

*How Australia Decides:
Election Reporting and
the Media*

By Sally Young

Cambridge University Press,
2011

\$49.95, 346 pages

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Sally Young's book claims to be the only 'systematic, historical, in-depth analysis' of Australian election reporting, weighing up 'how well Australians are served by those who report and comment on politics.' It highlights audiences' greater degree of choice and control in media content over the past decade, but questions whether this diversity is welcome. Young argues that the media's election coverage has served and shaped two publics: 'informed elites' and an 'entertained majority.'

The book's chapter on the 'elite public sphere' notes that this audience is over-represented by men, the tertiary educated, those over 40, and those in well-paid managerial or professional jobs; it is under-represented by women, the young, and people with low education or low incomes. 'Elite' television news and current affairs programs (including commercial news, *Nightline*, *Four Corners*, *Meet the Press*, *60 Minutes*, and *The 7:30 Report*) all lost viewers between 2001 and 2007.

Young identifies one of the key trends in election reporting as the reduction in space provided for political news in traditional media (p. 259). Quality journalism faces a 'serious dilemma' in that

the citizens who are most difficult to reach are also the citizens most in need of the benefits of greater political participation (p. 60). There are strong parallels with Lindsay Tanner's recent critique of the media's role in 'dumbing down' Australian democracy.

The chapter on the 'popular public sphere' observes that younger people and those with a university education are more likely to access online versions of tabloids than the printed format. It also notes a marked fall in audience numbers for commercial news and current affairs programs between 2001 and 2007. The only three that increased their viewership were Channel 7 programs *Today Tonight*, *Seven National News* and *Sunrise*.

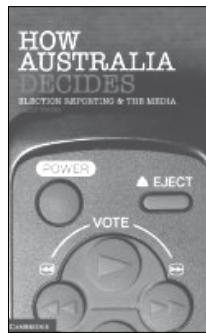
The chapter on media bias assesses newspaper editorial alignments based on election-eve newspapers for the 2001, 2004 and 2007 polls (p. 238). In the 2001 and 2004 polls, the editorials of *The Australian*, the *Australian Financial Review*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Herald Sun*, the *Courier-Mail*, the *West Australian*, the *Advertiser*, and *The Mercury* all supported the Coalition. *The Sydney Morning Herald* supported the Coalition in 2001, but in Young's assessment, did not support either party in 2004. *The Age* supported Labor in 2001 but the Coalition in 2004. In 2007, only the *AFR*, the *Herald Sun*, the *West Australian*, and the *Advertiser* supported the Coalition.

The speaking time given to the two major parties on the television news bulletins of SBS,

ABC, Channel 10, Channel 9 and Channel 7 (p. 252), shows the Coalition received more speaking time than Labor for all networks during the 2001, 2004 and 2007 election campaigns, with the exception of Channel 7's 2004 coverage. In terms of media bias, Young concludes that it was rarely a major political concern in the 2000s because even when an outlet was running a political agenda, it 'provided space for alternative and oppositional views.'

The book's final chapter studies the trends in election reporting in light of what the public 'want' and what the public 'need.' Young restates that traditional journalism, drawing heavily on 'ideals of the public sphere role,' has coexisted with 'much looser standards of news' aimed not at creating informed citizens but at 'capturing the attention of citizens who had multi-faceted interests' (p. 259). These looser standards, she notes, brought greater focus on the 'horse race' aspects and increasing attempts to make politics more fun and less boring.

How Australia Decides has the feel of an early undergraduate text: there are several pages of pictures, cartoons, tables, graphs and boxes depicting the media's presentation of elections. This format has some appeal, but it robs the book of flow and necessary context. Given that Young's focus is principally on the three federal elections from 2001 to 2007, a better structure for the book would have been to incorporate three separate chapters on each of these elections. This would have provided a more contextual and dynamic account of the media



and the parties' strategy and influence on each other. Each of these chapters could have had interviews with the television and newspaper executives responsible for election coverage and with the parties' campaign directors and media managers. This type of analysis would have more effectively identified the interaction between the media, the parties, and the polls through each twist and turn of the campaign.

Another weakness of the book is its treatment of the normative issue of what the public need from the media to inform their electoral decision. There are scattered references to Habermas's public sphere, 'citizenship,' 'democracy,' and political participation and engagement. But these references are not developed into a sustained argument in any convincing way. The final chapter, purporting to examine the disconnect between what the public 'need' and what the public 'want,' is peculiar in that Young does not properly explore the normative issue. She avoids any direct reference to the need for better media performance to enhance these normative ideals. She concludes, rather glibly, that the media's performance is 'often no higher than the purposes and responsibilities that journalists ascribe to themselves.'

Young's book is an accessible read and a useful empirical contribution on a rapidly changing and diversified media landscape. It has a ready market in undergraduate political science and media studies courses. A revised edition, covering

subsequent election campaigns, should consider a narrative on the day-to-day manoeuvrings of election campaigns, and focus on the circumstances in which media outlets and party campaign strategists collude, conflict and compromise on their agendas.

Reviewed by Richard Grant

*The Social Animal:
The Hidden Sources of Love,
Character and Achievement*

By David Brooks

Random House, New York
US\$27, 424 pages
ISBN 9781400067602

David Brooks is best known for his 2000 book *Bobos in Paradise*, a gently satirical portrait of upper-class American life in the 1990s. By fusing together elements of bourgeois and bohemian culture, bobos arrived at a pragmatic style of politics that defused the conflicts of earlier decades. According to Brooks, the new upper class no longer sees politics as a struggle for personal freedom or economic liberation, but as a way of nurturing responsible citizens and building strong communities.

His latest book, *The Social Animal* picks up where *Bobos* left off, arriving at the same conclusions by a different route. Much of the book is devoted to summaries of findings from neuroscience and psychology. To make all this research easier to digest, Brooks has created two

fictional upper-class Americans, Harold and Erica, whose lives form the narrative framework for the discussion.

For people familiar with Brooks' work, it might seem odd that he has written a book about neuroscience. After all, he is not a science writer and once described himself as a 'scientific imbecile.' But neuroscience and psychology are hot topics, with obvious implications for political philosophy, an area where Brooks does have considerable expertise. In a recent interview with James Atlas he said, 'Philosophy and theology are telling us less than they used to. Scientists and researchers are leaping in where these disciplines atrophy—they're all drilling down into an explanation of what man is.'

Disputes in political philosophy hinge on assumptions about human nature and how the world works. Research in neuroscience promises to resolve these disputes by substituting fact for supposition. Brooks believes that new findings

from the science of brain and cognition support his assumptions about human nature and his neoconservative/communitarian approach to politics.

Economically minded libertarians tend to assume that human beings are rational and self-interested. Many argue that success in the marketplace depends largely on inherited cognitive ability. And because they believe IQ is largely fixed, it follows that government efforts to alleviate disadvantage through education and training will fail. Combined

