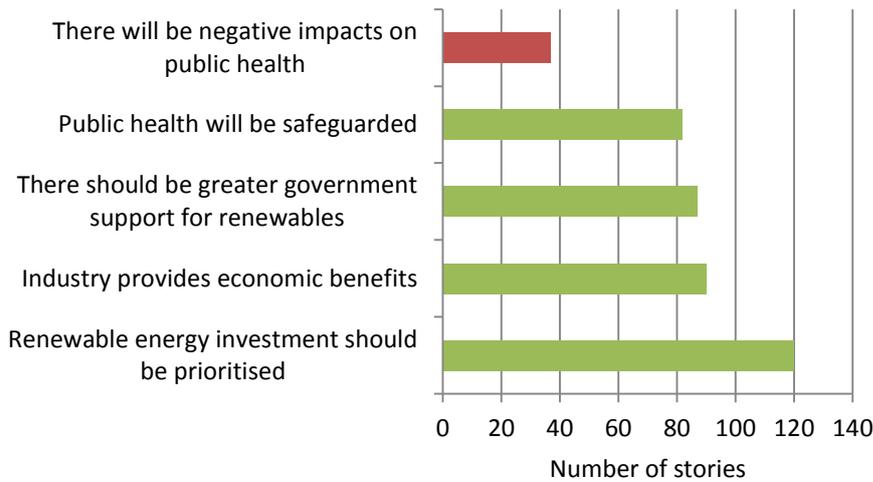


How this extreme imbalance between favourability and unfavourability is manifested is evident in iSentia’s analysis of the leading messages in renewable energy stories. As Chart 8 shows, by far the most repeated leading message was that “renewable energy should be prioritised” – which appeared in 120 stories. This is as political a leading message as could be imagined, given the public policy controversy surrounding the renewable energy industry.

Similarly imbalanced is the second most significant leading message, which suggested that the renewable energy provides economic benefits. As we have seen in the *Lateline* case study above, such messages constitute claims about the number of jobs in the renewable energy industry, the success of government renewable energy investment, or the total contribution of renewable energy to Australia’s economy.

However, these arguments are confused, simplistic, and fail to take into account opportunity cost. Conceptually, in a marketplace economic benefits are realised by profitable firms. Industries which rely on government subsidy to be profitable cannot be seen as economically beneficial. Rather, those subsidies artificially boost uneconomical businesses.

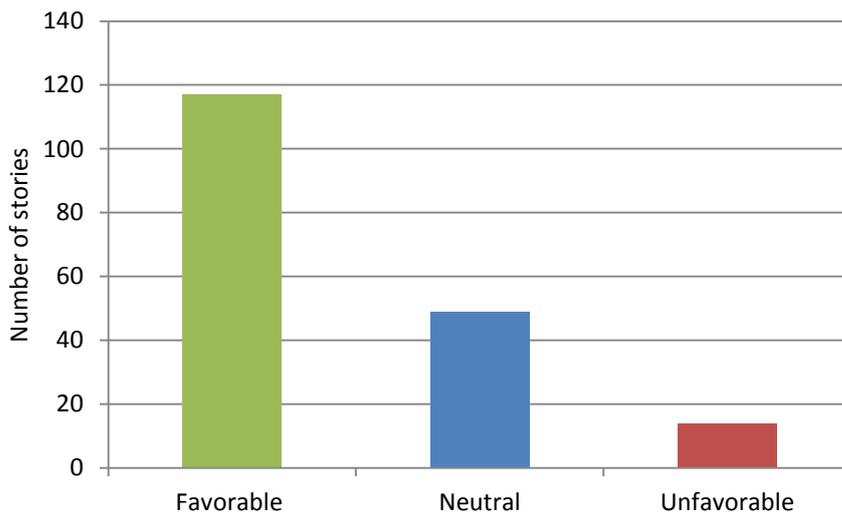
Chart 8: Leading messages for renewable energy



Stories which depict the economics of renewable energy in a favourable light outnumber those that do not by nearly a factor of 8 to 1.

We can see the overwhelming support that the ABC gives the economics of renewable energy by looking closer at favourability/unfavourability rating for individual topics in a story. In Chart 9 stories which depict the economics of renewable energy in a favourable light outnumber those that do not by nearly a factor of 8 to 1. Where there were only 14 stories which framed the economic cost of renewables in a negative light, there were 117 stories which framed it positively. The negative stories were vastly outweighed by those which treated renewable energy economics neutrally.

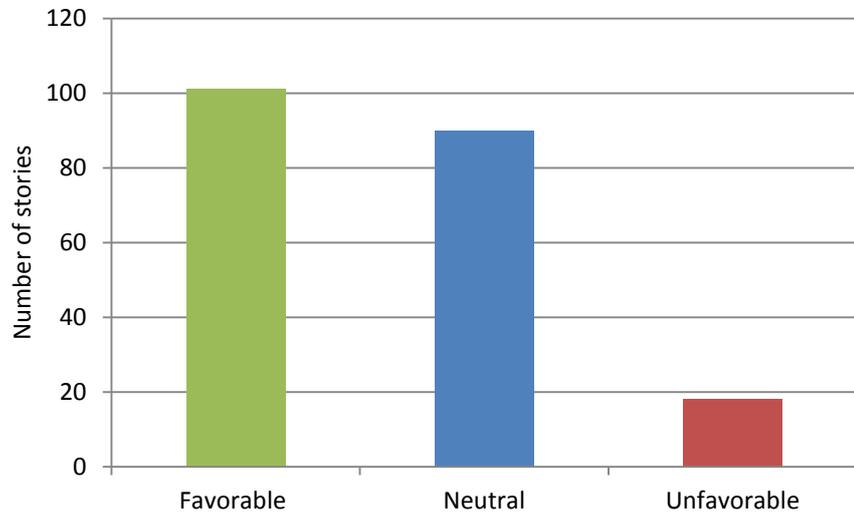
Chart 9: How the ABC depicts the economic impact of the renewable energy industry



Likewise, the ABC treats public policy which favours renewable energy and disfavors non-renewable energy highly positively, as Chart 10 clearly demonstrates. These programs include emissions trading schemes, the Gillard government's carbon tax policy, the Abbott government's Direct Action

climate change policy, and the Renewable Energy Target. 101 stories were favourable to such programs, compared with just 18 which were unfavourable.

Chart 10: How the ABC depicts government programs which subsidise renewable energy and restrict non-renewable energy



Renewable energy stories had the highest proportional use of the language of hope

In Chart 11 we can see that the imbalance is also reflected in language use. Overwhelmingly stories about renewable energy made use of the language of reason and the language of pragmatism. Renewable energy stories also had the highest proportional use of the language of hope, with a significant 93 stories utilising such language. By contrast, stories which deployed the language of fear and cynicism were extremely rare. The latter is particularly striking considering the reliance of the industry on government subsidy and the strong awareness that corporate rent-seeking and special favours is an endemic problem in modern democracies.

Chart 11: Language use in renewable energy stories

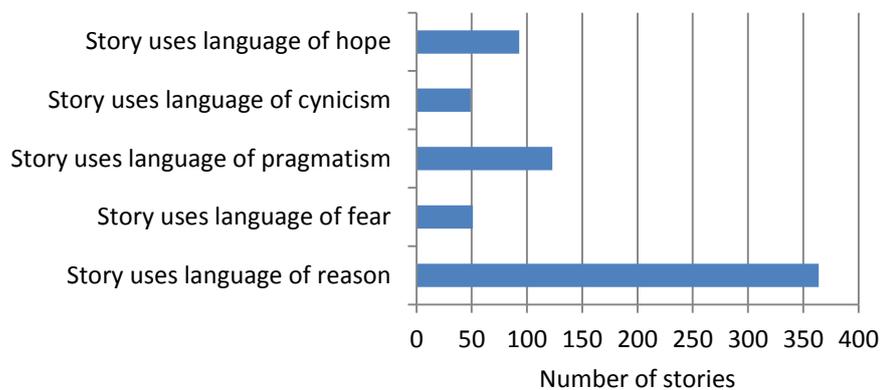
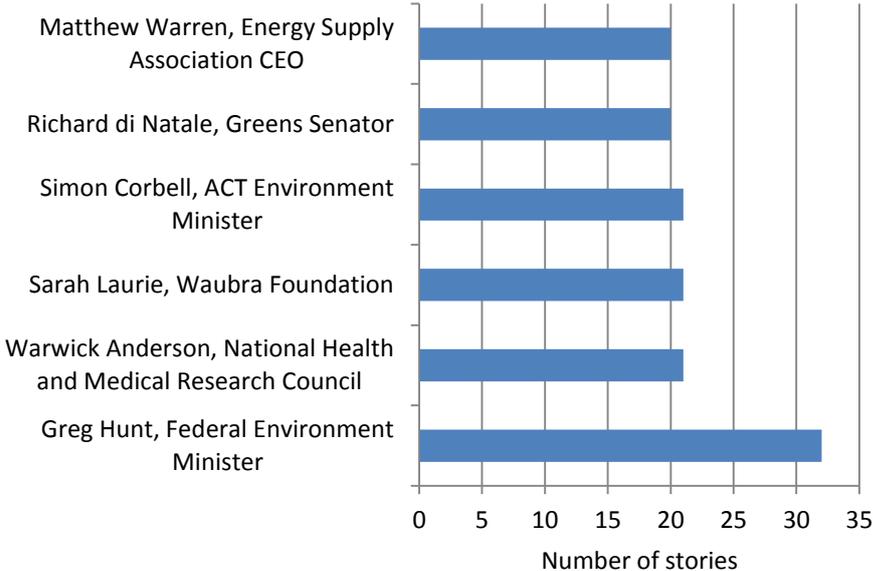


Chart 12 shows the leading spokespeople on the renewable energy industry. Federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt is the most often quoted person on the issue. The large roles played by Warwick Anderson of the National Health

and Medical Research Council and Sarah Laurie of the Waubra Foundation reflect one particular controversy recorded in the survey period – that of the public health impact of wind farms. Likewise, the Greens Senator Richard Di Natale appeared in his capacity as the Greens’ spokesperson on the link between health and windfarms. The significance of the Australian Capital Territory Environment Minister Simon Corbell reflects the fact that in February 2014 the ACT announced a significant expansion of its renewable energy program.

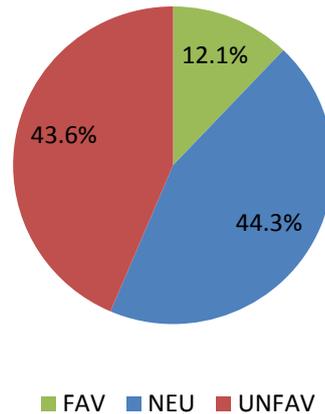
Chart 12: Leading spokespeople on renewable energy industry stories



Coal seam gas

Where renewable energy is treated highly favourably, the CSG industry is treated with extreme disfavour. Chart 13 shows just how reliant the ABC is on negative framing when it reports CSG. 487 stories treated the industry unfavourably, whereas just 135 treated it favourably.

Chart 13: Overview of media coverage of coal seam gas



487 stories treated the CSG industry unfavourably, whereas just 135 treated it favourably.

The source of this incredible antipathy with which the ABC treats CSG is shown in Chart 14. The ABC has signed up fully to the claim that CSG will bring about negative environmental impacts. 259 stories emphasised that there would be negative impacts to the environment from the increased use of CSG technology. (It is worth recalling that this is only a fraction of the total – iSentia took a sample of all CSG stories to analyse.) That figure is double the number of reports that claimed renewable energy should be prioritised. ABC viewers and listeners will have heard about the environmental dangers of CSG far more than any other energy story.

By contrast, the message that environmental impacts will be managed by CSG technology – the demonstrable reality acknowledged by the CSIRO, was broadcast only 72 times. The economic significance of the industry was similarly downplayed. The economic benefits of CSG were discussed merely 52 times.

Chart 14: Leading messages for coal seam gas

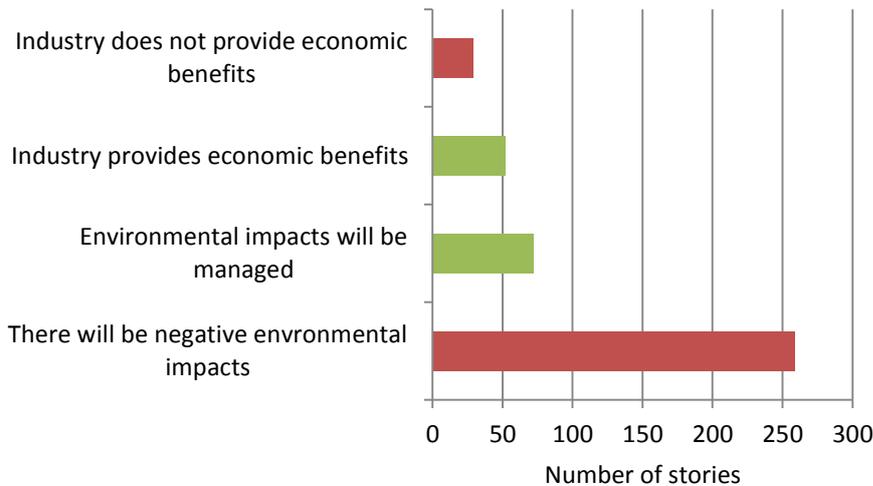
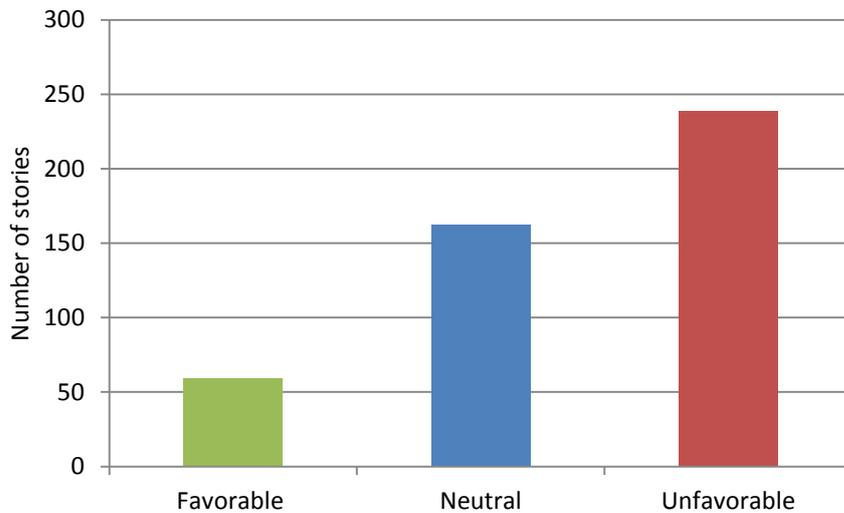


Chart 15 further demonstrates this imbalance. Once again, the overwhelming hostility to CSG industry’s environmental impact is evident.

Chart 15: How the ABC depicts the environmental impact of the coal seam gas industry



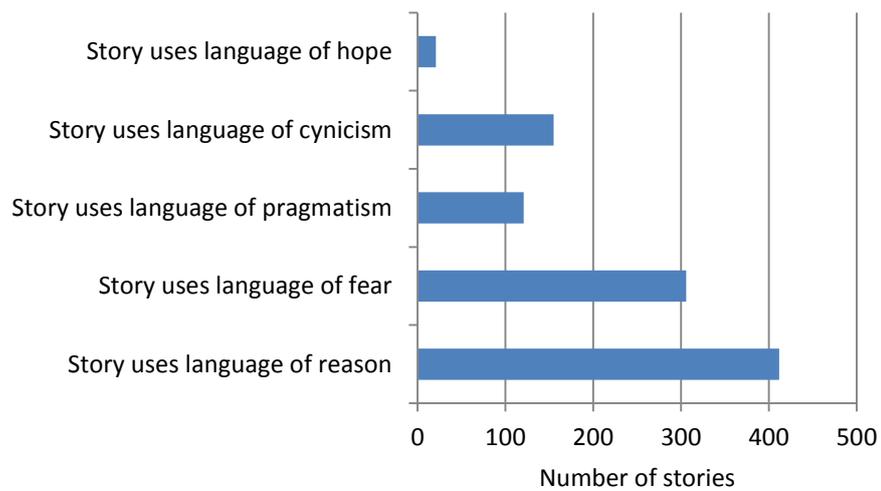
CSG industry stories had the highest number and proportion of language of fear out of the three industries. Chart 16 shows that 412 stories used the language of reason. But this volume was nearly matched by the 306 stories on CSG that utilised the language of fear – 27% of the total of 1,117. Likewise, the use of the language of cynicism was the highest of all industries, used in 155 stories. Once again, this needs to be seen in the context of the large volume of CSG stories overall – in the survey period ABC viewers were inundated with fearful stories about CSG.

The ABC has signed up fully to the claim that CSG will bring negative environmental impacts.

The remarkably low number of stories that utilised hope – just 21, or 2% - is also striking. As we have noted above, CSG is both economically viable without subsidy and has half the emissions profile of coal mining. For a broadcaster that prioritises the environmental impact of Australia’s energy mix, that combination would seem to be highly desirable – even hopeful. However such optimism is not evident in the ABC’s coverage reported by iSentia. It is barely acknowledged. 21 stories that utilise the language of hope are completely drowned out by the 306 stories that utilised the language of fear.

Chart 16: Language use in coal seam gas industry stories

CSG industry stories had the highest number and proportion of language of fear out of the three industries.



The ABC’s hostility to the CSG industry is also clearly evident in the selection of interviewees, as Chart 17 shows. Overwhelmingly the most prominent spokesperson on CSG issues in the period surveyed was Jeremy Buckingham, a Greens member of the NSW Legislative Council. Buckingham believes that “Coal seam gas is an inherently risky industry” and “is unsafe no matter who runs it”.³¹ Unsurprisingly his comments were almost uniformly negative: 80 of 92 were unfavourable, and the rest comprised of neutral comment.

The next two most frequently interviewed spokespeople were Brad Hazzard, former planning minister in the NSW state government, and Chris Hartcher, former energy minister in the NSW state government. Their comments were overwhelmingly neutral, with 30 of 42 comments for the former and 27 of 40 for the latter. The balance for each was provided by an even split of favourable and unfavourable comments.

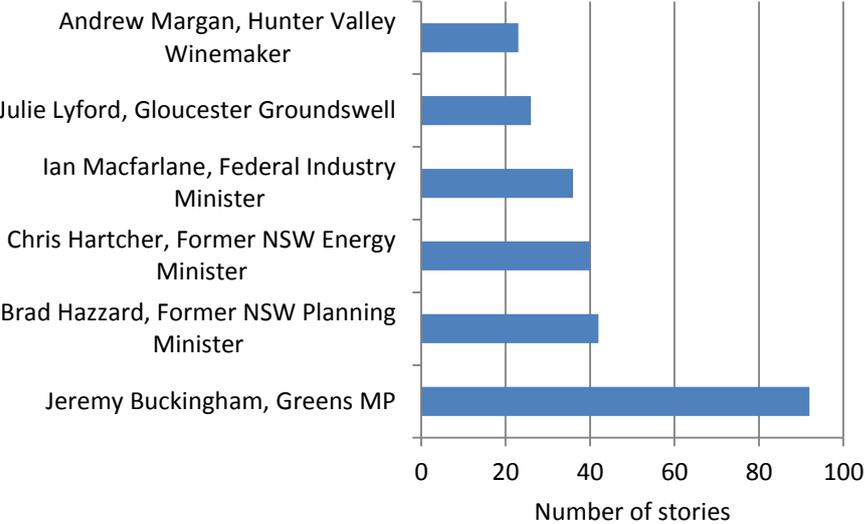
The only clear supporter of the CSG industry was Ian Macfarlane, Federal Industry Minister, who provided 36 comments, 28 of which were favourable to the industry. The fifth and sixth most cited spokespeople, Julie Lyford from the anti-CSG activist group Groundswell Gloucester, and Andrew Margan, a

³¹ J Buckingham, ‘Media Release: Another Toxic Coal Seam Gas Spill for Santos’, 28 March 2014.

winemaker in the Hunter Valley opposed to CSG extraction. Their comments were uniformly unfavourable to the CSG industry.

The mixture of guests is clearly hostile. The emphasis given to Jeremy Buckingham demonstrates the success the Greens have had at setting the ABC's agenda on CSG – keeping the attention firmly on his hyperbolic claims about the environmental and health impacts of fracking. The only clear advocate for this new form of energy is the federal industry minister, who receives barely a third of the media attention received by Buckingham.

Chart 17: Leading spokespeople on coal seam gas industry stories



Overwhelmingly the most prominent spokesperson on CSG issues on the ABC was Greens MP Jeremy Buckingham

Conclusion

All news content is framed in some fashion. Framing can be consciously or unconsciously imposed. The iSentia research collected in this report has shown that the ABC frames the energy industry in a consistent direction. It consistently weights environmental concerns far higher than economic concerns.

The ABC presents the renewable energy industry with an absence of trade-offs; it is possible for Australia to have its cake and eat it too

Table 3: iSentia favorability rating (where 50 is neutral)

Industry	iSentia average favourability rating	Finding
Coal industry	48.8	Slightly unfavourable
Renewable energy industry	54.1	Highly favourable
Coal seam gas industry	47.7	Highly unfavourable

Table 3 gives the consolidated iSentia favourability index for all three industries.

The ABC treats the coal industry poorly, systemically underplaying the economic significance of coal energy generation and focusing its attention on the effect coal may have on the global environment.

It treats the renewable energy industry highly favourably. This favourability is based not only on renewable energy's low carbon emissions profile, but the ABC regularly claims that the economics of renewable energy are also highly favourable. The detailed case study of *Lateline's* report into the CEFC above is a particularly damning example of how that message is propagated – through the self-interested assertions of government bodies whose survival depends on that argument.

In other words, the ABC presents the renewable energy industry with an absence of trade-offs; it is possible for Australia to have its cake and eat it too when it comes to energy choices. The political dimensions of this are obvious. iSentia found the leading message for renewable energy was “renewable energy investment should be prioritised”. The ABC does not have an official corporate policy to favour renewable energy subsidies, but this is the most common frame – by a substantial margin - within it, it discusses questions concerning renewable energy.

The opposite phenomenon occurs when the ABC frames stories about CSG extraction. In the period studied, CSG was the most frequent industry that the ABC reported on. It was also the industry that featured the strongest framing. The ABC treated CSG highly unfavourably.

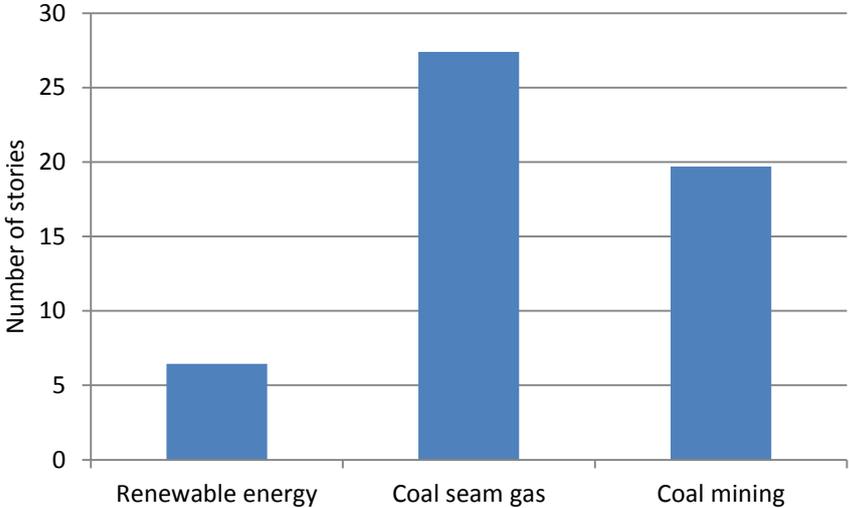
The leading message in CSG was that there will be negative environmental impacts. The number of times ABC audiences were told about the negative consequences of CSG drowned out the 115 times coal mining was criticised for its environmental consequences, and the 120 times audiences were told that renewable energy should be prioritised.

This disproportionate focus is all the more galling considering the paucity of evidence that there will be negative environmental impacts from CSG, as the government’s own geological experts have argued. It also flies in the face of the fact that CSG has half the emissions profile as coal mining. The ABC cannot claim that this is a balanced take on the evidence of the environmental impact of CSG.

The most indicative finding from iSentia’s analysis concerns the language use in individual stories, illustrated in Chart 18. More than a quarter of the stories that discussed the CSG industry featured the language of fear. That is, it included heightened and emphasised focus on negative outcomes and concerns, negative adjectives, and an emotive, angry or distressed tone. This compares with less than 20 per cent of coal stories, and just over five per cent of renewable energy stories.

The ABC cannot claim that it has a balanced take on the evidence of the environmental impact of CSG.

Chart 18: Use of language of fear as % of total industry stories



The key findings of the iSentia survey are summarised in Table 4. This starkly demonstrates the different treatment the ABC gives each energy source.

The ABC's biased approach to energy issues is consistent across platforms and regions

Table 4: Key metrics

Key metrics	Topic	Finding
Dominant messages	Coal seam gas	There will be negative environmental impacts
	Coal mining	There will be negative environmental impacts
	Renewable energy	Renewable energy investment should be prioritised
Dominant industry position	Coal seam gas	Harmful
	Coal mining	Harmful
	Renewable energy	Beneficial
Dominant spokesperson	Coal seam gas	Jeremy Buckingham, Greens MP
	Coal mining	Greg Hunt, Federal Environment Minister
	Renewable energy	Greg Hunt, Federal Environment Minister

ABC bias is consistent across platforms and regions

One possible objection to this finding is that ABC bias is not consistent. If it differed significantly by region, station, platform or medium, then it may reflect the idiosyncratic preferences of individuals who dominate those narrower groupings – such as prominent journalists or managers – rather than an institutional view. After all, there are only a limited number of journalists with a brief to cover energy issues. A further claim could be made that industries are treated differently according to the preferences of the audience. For example, CSG may be less popular with rural voters than urban voters, and ABC coverage might try to reflect that.

If that objection holds, it would suggest that the analysis above could be unrepresentative of the organisation as a whole. Perhaps coverage of different policy areas skews in the opposite direction, providing a political balance across the ABC's reporting. Or, alternatively, internal reform would be able to rebalance policy coverage – the appointment of more journalists with different interests could provide acceptable even-handedness.

However, this is not the case. The analysis above holds true for both media platform and region. Chart 19, Chart 20, and Chart 21 detail the favourability of the three studied industries across metropolitan, national, and regional media. As we can see, there is no substantive difference in approach to these issues between regions.

Chart 19: Coal seam gas favourability by region

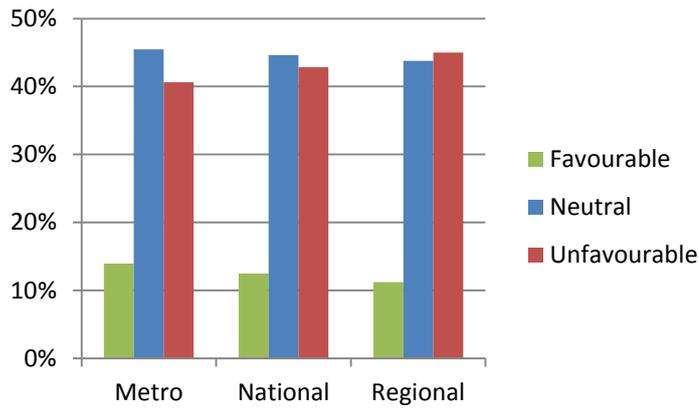


Chart 20: Renewable energy favourability by region

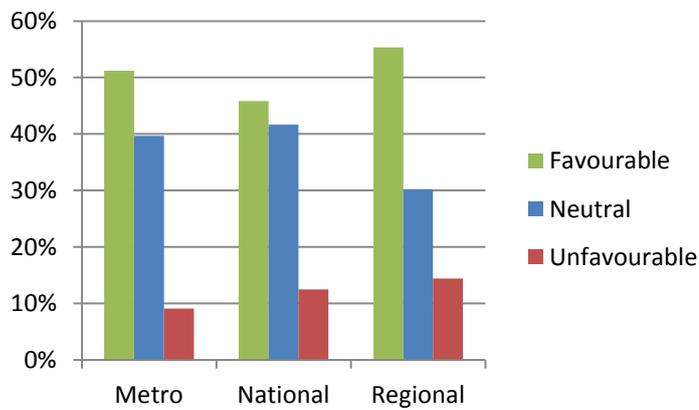
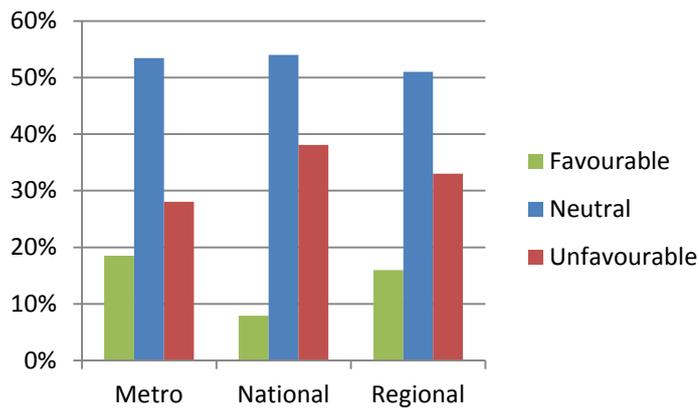


Chart 21: Coal mining favourability by region



Nor is there any evidence to suggest that ABC bias differs by media platform, as Chart 22, 23 and 24 show.

Chart 22: Coal seam gas favourability by platform

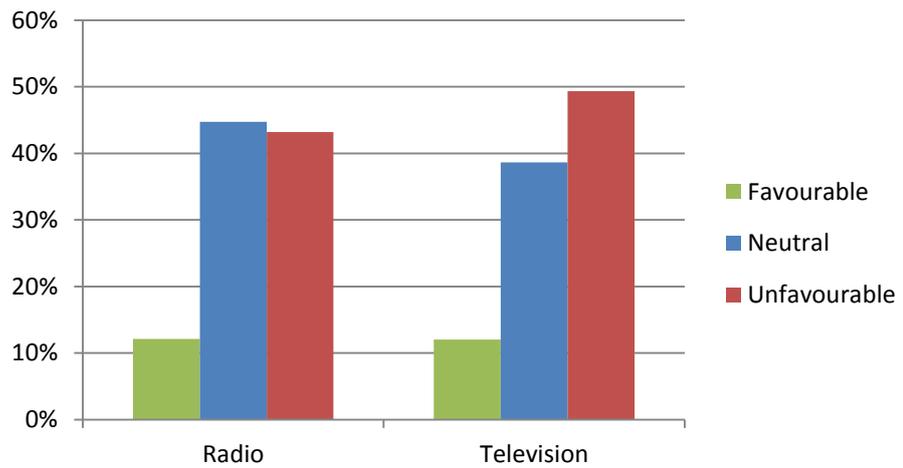


Chart 23: Renewable energy favourability by platform

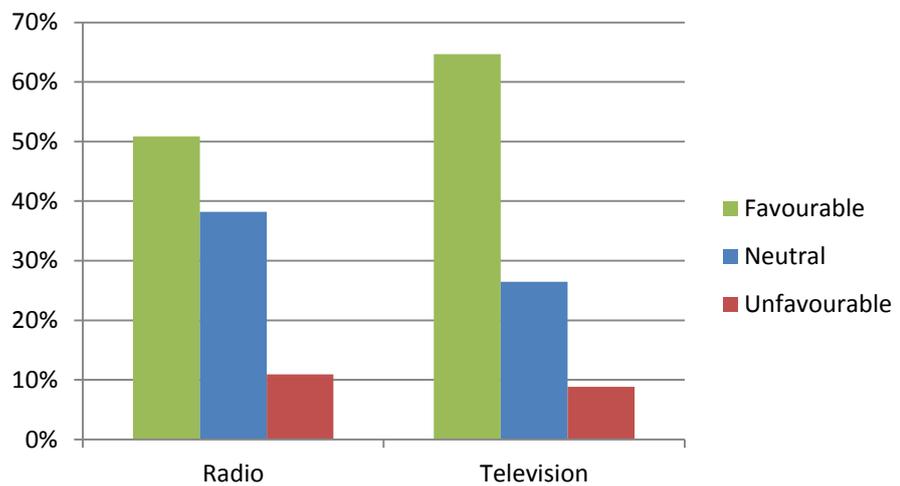
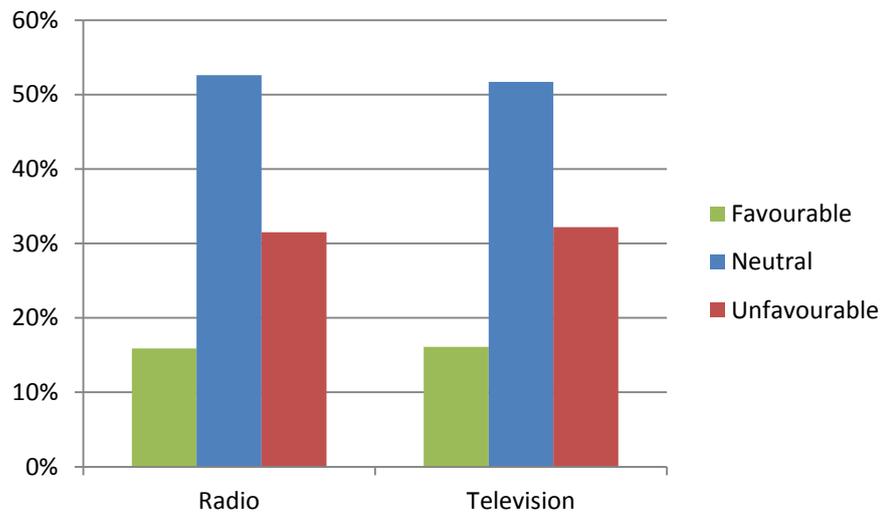


Chart 24: Coal mining favourability by platform



Rather, ABC bias is consistent across platforms and across regions. This suggests clearly that the bias problem is institutional, rather than reflective of individual preference or idiosyncrasies.

The privatisation solution to the ABC bias problem

We have presented evidence here that the ABC frames questions of Australia's energy mix in a consistent manner – in favour of environmental issues and environmental scares, and against questions of economic sustainability.

Consistent framing in this way suggests that there is a deeper issue within the ABC itself – a systemic problem that leads ABC journalists and producers to be unfavourable to coal, highly unfavourable to CSG, and highly favourable to renewable energy.

However, as we have discussed, framing is an inevitable consequence of the nature of media communications. It is often an unconscious act – driven by the ideological, philosophical and intellectual preferences of those preparing media communications content. That it would coalesce in certain directions in certain media organisations is not surprising.

Indeed, the same sort of analysis could almost certainly be replicated in other media companies, with results that would perhaps not be similar in detail but just as dramatic. We mean to make no suggestion here that the ABC is uniquely biased, nor that bias is something to be regretted in media communications.

However, the ABC occupies a unique role in the Australian political system. Its supporters and advocates argue that it has a particular democratic function for Australia – as an educational and informational public good. As such, it is – or at least should be – required to be balanced and non-partisan, to accurately weigh up public controversies. This analysis demonstrates that it has failed to do so in the case of Australia's energy choices and the public policy that informs it.

The question of bias in the ABC has a long history. Promises to eliminate bias have been a feature of ABC corporate governance for decades. This study shows that little progress has apparently been made. It is time to rethink that goal. Is it possible to have a broadcaster without an internal culture that leads it to favour some frames over others? The answer is almost certainly no.

If it is not possible to have an unbiased public broadcaster – that is, a broadcaster which lives up to its democratic mandate – then the project of public broadcasting should be reassessed and, ultimately, abandoned. The ABC should be privatised. The Institute of Public Affairs has long called for the

The ABC is incapable of presenting energy issues in an unbiased manner

privatisation of the ABC. Breaking up and tendering out the ABC was one of the IPA's 75 radical ideas for Tony Abbott.³²

Of course, the case for the privatisation of the ABC does not rest solely on its bias. As IPA Executive Director John Roskam wrote in *The Australian Financial Review* in November 2013,

A state-owned media company has no place in a free society. A free society requires a free media to hold the power of the state in check. The ABC's so-called "independence" is merely independence from political interference by the government of the day. The ABC is not independent of the state because it is a part of the state. Furthermore, as the ABC grows, it crowds out the private and independent media which are essential elements of a free society.

A media organisation owned and funded by the government will inevitably take an ideological position in support of larger and more powerful government - which is precisely what has happened in Australia and Britain.

The ABC does some very good work and produces some excellent programs. When Coalition MPs defend the ABC they often refer to the high quality of much of the ABC's output. But the good works of the ABC don't defeat the principle that the government should not own newspapers - or television or radio stations.³³

The evidence assembled in this report suggests that the dream of an unbiased public broadcaster is unlikely to be attained any time soon.

The only way for the government to ensure that it is not subsidising biased media is to privatise the ABC.

³² J Roskam, J Paterson, & C Berg, 'Be like Gough: 75 radical ideas to transform Australia', *IPA Review*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2012.

³³ Roskam, 'Sell off the ABC and show the way'.

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