

Australian Government Media Strategies

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Abstract: *This paper argues that the liberal media in terms of government intervention is increasingly rhetorical in today's global climate. Liberal governments such as in Australia are increasingly moved by image management concerns and employ vigorous counter offensives at news media to support their national interests and this use of propaganda or "targeted public affairs material" is often little understood or recognized. Although liberal media system normally prohibits government's intervention, in Australia the government always intervenes, influences and manages their media to suit government agendas. Thus, Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere can be used to explain the role of the media and media system in Australia. This paper argues that the Australian government manipulates the public sphere of the media for the purpose of managing public opinion.*

Keywords: *Jurgen Habermas, liberal media, Australia, media management, the public sphere*

Introduction

According to the arguments of Jurgen Habermas (1992), a growing public sphere liberated the public, or people, from the oligarchic control of the church and state in the pre-renaissance era through the establishment of a people empowered media. Habermas found the power of the public sphere itself through media power would compound in such a way that would inevitably lead to its own demise. He theorized that the capitalist workings of the public sphere would inevitably become an oligarchic power in itself and put

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simply, would transplant the state power with an equally as oppressive power which controls information and knowledge in society. Governments have long battled with the flows of news and information in society. The approaches and choices they have made have been therefore wide and varied. The choice between information made publicly available or privately kept for example, or whether to control newspapers and hence the images and ideas that are exposed to their societies, whether to allow freedom of debate and criticism at the expense of harmony or whether to constrict information for the sake of national security are all increasingly dominate issues in today's global political climate. It has been traditionally understood that one major point of difference between Western governments and non-Western governments has been found in their approaches to their national media with Western governments being recognized for liberal and free media systems and developing nations being more commonly associated with development media or that which serves the national interest.

This paper argues that the liberal media in terms of government intervention is increasingly rhetorical in today's global climate. Liberal governments such as in Australia are increasingly moved by security and image management concerns and employ vigorous counter offensives at news media to preserve their national interests and this use of propaganda or "targeted public affairs material" is often little understood or recognized. This example of liberal media and its relationship to government is clearly illustrated in Australia. Although both countries have employed different media systems from the outset, the politics of modern day society has meant that both nations use government intervention of media, employing influence, control or management techniques with the shared aim to preserve the government's agenda or, national wellbeing. Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere can be used to explain the role of the media and government and media system in Australia and this paper argues that the Australian government manipulates the public sphere of the media for the purpose of managing public opinion.

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, University Utara Malaysia,
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The Public Sphere

Habermas (1962/1989) describes the nature of the mass press by comparing it more to the medieval feudal system of classical Europe than to the rational critical debate model many envisioned. He finds in the process, a manipulated public sphere where the flooding of advertising arose as economic concentration increased in order to assure market stability and share (Habermas 1962/1989, 189-194). Economic advertising he said became political with the development of public relations, and public opinion management that invaded public opinion by creating and exploiting events. The result Habermas likened was the engineering of consent, with features resembling a staged public opinion or a consensus created by sophisticated opinion-molding that lacked the criterion of rationality or of a consensus reached by the time-consuming process of mutual enlightenment. Shaped by public relations, the public sphere takes on feudal features as the public is presented a “showy pomp” that it is ready to follow. It is feudal in that it imitates the aura of personal prestige and supernatural authority and given to the publicity of feudal courts. In short, this refeudalization has emerged creating a decayed form of the bourgeois public sphere, a manipulated and manufactured sphere in which the media both represent political ideology and are ineffectual in political communication except as advertising (Habermas 1962/1989, 214-217).

In debating Habermas’ argument of the refeudalization of media, John B. Thompson (1995, 7) found that the strength of Habermas’ early work in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was that it treated the development of the media as an integral part in the formation of modern societies. With the rise of the bourgeois public sphere, Thompson argues that Habermas puts particular importance on the rise of the press – critical journals and moral weeklies that appeared in the late 1600s and 1700s – along with coffee houses and salons. Habermas argued that the critical discussion stimulated by the press transformed the institutions of the state (Thompson 1995,

70). Thompson (1995, 73-74) however finds Habermas' account of the decline of the bourgeois public sphere to be his weakest argument, and that a central component of its decline was the radical change of its key institutions, including the commercialization of the media in the 1800s and 1900s. This process turned rational-critical debate into cultural consumption, as the media became part of a "quasi-feudal" kind of public life in which politics becomes a managed show of leaders who exclude most people from discussion and decision-making. In this manipulated or managed public sphere, the media bestow aura and prestige upon authorities similar to that bestowed on royal figures under feudalism (Grosswiler 2001). It happens in modern social-democratic states where the refeudalization involves a merging of the state and society, public and private that approximates to conditions in the feudal state, and a return of elements of representative publicity. The transformation involves private interests assuming direct political functions, as powerful corporations came to control and manipulate the media and state. This becomes compounded of course if the state owns the media corporations that dominate the public sphere. On the other hand, the state began to play a more fundamental role in the private realm and everyday life, thus eroding the difference between state and civil society, between the public and private sphere. As the public sphere declined, citizens became consumers, dedicating themselves more to passive consumption and private concerns than to issues of the common good and democratic participation (Kellner 1999).

The Public Sphere of Australian Media

The bourgeois public sphere idea that Habermas (1992) put forward is a fitting one when considering the role and place of the news media in Australian society. Habermas theorized that by the end of the eighteenth century a new kind of civic society had emerged which was based on the need for matters of concern and news to be freely exchanged and discussed by the individuals that made up the public of society. Habermas' theory explains for the emergence of this new civic society coming about alongside various social

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, University Utara Malaysia,

and Irene Limberis Twombly, University of South Australia

factors including growing rates of literacy, increased accessibility to literature and a new kind of critical journalism. Essentially though, Habermas argued that, as any studies of power will concede, the power of the public sphere which replaced the oligarchic dominance of the church and state would eventually be destroyed by the same forces which established it. He argued that a new power would emerge from this liberal media phenomenon, that of “media power” and based on its own inevitable evolution, this power would supersede and replace the oligarchic control once held by the state and through capitalist consequences will establish its own form of information control. In essence Habermas argued that commercial drives and capitalistic forces would destroy the very innocence of the free public sphere bringing it under the control of its own commercial objectives (Habermas 1992).

We see the broad issue of Habermas’ theory at work today and some might argue that the example of modern Australian society encapsulates it well. The formation of the public sphere is evidenced in Australian society with liberal media running as an independent institution used to protect the tenets of democracy largely giving the people ownership of information and debate and allowing for the critique of government and fostering of independent thought. As Former Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia Sir Anthony Mason noted:

Free speech is of course the essence of modern democratic government and the very spirit of our social life...this means that good government requires that people are entitled to the provision of information, to informed commentary, to the benefit of continuing discussion and debate on public affairs and to the impact that that discussion and debate (have) on the decision making process of government (Abjorensen 2007, 17).

In reality, the Australian framework for the media is seen as weaker in terms of other liberal democracies for two main reasons; commercial and legislative pressures (Nash 2003). Firstly, forces of capitalism and with it consumerism

have shown themselves, much like Habermas theorized, in such a way that has meant only a select and wealthy few in reality have ownership and by some accounts, control of the media. This “media power” as envisioned by Habermas is dominated by the objectives of commercial endeavors and rely on raising sales and maximizing profits. Critics for example have pointed to the influence of advertising on media content as being a pressure pushing populist content in prime time slots to maximize audiences (Abjorenesen 2007, 16). The effect is thought to compromise the information integrity of news for the sake of infotainment. It is not the only factor which comes to bare on the problematic state of media liberty in modern Australian society. Chris Nash (2003) and Mark Pearson (2007, 6) point out that since the middle of the twentieth century Australia has had a concentration of media ownership almost unparalleled to any other liberal democracy in the world. Pearson notes that in 1926 there were 26 metropolitan daily newspapers and by the mid 1980s there were only three proprietors of metropolitan dailies, the Herald and Weekly Times, News Limited and the John Fairfax Group (Pearson 2007, 11). The Democratic Audit of Australia published ownership figures in 2007 which illustrated the majority of print and broadcasting media in Australia being owned by a small group of power players; News Corporation, Publishing and Broadcasting Ltd, John Fairfax Holdings and Southern Cross Broadcasting (Abjorensen 2007, 11). Pearson (1997, 11) warned that “such concentration of media ownership means that unelected media proprietors exercise an enormous amount of political power” and that this has serious ramifications for the state of democracy. Pearson’s point moves to the heart of Habermasian thinking. It suggests that the modern media in its purest design was used as an instrument of true democracy, allowing dissent and debate, but because of its collision with capitalism, while withstanding government pressures, has fallen victim to a different kind of power which is no less disempowering for the public sphere; the power of commercialism. It is curious but true that Australians as a consequence are less suspicious of government funded media than the commercially owned product which dominates the mainstream media climate. A true empowerment of a

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, University Utara Malaysia,
and Irene Limberis Twombly, University of South Australia

democratically free people demands not only information free from government bias, but also free from market bias. It is a commonly held belief within Australian society for example that the public will not get reliable, objective and value free news reporting from the commercial television shows of the seven, nine and ten networks. In fact, studies clearly indicate that the Australian public will choose the government owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) networks for their most reliable television news (Vervoorn 1998) simply because their content is less marred by the pressures of commercialization. It is a new twist on an old phenomenon and it remains a commonly held fact within the Australian media industry that the primary role of the commercial news show is to deliver the consumer to the advertiser. In short, news is a commodity that is bought and sold like any other media product, and because of this, its content integrity is seen to be compromised. The desire to produce savvy, cost effective and commercially compatible formats shapes the media product to a point where truth, balanced reporting, considered investigative enquiry and contextual analysis are all weakened. It is the perfect hypothesis of Habermas' theory and shows that capitalist consequences have permeated the information supply in such a way as that the public are increasingly turning away from commercially owned media in search of truth without bias or color.

To return to the idea of the public sphere we understand that the church and state of the pre-renaissance period maintained its power largely through the control of ideas and knowledge. The objective of governments to hold onto such controls and regulate the information that flows into, around and out of their societies is not exclusive or unique to any era or political system however and still manifests clearly in modern day cases. In fact, the differences between censorship (often associated with democratic systems) and propaganda (often associated with un-democratic systems) are increasingly blurred and this is an issue that is little understood. Where censorship refers traditionally to the restriction of information, propaganda refers to the generation of information to counter other influences and both are used in the liberal Australian model

of the present day. Vervoorn (1998) points out that all governments censor information and generate their own. He notes that the issue on a spectrum would show at one end a system where populations are kept uneducated and ignorant with newspapers and radio broadcasts restricted while official government media spread propaganda which is seldom taken seriously. At the other end of the spectrum would be societies where lying is often called marketing or public relations and governments produce self-serving media releases that highlight success while ignoring failures and encourage “self-regulation” of private media to protect what is labeled as being in the national interest. He notes that the distance between the two is not as large as many assume and the case of Australia is relative. Vervoorn found that in 1994 the Australian media were found to be one of the world’s most free but in 1995 were revealed to be subject to a system of self-censorship intended to protect the national interest and not to be discussed in public.

The truth of the Australian system falls somewhat in the middle of the spectrum described by Vervoorn while leaning for the most part toward the liberal left. Apart from commercialization, other factors are thought to bare heavily on Australia’s current state of media freedoms and are legislative and involve the role of government restrictions through the legislative and bureaucratic branches of government. Unlike other liberal democracies like the United States (US), Canada and New Zealand for example, Australia does not have a legal instrument protecting media freedoms. The US Bill of Rights for example specifically legislates for the freedom of the press. Furthermore, the nature of Australia’s defamation and freedom of information (FOI) laws combined with the 2003 introduction of amended anti-terrorism laws have said to have created major impacts for the future of media freedoms in Australia. In a study for example conducted by Freedom House in 2007 Australia ranked 39 out of 185 countries surveyed in terms of media freedom (Abjorensen 2007) behind such countries as Ghana, Lithuania, Jamaica, New Zealand and Finland being ranked number one.

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, University Utara Malaysia,

and Irene Limberis Twombly, University of South Australia

There are two debates that wage on this issue. The first argues for unlimited media freedoms suggesting that a truly democratic system can only be protected by a truly free news media. The second argues that the news media, and its practitioners, are not above the law and whose rights should not supersede the rights of individual citizens or the right of the national authorities to protect the people. New near uniform defamation laws were passed in 2006 and did away with privacy provisions where as Pearson (2007) points out defendants, or the media, had to prove defamatory matter was “in the public interest” before they could justify their publications. Pearson suggests this “was designed to prevent highly personal (though truthful) matters being published when they bore no relation to an individual’s public role or duty” (Pearson 2007, 6) and relates specifically to the right of the individual. It is true of the nature of freedoms logically speaking that one group right to freedom cannot be established at the expense of others.

Further, amendments to the terrorism laws passed under the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) Legislative Amendment (Terrorism) Act 2003 were criticized by media professionals as being restrictive of their freedoms. They argued that the amended laws left them open to the exposing of their confidential sources and the closing of certain court proceedings deeming certain matters unreportable to them. The journalists union, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), listed the 2003 Act in its 2005 report “as the main concern to journalists because of its effective limits on any media exposure of active operation under warrant for up to two years” (Pearson 2007, 10). Nash (2007) argues that the Act when limiting a journalist’s right to protect its sources is restricting a crucial dimension to freedom of the press. He goes on to state that unless a journalist can protect a source from retribution its capacity to research and report is effectively weakened (Nash 2007, 2). While the argument has merit it is not a new one for Australian society and has played out on many levels in debates that intrinsically argue between the roles of the policing and security authorities, the courts and their lawyers, all of whose roles are also firmly based in the preservation of the democratic process, and the press. The

legal profession argues that their roles are firmly embedded into the pursuit of the public good, and journalistic enquiries based purely on the desire to get a good story, should not interfere in their judicial processes. Equally, policing and security services argue that their role to investigate matters of crime and national security cannot be replaced or compromised by media. Fairly, restrictions on journalistic activity surrounding criminal prosecutions and especially trials involving minors for example is not a new concept for Australian media. There are limits to what is legally agreed as being information critical to the public interest while involved in public investigations in cases involving both criminal or national security matters. Such provisions are dealt with either by individual state or Commonwealth laws and are decided on by the courts. The employment of suppression orders on media reporting or public interest immunity cases are commonly practiced and are done so based on relative democratic principals intended to protect the freedom of individuals. Democratic liberties argue that individuals who face criminal charges for example possess rights to fair trial which is often times viewed as being compromised by media conjecture. It is fair therefore to protect individuals against “trial by public” before a trial by jury, and with it set legal parameters for fair hearing, has been achieved. Further counter arguments suggest that government authorities have a responsibility to the public to bring criminal and security investigations to light. Their ability to do so cannot always be aided by the media argument of making any and all information public at their choosing. In truth in some cases the Australian liberal system shows the promotion of information in the public sphere cannot supersede the rights of the individuals who make up the public sphere and the realities of the liberal democratic media system is that individual and officially deemed rights must be also accounted equally. The balance therefore between the rights of the press and social rights and responsibilities of wider society is a complex issue and one which is in avid debate in Australia at present. It is one that illustrates clearly that the concept of liberal and free press exempt from any government or legal restriction is not only unrealistic but incorrect.

*Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, University Utara Malaysia,
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Media Theory and Managements in Australia

Western liberal societies primarily view the news media, at least ideologically, as being for the promotion of truth, and the canons of Western journalism are closely linked to this. The system is often understated however as attention to “image management by government” is increasing in the West (Robertson 1992) in response to a strengthened commercialized media sector or “media sphere” which is seen at times to threaten their interests. Australian government model is facing dilemmas of image control and struggle to protect their national interests in an increasingly competitive global media and public sphere. The Australian government must make their national and judicial interests accounted in the deafening landscape of commercial media activity. The position of the government is looking increasingly and is based on a need to protect and preserve national interests in spite of a growing media sphere. Therefore, liberal media system will be discussed by referring to Australia.

The Liberal Free Media in Australia and their Critiques

The Western framework provides that the media must be honest, seek justice, and guard their own freedoms “from government and social forces” (Hindman 1997). By closely following the Western liberal tradition, in the Australian and liberal democratic instance the press is viewed as the “fourth estate” or the watch dog of government, charged with the task of relentlessly pursuing the truth and protecting the public’s “right to know”. In this regard the media is responsible to the citizen or the public as a functioning body in the system of dual federalism providing the necessary checks and balances for public good. In many ways the news media are viewed as the private investigators of the public – or rather, the public investigators.

The Australian Journalists Association code,¹ adopted in 1944 and revised in 1984, states (Australian Journalists Association 1984, 1):

Respect for the truth and the public's right to information are overriding principals for all journalists. journalists [should] commit themselves to ethical and professional standards. ...All members of the Australian Journalists' Association engaged in gathering, transmitting, disseminating and commenting on news and information shall observe the following code of ethics...

(1) They shall report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty by striving to disclose all essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis.²

Criticisms of the actual management of this in Australia and abroad in other Western nations are plenty. However, the Coups and Earthquakes Syndrome stipulates that it is the free-wheeling Western media who, driven by commercial interests, stereotype the non-Western world with stories which focus on the conflicts and disasters that transpire in those countries, in short because they sell stories (Lee 1968; Reeves 1993; Kingsbury 2000; Alleyne 2003). It is not a balanced representation, they argue, of the available facts.

Domestically, Australia suffers this problem. The news media are adept at presenting bad news as the only news purely based on the supposition that information that is of interest to the public is information that ill impacts them, like for example, new tax laws which will disadvantage them and rising interest rates. The Australian media can be

¹The Australian Journalists Association merged with the Media, Entertainment and Arts, to form a large union, subsequently the code is also known as the Journalists Code of Ethics. A comprehensive discussion on the code can be located in Bowman as cited in Henningham (1990).

² For a more comprehensive account of the journalism codes of ethics see Coady and Bloch (1996) and Armstrong (1995).

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, University Utara Malaysia,

and Irene Limberis Twombly, University of South Australia

argued at times to promote news which highlights the mistakes, infidelities and untrustworthiness of its politicians, celebrities and any group or individual which is likely to arouse public reactions simply because these headlines and stories will interest the greater number of people and sell the greatest volumes. As we have previously discussed, this comes into sharp rebuke when the media seek stories out of information which is relevant to public enquiry, court proceedings or national security matters and are often restricted in their capacity to access or report on such information when these matters are being dealt with in the public sphere through the other democratically instilled institutions such as police, judicial and legislative processes. While people have a right to information they also have a right to trial, and while the government has a responsibility to keep the public informed they also have a right to enquiry, investigation, prosecution and defense.

In response to the commercialization of media, journalists are either restricted by suppression orders where official proceedings are at work, or in the case of most public offices, public relations officers are employed by many professions which capture a consistent media attention with counter offensive approaches. Public relations officers will seek to highlight the successes of their clients and minimize their public failures in the public sphere. The role of the press secretary within the domestic government whether at federal or state level for example is a demanding one and is used to manage media activity.

The issues are not purely domestic but run globally also. On the international level, there are a myriad of debates that wage on the interplay between news media and government. The Coups and Earthquakes Syndrome can be defined as the persistence of negative media reporting from the liberal Western news media of toward other nations and particularly developing nations. The problems that have been listed in arguments about biased or unfair media coverage of Third World nations are numerous. Essentially it is believed that as people learn from the media about each other, the quality of international education and representation is compromised. Where balanced coverage of nations and their

cultures are lacking, accurate perceptions held by the public is deemed to follow suit. This is thought to be influential not only on political and social levels, but in terms of investment, trade, religion and eventually bilateral and multilateral diplomacy as misrepresentation and misunderstanding are seen to maximize intolerance and conflict.

The arguments which played out quite significantly within the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) from as early as the 1970s and where presented in the MacBride Report of 1980 (1980) unfortunately have seemed to perpetuate the myth that it is the nations of the developing world who are most concerned with their image managements and the only nation's who are concerned with the news media's impacts on these images. A secondary and popular myth that has transpired is that the liberal democratic governments of the Western world are somehow immune to concerns about news media and its image power and consequently are free from state based attempts to manipulate them.

Australia's International Image Concerns and Media Management Strategies

The Australian government is not a stranger to media management strategies and considerations. In fact, it is increasingly coming to terms with its own experience of the problems that can occur economically and politically when news media content is left unchallenged, unbridled and able to promote an image of Australia abroad with little regard for national well being.

To highlight this, on 7 November 2006 the Australian Parliamentary Senate referred the matter of the nature and conduct of Australia's public diplomacy to a Legislative and General Purpose Standing Committee for enquiry. In the May 2007 federal budget the Australian government committed AD20.4 billion over four years to Australia's cultural diplomacy efforts and in August 2007 the outcomes of the Senate Committee enquiry were released in a report titled "Australia's Public Diplomacy: building our image" (Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2007).

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, University Utara Malaysia,
and Irene Limberis Twombly, University of South Australia

The report provided a documented analysis of Australia's public diplomacy concerns and efforts and in doing so revealed both a critical level of concern that the Australian government held for its international reputation and image and a committed level of effort in managing negative media impacts. In defining public diplomacy the government described a strategy which was aimed toward projecting a positive image of Australia internationally, promoting a clearer understanding of Australia's foreign and trade policies and promoting an accurate and contemporary view of Australia while managing or rebutting negative or inaccurate perceptions of Australia. According to the report the department spent AD93.5 million and employed 229 staff on public diplomacy activities in 2006 alone.

The report stipulated that Australia clearly recognizes the connection between Australia's international reputation and its ability to influence the regional and global agenda in ways that promote Australia's interests and it understands that its reputation can either promote or undermine its foreign policy objectives. The enquiry found overall that Australia faces a number of challenges in its pursuit for good public relations. The first challenge it listed was the problem of gaining attention in the fiercely contested international environment while arguing that coupled with a rolling 24 hour news agenda, the rise of multilateralism and the need to address many audiences for whom English is not necessarily a language of conviction, a challenge for Australia emerges if our voice is to be heard in the cacophony of others. The second challenge found by the committee enquiry was the persistence of stereotypical or outdated images about Australia abroad, or what they labeled as the "Sunshine, Cuddly Koalas and Abundant Natural Resources" problem. Submissions that had been received by the senate committee during their enquiry included one from the India Business Council of Australia which noted that "despite Australia's obvious economic success and strength, the stereo typical view of Australia that one picks up in India and elsewhere is that we are a relaxed people, fairly laid back, not very hard working, obsessed with sport and leisure (and) not as advanced in

technology, management or business as say the United States, Europe or Japan” (Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2007).

Urs Walterlin, President, Foreign Correspondent Association Australia and South Pacific noted within the enquiry that insufficient stereo typical and outdated image reputations of Australia may fail to successfully counter news media impacts on the Australian image (Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2007). She said that Australia may have been in the fortunate position of not having to worry about its public image, and had successfully and traditionally been protected by its “Cuddly Koalas” (CK) factor but warned that image wise, although the CK factor works to a certain extent as a buffer against more critical news coming from this country, the buffer was becoming thinner.

The third challenge listed by the senate committee to the parliament was the persistence of an ill reputation concerning race relations in Australia which the government described as frustrating Australia’s attempts to present itself as a tolerant country. The 2005 “Cronulla riots” which transpired in Sydney in December 2005 where cited as being “widely attributed in the media to ethnic tensions” and making world headlines. The report suggested the danger with which the news reporting of an event like the Cronulla riots caused was that it could be perceived abroad as a supporting piece of evidence to the already held perception of Australia as a racist country. The report found this was an unfortunate carry over from the White Australia Policy which restricted non white migration to Australia from 1901 to 1973. The committee report found that Australia’s public diplomacy efforts held the difficult task of not only managing the fall-out from the occasional public demonstrations of bad behavior, but of countering the underlying predisposition abroad and by Australia’s foreign neighbors to interpret these incidents in an unfavorable light and noted the public must also manage images coming out of the country that have the potential to undermine the government’s attempts to promote a positive image (Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2007).

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, University Utara Malaysia,

and Irene Limberis Twombly, University of South Australia

According to the 2006 Annual Report from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Australia had a high profile year in the international media in 2005–06 with “reporting for the most part factual but on occasion requiring concerted effort by our posts overseas to rectify misconceptions or to underscore key messages” (DFAT 2006). The Australian government in the 2005/06 year reported to have used a number of strategies to address and manage negative news media impacts on its public image abroad which it said came mainly from Australian involvement in international crises including the terrorist bombings in London, Bali, Sharm el-Sheikh, Dahab and Amman, as well as significant foreign and trade policy developments, the challenges presented by the international security environment and DFAT’s assistance to the Cole Inquiry.¹

Overseas posts were used to combat negative media images abroad and drove robust and proactive media management strategies which were described to have had positive impacts on Australia’s visibility and image. Monitoring of international reporting on Australia and close cooperation with other agencies and posts was also reported by DFAT as enabling them to respond promptly to inaccurate reporting on issues such as the Cronulla riots. The embassy’s links with the senior editors of major local newspapers to facilitate the placement of articles and op-ed or opinion editorial pieces communicating the Government’s position was also used. The Australian government describes the planted opinion pieces as “targeted public affairs material” used to counter inaccurate reporting on various issues. In a cited case on the Australian gun control referendum, the Australian “experience was misrepresented” in Brazil and in response to this issue the embassy in Brasilia provided detailed information on Australian legislation to a wide range of Brazilian media outlets with the aim being to counter misconceptions, promote the success of Australia’s policies and show Australia to be a safe and

¹ An enquiry into Australia’s involvement in the United Nations Oil for Food program.

secure society with strong police and judicial systems (DFAT 2006).

Overall the Australian government reports using high-quality media monitoring to anticipate and respond to media issues and where media reporting was deemed to be inaccurate, corrections, submitted letters to editors and arranged background briefings for journalists were employed “to improve accuracy in subsequent articles.” The following actions were also listed by the Australian government as being functions of DFAT:

- 1) Regular media briefings to “actively promote the Government’s foreign and trade policy agenda to domestic and international audiences”.
- 2) Active and strategic engagement with Australian and international media including a 24-hour service which “facilitated mostly informed and positive coverage of foreign and trade policy issues”.
- 3) Responding to over 10,600 requests for information from Australian and international media.
- 4) Providing strategic media advice to portfolio ministers and parliamentary secretaries, as well as the Prime Minister’s office.
- 5) Facilitating Australian media attendance at and coverage of a number of major international events to promote a greater public understanding and awareness of key portfolio issues.
- 6) An International Media Visits Program (IMV) as a core strategy program in building strong links with the media community abroad as one of its public diplomacy initiatives by helping to generate informed international media coverage on Australia, its economic strength and its key foreign and trade policy objectives. (The program involves DFAT bringing senior international journalists and commentators to Australia as visitors and providing targeted programs according to their interests). (DFAT 2006)

Conclusion

It is clear that with the concern of image management within the press, Australian government employs media manipulation and management efforts for the sake of

Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, University Utara Malaysia,
and Irene Limberis Twombly, University of South Australia

national interests. The Australian government has the advantage of having a significant amount of financial resources to commit to public diplomacy counter methods used to combat negative media attention abroad but also has shown an increasing move toward restrictive laws to contain the domestic media on cases of criminal or privacy, national security relevance.

The Australian media system has been caught between media power and government power, with ownership and commercial forces challenging journalistic integrity and government restrictions and counter approaches challenging the ideas of free media and successful governance. Habermas' theory of the public sphere is adept at explaining the phenomena of media management in Australian case. For the Australian model it shows the rise of the public sphere and media power, and while absorbing capitalist forces, shows that media power has diluted the power of the public it originally sort to enshrine. Intricately as an extension to Habermas' theory, the Australian model also illustrates clearly the power play that results between the government who is trying to reestablish power over the public consumption of information it deems in its interests and the media power which demands freedom but slaves against commercial objectives. Therefore, the only question left hanging is whether the public sphere actually has gained from these developments, or in fact, as Habermas forewarned, has become the loser.

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