The Media and the Opposition

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Abstract.

This paper briefly examines the role of media, particularly the changing role of media in the Victorian political context. It argues that the media seems to be taking on the role of the Opposition in Victoria. The reliance of the Opposition on the media is particularly evident during question time in the Victorian Parliament. There are difficulties with this situation not only for the Opposition but also for the Government.

The Media and the Opposition

Introduction

A great deal has been written about the media and politics mainly relating to manipulation of the media by political parties or the link between media ownership and possible biased reporting.

However, there is another area that has been less examined perhaps because it is a newer phenomena and that is, the media 'creating' or 'manipulating' the news rather than 'reporting' it within the political arena, and the dangers it can have particularly for Opposition parties.

What is the role of the media?

There are many books and articles on the subject.

The media has been described as *a central political battleground, and the political role of news is also an intellectual battleground. Most publicly this is manifested in the constant disputes over bias or distortion in the news. More deeply, it occurs in debates over the social values which the news should uphold, the institutional bases that will best realise those values, and the intellectual challenges in assessing both the influences on news and the influence of news.*[1]

[1] *The Politics of Australian Society: Political Issues for the New Century.*Ed. by Boreham, Paul, Stokes, Geoffrey & Hall, Richard. New South Wales. Longman.2000

The media's first duty as quoted in Shultz is *to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time and instantly by disclosing them to make them the common property of the nation.*[2]

However, in this modern era there is considerable concern about the disinterest and impartiality of the media. In addition there is little understanding in the community of the links between diversity of ownership and diversity of content.

Brown[3] lists the qualifications of the media that he believes supports democracy.

1. The media are not controlled by the state, so government censorship is limited and free speech is upheld.

2. A wider range of media mean a wide range of opinions

3. The media provide ***impartial accounts*** *of news and current affairs.*

4. The media accurately reflects public opinions that already exist in society ***rather than creating new ones***

5. anyone can put across their views by setting up a newspaper, distributing leaflets and using other media.

[2] Shultz, J. *Reviving the Fourth Estate : Democracy, Accountability and the Media* .Cambridge. Cambridge Press.1998.
[3] Browne, K *An Introduction to Sociology* .Cambridge. Polity Press. 1994

With the sophistication of political media it could be argued that the media is manipulated by carefully scripted media events. The political news according to Tiffen[4] is the outcome of three competing drives

1. the major political conflicts
2. competition between competing media groups.
3. sources and journalists and the manipulation of them.

He suggests that it may be may be partly the frustration between these factors and the careful censoring of media that encourages the media to provide its own stories, rather than reporting events involving political parties.

Seaton[5] identifies what is sometimes known as the "new media", which she identifies as having three main influences:

1. people want to personalise the media, rather than it just being an information source,
2. because of new technology there is 24 hour news, in a very competitive environment,
3. use of circumstantial detail to construct apparently authentic stories, which are frequently quite false.

The creation and manipulation of stories by the media is not a new phenomenon.

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[4] *The Politics of Australian Society* Op. Cit.
[5] *What Can Be Done? Making the Media and Politics Better.* ed. Lloyd, John & Seaton, Jean. Blackwell Publishing. Oxford 2006.

In 2002, in America, Dan Rather, who did the CBS evening news was accused of a counterfeit story that could have brought down George Bush, particularly because it was released just before the 2002 election. The report focused on George Bush's service in the National Guard and whether it actually happened or not. It was later discredited because the documents it relied on were false.

In an American study in 1987 Iyengar and Kinder[6] concluded that public judgements as well as understanding may result from mass media agenda setting, and that the media could strongly influence the way that people viewed policy and indeed politicians, by the way that they set the agenda. One of the examples of this is cited in Rogers and Dearing[7] relating to the drought in Ethiopia in October 1984. It was created as a political issue after the BBC and then the NBC reported from a refugee camp. This resulted in the US Government addressing the issue. No action had been taken until the media "made" it an issue.

It has been suggested that the media should have more clearly defined restrictions as to what they can write or report. Journalists currently can write whatever they like…..as long as it is not libel. The media should be

[6] Cited in Rogers, Everett M. & Dearing James W. *Agenda-Setting Research: Where Has it been, Where Is It going?* In Media Power In Politcs ed. by Graber, Doris A. Washington, CQ Press.2000.
[7] Ibid.

obligated to tell the truth and not manufacture or elaborate stories, even if it does not sound as good.

Osborne[8] points out that it is possible to sit through postgraduate seminars in Australia's major universities in which evidence gleaned from media sources was unaccompanied by any reference to who had complied the information, for what reasons, under what circumstances, and with what degree of contested meaning.

There are many dangers for political parties, particularly Opposition parties if they rely too heavily on news reports.

Utegate

In Australia, the recent "Utegate" affair reflects these concerns very obviously, and illustrates the strong dangers for Opposition parties relying on media stories as a vehicle for their policies and operations.

The role of the media was critical in this fraudulent email story, particularly the role of the journalist Steve Lewis, from the Daily Telegraph. The Telegraph printed a copy of the fake email in its newspaper on 20th June. Steve Lewis later claimed that he had never seen the email but that it had been read over the telephone to him by an unnamed source. (It is also claimed that Steve Lewis had four telephone conversations with the public servant (Godwin Grech) the day before he gave his now famous evidence.) This is certainly an attempt to mislead

[8] Osborne, Graeme. *Communications Traditions in 20th Century Australia*.

the public as the Telegraph actually produced a 'mock-up' of the email leading readers to believe that the Daily Telegraph had a copy of the email in their possession.[9]

As you are all aware the Opposition launched an attack on the Prime Minister significantly based on this and following newspaper reports.

The Daily Telegraph, the paper that printed the false email changed its headlines form "Car Deal: PM In Spin" to "Turnbull wounded as Utegate email exposed as a fake" neatly side-stepping its own involvement in the whole affair.

This story has had disastrous consequences for the Leader of the Opposition. The Newspoll[10] results from 12-14th June, before the event, and the following poll on 26th -28th June, after Utegate, show a decline in both the Opposition's rating and the Leaders position. The Leader's rating as preferred Prime Minister dropped from 25% to 18%, and the Opposition from 47% to 44%.

The following Auditor-General's report unfortunately was not asked to look at the media involvement in this story. However Attachment D provides an assessment of the media involvement written by Alex Mitchell, which examines the link between the newspaper coverage and

[9] Mitchell, Alex *The Real Utegate Scandal* Published on 21st July, newmatilda.com
[10] Australian Newspaper 28th July 2009.p2.

the consequences for the Opposition.[11] (The author is, of course, a journalist!)

Victoria

However in Victoria a reliance on the media has become a strong habit for the Opposition parties, particularly in Parliament.

Looking at State political reporting in Victoria, since the change of Government in 1999, there is more and more evidence of the increasing role of the media taking on the role of the Opposition in State politics. There are a number of factors which have contributed to this change.

The Labor Government was elected in an unexpected result in 1999 so has now been in Government for 10 years. Whilst the 1999 election was very close, the 2002 election delivered the biggest majority ever in the history of Victoria, and the 2006 election delivered another decisive victory to the Labor Party.

In the same period, the Opposition has had 3 Leaders- Denis Napthine, Robert Doyle and Ted Baillieu. The divisions within the Party have been obvious and have led to an unsettled and unfocused Opposition. These internal difficulties have perhaps distracted it from its Opposition role, which has been taken over to a certain extent by political journalists.

[11] Mitchell, Alex. Op. Cit.

It means that the media is setting the issues for scrutiny rather than the Opposition. The Opposition is led into areas that the media has pre-determined for it, or rather than the opposition policy or strategies leading the media.

In some cases the media has become the opposition.

Andrew Jaspan and the Age

The case of Andrew Jaspan, a former editor of the Age newspaper and the current Government's channel deepening policy is an amazing example of a newspaper taking on the Opposition role.

In relation to the issue of channel deepening the Liberal and National parties who have a loose union, had a difficulty, because the Nationals thought it would assist with the export of agricultural products, whilst the Liberals appeared to oppose it, mainly on process issues. However neither Party supported the Government policy.

However, Andrew Jaspan's personal view was that the project should not go ahead, and he actually instructed his journalists to write articles opposing it, a fact which he quite openly admitted in radio interviews.

Accordingly, the Age ran a series of articles attacking the Government in 2008. Headlines like *"Dredge plume spreads" "seal dies", "Environment impact tests 'worst in country' " "Concern for penguin colony", "Dredging starts on toxic sediment" "dredging an insult", "A dive with bay views: clear one day, cloudy the next" "Bulky Queen leaves*

Bayside seriously browned-off." came delivered each morning with the paper. These stories were based mainly on hearsay or fears with very little, if any, factual basis.

None of the terrible environmental dangers envisaged by Jaspan occurred, and the Government made several attempts to get a more even-handed reporting of the dredging project. Eventually even the Age journalists rose up in rebellion. As the Australian newspaper (gleefully, no doubt) reported on July 2

According to a statement endorsed unanimously by 235 staff members Jaspan had 'pursued an undeclared campaign' against the Victorian Government's dredging of Port Phillip Bay.

"The paper's news reporting and analysis of the issue, as well as the selection, emphasis and presentation of stories, has been aggressively directed to reflect the view that the dredging is a mistake" the statement said. "This is an issue on which our readers expect fair and objective coverage. Instead, the role of editorial advocacy and reporting has become confused.

For Melbourne's so-called top end of town, and those who walk the corridors of power on Spring Street, the condemnation by the Age staff vindicated their long held concern that Jaspan had devoted enormous resources to wage a vendetta against the channel-deepening project.

The channel deepening project is to enable larger ships to come into the Port of Melbourne. It is perhaps important to note in view of the many articles about it, and I have only mentioned a few, that the majority Victorians do not have strong views on the subject. (The project has now been completed ahead of time, with none of the consequences promoted by Jaspan.)

The following month the Age decided it could dispense with Jaspan's services and dredging now rarely rates a mention.

Jaspan, in fact, appears to have breached The Age's "Charter of Independence' which states inter alia.

4. *The Board of directors acknowledges the responsibility of journalists, artists and photographers to report and comment on the affairs of the city, state, nation and the world fairly and accurately and regardless of any commercial, personal, or political interests including those of any shareholder, director, manager, editor or staff members.*

Questions Without Notice

Question time in the Victorian Parliament displays more keenly how the Opposition relies on the media to provide its impetus. That the media has taken on the role of the Opposition is clearly shown by the basis for the questions asked by the Opposition.

By examining recent sitting weeks in the Victorian Parliament this year the situation in Victoria is clearly illustrated. Appendices A/B/C give a detailed account of the questions asked in three randomly chosen weeks in March/April, June, and July, this year. This shows that most of the questions are based on media reports.

On Tuesday 31st March both daily newspapers (The Age and the Herald/Sun) reported that the Minister for Health had released an independent report showing that the Royal Woman's Hospital had understated waiting lists, and indicating what he intended to do about it. (This surprisingly enough was just a day before the Auditor General found the same thing.)

In the first week, 12 out of the 15 questions from the Opposition relied on earlier media reports relating to waiting lists. The Auditor's General report should have been a golden opportunity for the Opposition, so what did they get out of it in terms of media coverage in the daily press? Over these three days there were 16 stories in the two daily papers and the Australian covering waiting lists.

Over these 3 days the Opposition rated five small mentions, mainly the last sentence in the article, for example:

The Opposition was mentioned in the newspaper reports in the Herald Sun on 31st March

Opposition health spokeswoman Helen Shardy said Mr Andrew should resign as the incompetence and fraud had undermined the management of hospitals. (Second last sentence in a lengthy article)

And in the Herald Sun on April 2nd

Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu said the Auditor-General's report made it clear the state's hospital waiting list systems were'dodgy'. (Last sentence of the article)

This example shows that instead of leading the debate the Opposition has merely become a commentator on the issues. This was previously the role of the media, and in effect the media and the Opposition have changed roles. The media is providing the story and the Opposition has only a minor role. It is not getting any credit, or recognition that it is an effective opposition force, or more importantly an alternative government.

In the second week (Appendix B) the Opposition asked 12 out of 15 questions based on media reports, and in the third week (Appendix C) they asked 10 out of 14 questions.

The media results were perhaps worse than the first week , No stories appeared in any of the media as a result of these questions in the second week, and only one in the third week which actually related to the Government's media release on desalination.

These examples only cover three weeks of the Parliament but the pattern is similar over a long period of time.

In some cases the Opposition ask questions about articles that appeared in the media some months ago. In some cases after the Government has already responded; certainly the questions are not unexpected by Government ministers.

The Opposition

For the Opposition therefore there are serious flaws in this policy.

Firstly, they are never seen to be on the front foot and leading the debate, they are always reacting to issues that have been created by the media or in some cases, the Government.

Secondly, they never have the element of surprise on their side. The Minister's have all morning(in some cases several weeks) for answers to be prepared by their staff and Departmental staff for questions without notice so they are never put under pressure, and are never caught off guard and make mistakes. Most of the time they just repeat the same answers that they have given previously to the media.

Thirdly, their role is reduced to that of a minor commentator.

Additionally it could be also considered a high risk strategy when the next election campaign commences. It will be interesting if the Opposition is able to gain traction with its pre-determined, and no doubt costly, media strategy, or will it be forced to follow the media, with the

media determining the issues over which it thinks the election should be fought, as it will have done in the years leading up to the election.

Overall it is difficult to see that the Opposition has gained much benefit from this strategy, or lack of one.

The following report from The Age on July 5th entitled

Ted takes a plunge: The Opposition Leader just can't get the traction he needs, perhaps illustrates this:

The last Newspoll, a survey taken after voters witnessed a smart , hands-on and compassionate John Brumby in the aftermath of February's bushfires, saw the two party preferred vote at 60-40,

Tuesday's poll saw Labor leading 56-44.[This was only one percentage point below the figures at the last State election. It continues-]

Since the last Newspoll Labor rarely saw a day of political sunshine. A series of scandals erupted, beginning with revelations that despite previous denials by Health Minister Daniel Andrews, hospital waiting list were being manipulated. There were concerns over crime statistics, the festering sores of water and transport, and then of course the Ombudsman report into the Labor dominated Brimbank council, a sordid little tale.

The Opposition should be very concerned about these Newspoll figures. It really highlights that they are not perceived by the public to be relevant,

or a significant force, in criticising the government, mainly because they are never mentioned.

Even more alarming for the Opposition must be the August Newspoll figures which showed that the Labor party was rating more highly than they did in the 2006 election. This was despite even more bad news for the State Government, in some of the findings into the Royal Commission into the February bushfires.

It is also interesting that the media rarely discuss the Opposition's role, normally it just ignores it.

The Government

This situation also provides significant problems for the Government. It is often difficult for the Government to get its side of the argument across. It makes it difficult for the Government to get an unbiased assessment of its policies and actions.

The case of channel deepening is obviously an example of this.

This may be compounded by the traditional view that the limited media ownership does not benefit Labor parties. As Windschuttle identified *Compared with most western democracies, the one-sided political bias of Australia's press is unusual. Most comparable countries have major daily newspapers that support a range of political opinion. Ever since the*

Australian Labor party was formed in 1891 it has had to battle against the hostile opinion of the major daily newspapers."[12]

Parliament

In addition, it causes a number of problems for the operation of the Parliament. It gives the media an over inflated view of its importance to the Parliament. They become the newsmakers rather than the news reporters. Accordingly they begin to see themselves as part of the parliamentary process not an observer of it.

Conclusion

There is an often repeated phrase that governments lose elections rather than Oppositions winning them, but there must be a credible alternative for voters. They must be aware that there is an Opposition Party in which they have confidence.

If the media has taken on the role of Opposition, it leaves the Opposition parties without a space to operate in.

It makes the Opposition irrelevant in terms of controlling type of media that might best support its policies or its strategies.

[12] Windschuttle, Keith. *The media : A new analysis of the press, television, radio and advertising in Australia.* 3rd ed. Victoria. Penguin. 1988. p 308.

They become just one of a range of commentators, not the central part of the story. They are not seen to be the ones holding the Government to account.

However if the political parties hand this role over to the media, it might be very hard to get it back, because it does fundamentally change the nature of media reporting from reporting the news to creating the news.

Appendix A: Parliamentary Sitting week 31st March, 1st April and 2nd April.

31st March

Questions : Waiting list ..why didn't the Government take action

Question 2: Waiting list : why didn't the Government take action.

Question 3: Question relating to public hospital performance referring to AMA comments reported in the daily press in February

Question 4 :Waiting lists and comments made earlier in the year.

All based on news reports of the Age and the Herald Sun on March 31st.

The Minister's response to these questions was that he had already addressed the issues raised.

The next day, on 1st April the Herald Sun reported that it had done a survey of public hospitals, all of whom denied that there was anything wrong with their waiting list. The Auditor General's report was available at this stage which gave a slightly different view.

1st April

Question 1:A/g's report and waiting lists

Question 2: A/g's report and waiting lists

Question 3: A/g's report and waiting lists

Question 4: A/G's report and waiting lists.

(All based on news reports from the Herald Sun and the Age on 1st April)

All of the Opposition questions on this day related to the findings of the Auditor General's report asking the Minister what action he intended to take. However he had already outlined what action he was taking on the previous day when he released his report to the media. So he just repeated what he had said the day before.

On the final sitting day this week, 2nd April the Sun reported more about their survey and reported that the Auditor General also raised doubts about the errors in the collection of data at three other hospitals.

April 2nd

Questions 1: A/g's report and waiting lists

Question 2: A/g's report and waiting lists

Question 3: A/g's report and waiting lists

Question 4: A/g's report and waiting lists.

(All based on the above media reports)

These questions received exactly the same answers as the previous day.

Appendix B: Parliamentary Sitting Week 23rd/24th/25th June

23rd June

Question1: Water North South Pipeline

Question2: Australian Building and Construction Commissioner : cohersive powers : **Refers to an event in 31 July 2008, already reported in the media**

Question3: Office of Police Integrity : **Press reports the preceding week**

Question4: Local government councillors: Refers back to earlier answered questions, also **based on a media report**

Question 5: Ambulance services; **media reports of EBA negotiations the previous week.**

24th June

Question 1: Water target savings of 155 litres based on **Herald Sun** page 23 "wealthy wallies egged on"

Question 2: Hospital :intensive –care beds based on **Herald Sun** p5 "Anguish at first swine flu death" –refers to lack of an intensive care bed

Question 3: School amalgamations based on **The Age** p3 "School closure fears as merger plan stepped up."

Question 4: Same as question 3 **The Age** p3

25th June

Question 1: The collapse of OPI investigation based **Herald Sun** p3 "Police Union Chief in Clear"

Question 2: Amalgamation of schools based on the **Age** report. 24th June

Question 3: Allegations about the Casey Council which appeared in the **Age** on June 4th, some three weeks earlier. (**A similar question was also asked on the day of the Age's report)**

Question 4: same as question 3. **The Age** June 4th.

Appendix C: Parliamentary Sitting week: 28th/29th/30th July

28th July

Question 1: Child protection services **Herald Sun** 26th July
Question 2: Water: Advertising Campaign **The Age** 28th July
Question 3: Bushfires
Question 4: Frankston: public housing **Herald Sun** July 26th.
Question 5: Crown Casino :Press reports from Government release **April** 2009

July 29th

Question1:TAC medical billing
Question2: Rail:metropolitan rolling stock **Herald Sun** July 29th, **The Age** July29th
Question3: Violence: International students: **Media reports in the previous week**
Question4: Schools: International students **The Age** July 28th

July 30th

Question 1: Desalination Plant: Government **press release**
Question 2: OPI Report police funding
Question 3: School Mergers **The Age** 24th June
Question 4: School mergers **The Age** 24th June.
Question 5: Insurance fire levy.

Appendix D: The Real Utegate Scandal

21 Jul 2009

Armed only with a forged email, News Ltd papers across Australia last month demanded the resignation of the PM and Treasurer. Alex Mitchell investigates the role of the Murdoch press in the Utegate fiasco

Over four extraordinary days in late June, Rupert Murdoch's flagship, The Australian, and his capital city dailies in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide waged war on Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Treasurer Wayne Swan — armed only with a forged email.

They savaged Rudd on the grounds that he had lied to parliament and that he and Swan had improperly lobbied for government financial assistance for a Queensland car dealer who was a mate. They were heady charges and their front-page treatment across the News Ltd stable sent a frisson of excitement through the ranks of the embattled Coalition.

The orchestrated media campaign was music to the ears of Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull — if he could damage fatally the Rudd-Swan team then a voter recovery suddenly seemed possible, especially if there was an early election as widely predicted. The aggressive ambition of Turnbull plus the zealotry of the regime-changers in the editorial chairs at News Ltd made a toxic combination.

There was, of course, one small snag in this breathtaking power play: the sole piece of evidence upon which the political assassins were relying — an email sent by a senior member of Rudd's staff to a Treasury official named Godwin Grech — was a fake, a concoction, a fraud.

Until the Australian Federal Police raided Grech's Canberra home and seized his computer and its electronic entrails, Turnbull and Murdoch's newspapers sang from the same song sheet — or email — alleging that Dr Andrew Charlton, Rudd's senior economic adviser, had sent a message to Grech, the Treasury official in charge of organising a financial guarantee package for the credit-squeezed car industry, requesting he give special treatment to a Brisbane car dealer named John Grant.

The situation was complicated because Grant had given Rudd a 1996 Mazda utility truck, aka the "Ruddmobile", to use as his campaigning vehicle in recent elections and there was no doubt that the glad-handing, knockabout car salesman had dipped into his pocket more than once to help his mate "Ruddie".

Yet the record showed that Grant — along with many other car dealers and dealerships — had made representations to the Government; that Grant had not received special treatment; and, indeed, had not received a cent from the Federal Government.

None of these essential facts fazed the News Ltd editorial offices. Murdoch's papers crystallised the Prime Minister's link with Grant into "UteGate" and a scandal leading to the highest elected office in the land was born.

Sydney's Daily Telegraph gave notice of its "exclusive" with the front-page headline on June 19, "Car Deal: PM In Spin", accompanied by this startling revelation: "The Daily Telegraph has learned of a correspondence trail involving the office of the Prime Minister and Government officials responsible for a $2 billion scheme to help cash-strapped car dealers."

National Political Correspondent Steve Lewis produced further revelations the following day in another front-pager, "Rudd's Car Crisis", which read: "The Rudd Government last night launched a full inquiry into the UteGate affair amid increasing pressure on Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Treasurer Wayne Swan to resign."

The early editions even published a mock-up graphic of the alleged email between Charlton and Grech. In their haste, the News Ltd embroiderers actually got the name of the email recipient wrong. It read "Godwin Grant". Turnbull fumed that Rudd and Swan were guilty of "a shocking abuse of power", adding: "The Prime Minister and the Treasurer have used their offices and taxpayers' resources to seek advantage for one of their mates and they lied about it to parliament."

Over the weekend of 20–21 June the country's mass media focused on the email that was driving a stake into the heart of the Rudd Government, with the Prime Minister calling on the Opposition Leader to come clean and produce it.

Turnbull began to look shaky when he declared that he had never seen the email and that it had not been distributed to the media by him or anyone from the Opposition. He told commercial radio on 20 June: "We did not. No one in the Opposition provided the text of that email to the News Limited newspapers."

Over on ABC Radio, Rudd sensed blood: "Mr Turnbull has sought to smear my reputation as Prime Minister, and that of the Treasurer, which is his argument — backgrounding editors across the country, and you know this to be true, over the last couple of weeks, saying that they have a smoking gun against the Government, that it is this email which drops me directly in it."

The issue was settled a few hours later when the federal police issued a press release stating categorically that the email was a fake and that Grech, whose home had been raided, was assisting them with inquiries.

News Ltd's follow-up coverage was extraordinary.

Turnbull, who had been feted as a caped crusader for truth and justice only days earlier, was thrown to the wolves. Cynically ignoring their own explicit involvement in the whole email scam, Murdoch's papers thundered across the land: "Turnbull's fake email nightmare" (The Australian); "BACKFIRE — Turnbull wounded as Utegate email exposed as fake" (Daily Telegraph); "UTE BACKFIRE — Fake email turns the tables on embattled Turnbull" (Brisbane's Courier-Mail); "WHAT A CAR WRECK — Ute-gate fake email backfires on Turnbull" (Melbourne's Herald-Sun),

"GRAND FAKE AUTO — Ute-gate: Email didn't exist, pressure on Turnbull" (Adelaide Advertiser).

Grech underwent a similar News Ltd makeover. Hailed as a courageous "whistleblower" on the weekend, poor old Godwin Grech, the man with the Dickensian moniker, suddenly became a dysfunctional "mole" who was sick, reclusive and eccentric, according to unnamed neighbours and colleagues. The email affair is now in the hands of the Commonwealth Auditor-General and the federal police.

The question remains: how did News Ltd's editors, its senior correspondents in the Canberra Press Gallery and political commentators become parties to such an inept, misguided and ludicrous scam to ambush the Australian Prime Minister and his Treasurer and try to force them out of office?

With the simple use of time-honoured journalistic checks, the email would have been revealed as a forgery. By way of comparison, when Australian conman Peter Foster told the British Daily Mail in 2002 that he had emails from Cherie Blair about the purchase of two investment units in Bristol, the Mail did not publish them until it had conducted three independent forensic tests. Obviously, the most stringent scrutiny was advisable in dealing with the convicted fraudster, but the Mail demonstrated in this case the elementary practices of proper journalism.

So why didn't News Ltd's operatives do their job?

Rudd addressed the lapse in professional standards at a press conference two weeks ago when News Ltd reporter Matthew Franklin asked him about UteGate. His response was unusually scathing — and marks the first time in living memory that an Australian PM has criticised the Murdoch press. For that reason alone, Rudd's reply is worth quoting at length:

"I think, what a number of people have said to me, Matthew, around the place is where have we kind of got to when you have major papers like the Daily Telegraph, the Courier-Mail and the Adelaide Advertiser running on their front page that the Prime Minister of the country is corrupt, and then, secondly, the editors it seems not having sighted any original document in terms of this email, and thirdly, it turns out that that email is a forgery. I would have thought a few people would want to know how all that happened, what sort of journalistic checks were put in place for that to be the case, or is it simply being sort of airbrushed from history?"

The email hoax comes hot on the heels of another News Ltd fiasco. On 15 March this year, Murdoch's largest selling newspaper in Australia, the Sydney-based Sunday Telegraph, published nude photographs of Pauline Hanson. The go-between was Sydney paparazzo Jamie Fawcett who received a $15,000 fee for supplying photographs allegedly taken in 1975 by a former Australian army officer named Jack Johnson. Sunday Telegraph editor Neil Breen splashed the pictures across several pages as did Murdoch's Sunday tabloids in four other State capitals.

The coast-to-coast coverage arrived one week before the Queensland state election in which Ms Hanson was standing as an independent candidate in the outer Brisbane

seat of Beaudesert. How much her political comeback was stymied by the censorious uproar caused by the nude pictures is anybody's guess, but she was soundly defeated.

For almost a week after the publication of the steamy portfolio of Hanson photos, Breen defended their authenticity. Only when faced with incontestable proof that the photos weren't of Hanson did Breen finally back down. In May he published a signed 57-word, three-paragraph apology to Ms Hanson which concluded: "We have learnt a valuable lesson." Last month, a private, out-of-court settlement was reached with Hanson.

She has been paid off but Breen, one of Murdoch's rising stars, remains the editor of the Sunday Telegraph. At the National Press Club in Canberra in early July, News Ltd's chief executive in Australia, John Hartigan, defended the group's coverage of UteGate: "I'm more than happy with the quality and standards of the reporting," he declared. "We ran with the story because it's in the public interest."

Most newspaper readers in Australia would be unaware of these facts because they weren't covered in News Ltd papers — no surprises there — and they were almost totally ignored by the Fairfax papers as well. The ABC — apart from the highly commendable and sharp observations of Media Watch presenter Jonathan Holmes — was also silent on the Murdoch papers' involvement in this affair.

News Ltd wants both scandals buried as quickly as possible because it has more important items on its agenda. In particular it is seeking a greater share of Foxtel, the pay TV monopoly which it currently shares with James Packer and Telstra, and is anxious to soften up the Rudd Government to make its case.

This is a classic case of what Rudyard Kipling once described: "Power without responsibility — the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages."

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Newspapers

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