The Conversation

Whose views skew the news? Media chiefs ready to vote out Labor, while reporters lean left

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While reporters’ political biases are always hotly debated, other biases remain - including too few voices from diverse backgrounds. AAP/Alan Porritt

Most Australian journalists describe themselves as left-wing, yet amongst those who wield the real power in the country’s newsrooms, the Coalition holds a winning lead.

But while the media’s political leanings will no doubt be debated in the lead-up to September’s federal election, our study has also found other largely unscrutinised biases remain - particularly whose views disproportionately shape the news.

Conducted between May 2012 and March this year, the University of the Sunshine Coast's representative survey of 605 journalists around Australia found that more than half (51.0%) describe themselves as holding left-of-centre political views, compared with only 12.9% who consider themselves right-of-centre.

It is the first study of its kind in more than 20 years to involve such a large number of journalists, and follows on from the work of John Henningham in the early 1990s.
Our survey was conducted by telephone with carefully selected journalists from newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, online news sites and news agency AAP, as a sample of the 8000 to 10,000 journalists in Australia today.

When asked about their voting intentions, less than two-thirds of the journalists we surveyed revealed their voting intention. Of those 372 people, 43.0% said they would give their first preference vote to Labor; 30.2% would vote for the Coalition; and 19.4% said they would choose the Greens - about twice the Australian average.

**Media bosses more in sync with voters**

Yet, among those who arguably matter most – the journalists in senior editorial ranks who have the most power to decide news agendas – a dramatically different picture emerged.

Among the 83 senior editors who took part in the survey, the Coalition was the party of choice on 43.2%, followed by Labor (34.1%) and the Greens (11.4%).

This suggests that Australia’s media bosses are more in line with the broader electorate, at least according to recent Newspoll results.

It is important to note that there is little research showing that journalists' personal political biases affect their work.

When asked in this survey about a range of influences on their work, many journalists said their superiors have a much stronger influence than their personal values and beliefs.

**Aunty leans to the Greens**

An interesting finding emerged when we compare journalists from the three biggest news organisations in the country – News Limited, Fairfax Media and the ABC.

The national broadcaster has repeatedly been attacked for having a seemingly leftist bias, while others have accused News Limited - and particularly its flagship newspaper The Australian - of being overly conservative in its political views.

At first glance, the findings do not support this assumption, with no significant differences in the way journalists from the ABC and News rate their political views on a scale of 0 (left) to 10 (right).

However, 41.2% of the 34 ABC journalists who declared a voting intention said they would vote for the Greens, followed by 32.4% for Labor and 14.7% for the Coalition.

In contrast, 46.5% of 86 News Limited journalists who answered this question said they would vote for Labor, 26.7% for the Coalition, and only 19.8% for the Greens. As well as The Australian, the News stable includes some of the country’s best-selling tabloids such as the Herald Sun, Daily Telegraph, Courier-Mail, Northern Territory News and the Adelaide Advertiser, and some suburban newspapers.

Among the 86 Fairfax Media journalists who responded, Labor was by far the most popular party at 54.7% support, followed by the Coalition and the Greens, both on 19.8%. The Fairfax journalists came from outlets including the Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, The Canberra Times, a range of regional and suburban newspapers, and metropolitan radio stations.
If we disregard the 42.8% of journalists who are undecided, refused to answer or would vote for a party or candidate other than the major three, this is a statistically significant result.

It means that even though only a smaller number of journalists answered the voting intentions, which does increase the margin of error, it is still reasonable to conclude that there is a marked difference between the voting intentions of journalists at the three major media organisations.

**Australian stories that go untold**

Where in the country journalists work also seems to make a major difference. Journalists at metropolitan news media are significantly more left-wing in their political views. Labor would receive 52.6% of the metropolitan journalist vote, while in regional areas, 44.4% would vote for the Coalition.

Our study also found that while journalists recognise their own political biases, they may be less aware of their cultural bias.

An overwhelming majority of journalists in this country still come from a white, Anglo-Saxon background, with minorities very few and far between in mainstream journalism.

Three out of four journalists give their ethnicity as at least partly Anglo-Saxon. Only 4.7% said they have an Asian or Middle Eastern background, which is around half of what it should be to reflect the make-up of the Australian population.

Journalists identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders representing just 1.8% of Australian journalists - again, disproportionately lower than the 2.5% of Australians with an Indigenous background.

This is further evidence to support the argument that Australian journalists’ worldviews and cultural backgrounds are still not representative of the general population.

And it is an aspect that many argue is reflected in Australian media reporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, as well as in stories related to race and ethnicity.

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*Note: This research has been accepted for publication in the June edition of the Australian Journalism Review. The margin of error for the entire study sample is 4%. Sub-samples of journalists’ responses to some questions - such as voting intentions - are likely to have a higher margin error, however, appropriate statistical methods were used in testing for differences between sub-samples to take account of the smaller sample sizes. The survey response rate was 89.5%.*