

# AUSTRALIA

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## Profile

- **Area:** 7.692.024 square kilometres
- **Population:** approx. 24 Mio.
- **Capital:** Canberra
- **State form:** Federal parliamentary monarchy
- **Official language:** English
- **Religion:** Christian (55.4 per cent), Other (44.6 per cent)



### – Abstract

The Australian media landscape can be characterized as highly concentrated and a hybrid of both strong commercial interests and state intervention. While the broadcasting sector is fairly regulated and has a long history of a dual-system-policy, the newspaper market has become one of the most highly concentrated in the world, with News Corp (owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch) and Fairfax being the two dominant players. Among commercial media, some outlets like News Corp are generally viewed as being partially partisan in supporting certain politics or parties. Though freedom of expression and press freedom are not constitutionally protected, two decisive rulings of the High Court in the 1990s serve as a substitute and are respected by authorities as a basic right. However, some laws can potentially limit press freedom regarding coverage of secret intelligence operations, protection of sources, defamation and reporting from immigration detention centres. Despite these restraints, Australian journalists are feeling largely autonomous, though time pressure, audience analytics and a shift towards sensationalism have an increasing impact on their reporting. With less influential unions, journalists are largely left alone in dealing with deteriorating working conditions or declining salary. They generally stick to ethical standards and view themselves as watchdogs of the government. The following report is based on NGO reports, literature and four expert interviews conducted in summer 2016.

### – Communication policy and regulations

Although freedom of expression, speech and press freedom are not constitutionally protected in Australia, the High Court ruled that the wording of the Constitution indicates an implied freedom of political communication. In two decisive trials in 1992, the judges consolidated this freedom in their verdicts: "Once it is recognised that a representative democracy is constitutionally prescribed, the freedom of discussion which is essential to sustain it is as firmly entrenched in the Constitution as the system of government which the Constitution expressly ordains" (Nationwide News vs. Wills, 1992: 19, 20). However, it operates as a freedom from government restraint rather than a right granted directly to individuals. The exact meaning of political communication, however, was determined in another crucial ruling in 1997, when the High Court defined that "any form of expressive conduct is capable of communicating a political or government message to those who witness it" (Levy vs. Victoria, 1997). Though its ambiguous meaning, the implied freedom of political communication is regarded as a substitute to a constitutional freedom of expression and press freedom and accepted as a de facto basic right by all Australian powers and authorities. However, some researchers perceive this implied freedom as "a potential basis for the missing normative dimension in Australian media policy" (Jones 2003, quoted from Jones/Pusey 2010: 452), since the lack of a constitutionally determined press freedom sometimes hinders the courts to strike down proposals that violate this civil liberty (Freedom on the Net, 2015: 12).

Australia's communication and media policy is generally viewed as liberal and non-restrictive, as confirmed by Alan Stokes, a journalist with over 30 years of working experience: "I think, generally speaking, it's a very free media, with very few limitations on what can be said or written." However, there are a few laws that can potentially limit press freedom and freedom of expression in specific matters:

- › First, the National Security Legislation Amendment Bill (NSLAB) which was passed in October 2014. It introduced a prison term of up to five years for revealing information relating to covert special intelligence operations (SIOs) and up to ten years if this information endangers the lives of involved persons or jeopardizes the effective conduct of a SIO. The bill refers to both future and past operations. While the government defends the bill by stating it "enhances the capability of our intelligence agencies (...) [by] improving protection of intelligence-related information", media freedom advocates like the Law Council of Australia are worried that the NSLAB might discourage journalists from covering national security issues and thus "will interfere with freedom of speech and prevent public discussions of important issues of public interest" (ABC, 2014). The main concern is that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) could easily label every disclosed operation as a covert SIO and thereby punish the responsible journalist for exposing errors made by security agencies (ABC, 2014). Other concerns are that the discretion of security agencies could impede journalists in investigating whether a SIO is covert or overt and that they could be convicted for mistakenly released information by ASIO officials. Another critical issue of the NSLAB is a passage that broadened the definition of a computer, allowing for an access to data of multiple computers connected to one network. This means that intelligence agencies are able to monitor entire news companies with only a single warrant (Freedom on the Net, 2015: 13).
- › Second, the Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Amendment (Data Retention) Act (TIAA) which Freedom House sees as "potentially the greatest legislative threat to Australian online freedom" (Freedom on the Net, 2015: 12). It extends the Telecommunications Act from 1997 that originally regulated the collection and surveillance of communication content and prescribed a warrant to authorize disclosure of personal data. However, the TIAA, which became law on April 13th 2015, repealed this necessity of a warrant for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to access and review metadata. It further introduced an obligatory retention for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to retain telecommunications metadata for two years. Meanwhile, there is an exception regarding metadata that involves stored communications as well as any metadata associated with journalists and their sources (Freedom on the Net, 2015: 12).
- › Third, the lack of uniform shield laws for the protection of journalists' sources. In federal law, the Evidence Act from 1995 protects the identity of journalists' sources. The Evidence Amendment Act (EAA) was passed in March 2011 and extends this source

protection by broadening the definition of journalist and news medium. However, the EAA can only be applied in court cases on a federal level and similar protection varies widely from state to state. Due to this lack of nationally consistent protection, in some states like Tasmania, Queensland or the Northern Territory (Bradley, 2013), journalists remain vulnerable to judicial efforts trying to gain information on confidential sources (Freedom of the Press 2015: 2). In an interview, Ben Doherty, immigration correspondent at The Guardian Australia, remembers some friends who have seriously faced convictions: "I've had friends and colleagues, who have gone to court, who have risk going to jail because they refused to reveal sources. So it is a risk, but I mean that a lot of journalist would say that it hasn't actually happened that anyone has been put to jail, but people I know have seriously faced it."

- › Fourth, defamation trials are common in Australia and often result in heavy fines or even imprisonment and serve as a regular mean to prosecute critical journalists (Freedom of the Press, 2015: 2). Alan Stokes, columnist and chief editorial writer at The Sydney Morning Herald, reported in an interview that he had been sued a couple of times over defamation during his 30 years as a journalist, though the cases were later dropped and never went to court. However, he states that "it certainly has a restraining effect, and it is pretty unfair, because (...) it's a weapon that rich and powerful people use to use to silence journalism." For instance, in July 2015, Fairfax Media was fined to pay 200.000 AUD to the Treasurer of Australia Joe Hockey over articles, among others in The Sydney Morning Herald that defamed him as bribable. However, the court ruled that Fairfax had only defamed Hockey as corrupt on an image with the words "Treasurer for Sale", imputing him to corruption. The content of the articles itself was of considerable public interest and thus not part of the defamation (Hall & Whitbourn, 2015). Ben Doherty, in contrast to Alan Stokes, doesn't see a strong restraining effect: "I am aware of defamation laws, of what I can say and what I can't, I am conscious of them, but I don't feel restrained by them, I don't think about them all the time when I write. I don't feel restrained from criticizing government policy or from writing articles that are unfavourable." However, some media advocates argue that defamation laws like the Uniform Defamation Laws Reform Act are too often interpreted liberally by judges and form the main trigger of self-censorship among Australian journalists (Freedom on the Net, 2015: 19).
- › Fifth, the Freedom of Information Act, passed in 1982, provides access to government documents. However, in 2014, the parliament passed the Freedom of Information Amendment (New Arrangements) Bill which considerably restrains citizen's rights to gain access to government information. It both cut funding for freedom of information services and eliminated the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) that had just been introduced in 2010. While the government promotes that the abolition of the OAIC will make freedom of information requests more efficient and accessible, media freedom advocates like the Public Interest Advocacy Centre criticized the act as a major loss of an impartial advocate for an open government (Farthing & Santow, 2014: 3-4). In addition, the bill also requires individuals to pay a filing fee of 800 AUD to appeal a government decision to withhold information (Freedom of the Press, 2015: 2).
- › Sixth, the government continues to restrict coverage from immigration detention centres, requesting journalist to sign a deed of agreement in order to enter these centres, be accompanied with an immigration official and comply with a set of rules during their visit. Communication with inmates is limited and any recordings are subject to review by officials (Freedom of the Press, 2015: 3). Alan Stokes regards these restrictions as "disgraceful (...) [since] every Australian citizen has a right to know what exactly goes on within the detention centres that Australia runs or supports financially." Ben Doherty even recognizes a "dangerous trend. I think it is deeply undemocratic, and I think it is something that journalists have, if not a right, but an obligation to resist." In addition, the government abolished weekly press conferences on border control in 2014, which usually resulted in controversial discussions between journalists and government representatives regarding Australia's infamous immigration policy (Freedom of the Press, 2015: 3).

While there is no public authority that oversees print content in Australia, broadcasting and internet content is supervised by the *Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA)*. It was formed in July 2005 and serves as contact point for consumer's complaints regarding television, radio or web content. Furthermore, it issues licences and administers the ownership and control rules for commercial television and radio broadcasting as well as associated print newspapers based on the *Broadcasting Services Amendment (Media Ownership) Act (BSAA)* of 2006. It states five decisive regulations regarding media ownership in Australia. However, they focus on broadcasting ownership while leaving newspaper ownership largely unaffected:

- › The minimum voices rule demands that at least five independent media voices must be present in a metropolitan licence area, and at least four in a regional licence area.
- › The 75 per cent audience reach rule prescribes that a person must not be in control of TV licence areas whose total population exceeds 75 per cent of the Australian population.
- › The one-to-a-market rule orders a person must not be able to control more than one TV licence in the same licence area.
- › The two-to-a-market rule dictates that a person must not be able to control more than two radio licences in the same licence area (Media control and ownership, 2014: 5).

Regarding media content, the ACMA's supervision of commercial TV, radio and the internet is generally regarded as fair and independent:

- › Its interventions in the commercial TV sector are based on the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice (CTICP) which was first introduced in 1993. It has been developed in accordance with the requirements of the original Broadcasting Services Act of 1992 by the broadcasting channel Free TV Australia. The CTICP has been registered by the ACMA and serves as a self-regulatory code for free-to-air broadcasters, which is supposed to be reviewed every three years. The current updated version

came into effect on December 1st 2015 and covers matters regarding program content that are of main public concern: program classification, scheduling of commercials and providing measures for handling consumer complaints (Free TV Australia 2016). With regard to TV content, the CTICP focuses on main safeguards like accuracy, privacy, discrimination, upsetting material and provides the ACMA with classifications to investigate consumer complaints and to determine compliance with code instructions (Code of Practice Overview, 2016).

- › Just like its TV regulations, the ACMA's content regulations of the commercial radio sector are based on the Commercial Radio Codes of Practice that operates by reference to the Broadcasting Service Act and is similar to the CTICP.
- › With respect to the internet and telephone sector, the ACMA is regarded as the "primary regulator for the internet and mobile telephony" (Freedom on the Net, 2015: 5). It is responsible for enforcing anti-spam law, investigating complaints about online content and gambling websites, the development of self-regulatory codes of practice for ISPs and to monitor compliance with these codes.

According to Freedom House, Australia's press is "free", with a country score of 22 (Freedom of the Press, 2015). In the World Press Freedom Index 2016, Australia was ranked 25 and varied between rank 35 and rank 16 within the last ten years (Reporters Without Borders, 2016).

#### — Media offers

The Australian media landscape can be characterized as highly concentrated and hybrid, since it features both a strong history of commercial and public service interests and state intervention. As such, Australia's media market has been structured both by economic as well as political means (Cunningham & Flew, 2000: 212). Among Australian politicians, there has always been a strong concern about the media influence (especially broadcasting) on the public opinion. As a result, control of more than one of the established traditional media (press, radio and TV) in the same local market had been prohibited for almost 20 years. Though abolished in 2006, cross-media ownership prohibition had a major influence on the formation of media conglomerates that still affect the Australian media landscape today. In 2010, only three acquisitions had been undertaken by major media groups that would have been prohibited before. The majority of media groups, however, still sticks to the previous restraints. Secondly, just like cross-media laws, foreign ownership restrictions had been applied in 1987 and were abolished in 1992 for radio and in 2006 for television. Even today, foreign investment in major traditional media is still supervised by the Foreign Investment Review Board based on general foreign investment policy (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016: 728-731). This hasn't prevented international media organizations like *The Guardian* or *The New York Times* from entering the market, but "a lot of them don't have enough money to go beyond big players, beyond Fairfax and News Corp and the ABC" (Interview Alcorn). However, the dominant newspaper company News Corp (owned by Australia-born media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who took up US citizenship in 1985) as well as two of the three main commercial television networks (TEN Network, owned by the Canadian corporation Canwest and Nine Network, owned by CVC Asia Pacific) are controlled by foreign entities (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016: 728-731).

"Australian media industries have always tended towards high levels of concentration due to a variety of factors that differ from industry to industry. The relatively small (in world terms) Australian market (...) has always been a limiting factor on the number of competing players" (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016: 705). As a result, the Australian newspaper industry has become one of the most highly concentrated in the world, with only four significant owners in total. From 1984 until 2008, these four companies were commanding over 80 per cent of the total circulation, reaching a share of 99.4 per cent in 2008 (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016: 708-710). Today, the metropolitan and national daily press consists of twelve titles, with News Corp (seven) and Fairfax Media (five) accounting for over 90 per cent of market share. Regarding the provincial press, there are 37 daily newspapers, whose ownership is largely held by the very same two dominant players, in addition to APN News & Media which controls 17 titles (Papandrea, 2013: 3). In an expert interview, communication researcher Folker Hanusch described the consequences for print journalists in this duopoly: "One doesn't have that many opportunities in journalism in Australia, because as a print journalist you have got two big publishing houses and that's it. So, if you don't get along with one of these companies, it is going to be hard." Three of the top-five-circulating newspapers belong to News Corp, with the *Herald Sun* being at the top (daily circulation: 342,546). Furthermore, the newspaper sector is largely city based, with the two key markets Sydney and Melbourne accounting for around 43 per cent of the country's population. Despite this long history of high concentration, the "Australian press has traditionally enjoyed full freedom of expression and participation in the industry has never been subject to regulation" (News Corp, 2016: 714). Media literacy in Australia is 99 per cent (Central Intelligence Agency 2016) and the average daily circulation of metropolitan and national dailies in 2012 was about 1.8 million (Papandrea, 2013: 5).

In contrast to print, the Australian broadcasting sector is fairly regulated and thus only features moderate levels of concentration, with the top four operators (three main commercial networks and the public broadcaster ABC) never hitting more than 25 per cent market share each (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016: 720). Furthermore, "Australian broadcasting has a long history of a 'dual system' of public service and commercial sectors which dates from the early 1930s, when the two sectors were termed the A and B class stations, with equivalent audience expectations of highbrow or lowbrow, or informative or entertaining program content" (Cunningham & Flew, 2000: 212). In fact, Australia was one of the first nations to introduce a dual-system of a state funded public service broadcaster (PSB) and private commercial radio channels in 1929 (Jones & Pusey, 2010: 453). "Television was introduced in 1956 on the basis of a similar dual system logic" (Cunningham & Flew, 2000: 212-213). However, Australia marks a very low per capita investment in PSB, second lowest amongst those surveyed by Tiffen and Gittins (2004: 186).

There are two separate and independent public service broadcasters in Australia, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and

the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS):

- › The ABC had originally been an established public service radio network. Although state owned and entirely funded by the Australian government, it remains editorially independent (Freedom of the Press, 2015: 3), as insured through the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act in 1983 that outlines ABC's main function and responsibilities: "to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard (...) that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community". Though some critics claim "that appointments to the ABC Board have been more often than not party-political" (Jones & Pusey, 2010: 456), ABC's coverage is generally respected and its reporting perceived as fair and independent. Furthermore, it has become an important factor in criticizing the Australian government, as attested by Gay Alcorn, a renowned editor at *The Guardian*: "I still think there is very good quality journalism of a serious kind that is designed to (...) hold the powerful to account. I think ABC has become more important in that regard, because the market is failing." On November 19th 2014, Australia's Minister for Communications announced that the government would cut the ABC's budget by 207 million AUD over a five-year period. As a result, the ABC announced that it would have to eliminate positions in regional programming (Freedom of the Press, 2015: 3).
- › The SBS is a multilingual PSB that had been established in 1980 as an alternative program for minority communities like the Aborigines. Since its founding, the SBS "has attracted much international attention as an innovative quality service" (Cunningham & Flew, 2000: 2013), whose main aim is "to provide multilingual and multicultural radio, television and digital media services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society". Unlike the ABC, SBS is permitted to raise part of its funding from advertising sales (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016: 703) and is thus hybrid-funded by both governmental appropriation (80 per cent) and advertising or sponsorship revenues (20 per cent).

In contrast to PSB, all interviewees highlighted the decline of commercial broadcasting quality, since there has always been a "poor regulation for accuracy and impartiality of commercial broadcast journalism" (Jones & Pusey 2010: 456) and financial pressures have forced channels to focus on shallow issues of public interest rather than on serious matters. Furthermore, it led to the decay of journalistic professional standards: "Australian commercial broadcast journalism has not been subject to a regulatory regime that encourages PSB-like professionalism. Current affairs' routine subordination to the pursuit of ratings is another highly tolerated practice that has resulted at times in outright falsification of information, most notoriously in a completely fabricated 1997 story by the *Today Tonight* programme" (ibid.: 465). These developments led to a "social polarization between PSBs and commercial television (...) [that] parallels the fragmented narrative of Australian media policy" (ibid.). Despite this divide, television remains the most relied upon source for news and information in Australia (ibid.: 461).

With regard to the political orientation of media organizations, Ben Doherty states that "there are a lot of elements of the Australian media that view their role as being quite partisan, they have an agenda to push whether it's a conservative one or a left wing one. (...) Some quite openly campaign for certain political causes." This view is supported by Folker Hanusch, who reports "talking to the chief editor of *The Australian* [owned by News Corp] once, who quite publicly stated that: 'We have an agenda. There are issues where we want to play a certain role and want to highlight a certain side of the discussion.'" Which part of the discussion depends on the political leanings of the media organization. Alan Stokes said that his current employer "Fairfax is a left-wing or a liberal media organization, whereas Murdoch [News Corp] is self-declared as a conservative right-wing organisation. The Murdoch organization has decided that its best way of making profit at the moment, or for the past twenty years, is to brand itself and produce right-wing journalism that appeals to a niche market, which is Conservatives. And that is the only way that they can find a monopoly within the Australian media landscape." Furthermore, he accuses News Corp to be "very partisan" in terms of promoting conservative politics. Gay Alcorn supports this view by saying that "in our political coverage there are certain news organizations, especially in News Corp, that are campaigning against Labour, campaigning against a progressive side of politics in a clearly distorted and unfair way."

#### — Journalists' autonomy

According to a census from 2011, there are about 16.125 people in Australia who classify themselves as journalists. However, this number should be downgraded to 10.691 if one counts only people who are actually involved in creating and publishing content. That makes around 500 journalists for every million people in Australia, double the proportion from the latest census in 1993 (Hanusch, 2013: 32). However, "the number of people being employed in Australian journalism has reduced sharply" (Interview Stokes) in the last years, with Hanusch even assuming 2.000 to 3.000 journalists out of 9.000 mainstream journalists having lost their job due to economic pressures on the industry. Despite this extensive reduction of jobs, Australian journalists are "extremely satisfied with their jobs overall and enormously optimistic about their future in the field. One might even say they are defiant in the face of adversity" (Hanusch, 2013: 38).

With regard to a study from 2013, the average Australian journalist is 37 years old, has 14 years of job experience and an average salary of 54.000 to 72.000 AUD per year. Despite the fact that nowadays there are more female journalists (55.5 per cent) than male, women are still paid considerably less, with only 35.6 per cent of women earning more than 72.000 AUD compared to 53.1 per cent of men. Women are furthermore underrepresented at senior levels (Hanusch, 2013: 33-34). This fact is also stressed by Gay Alcorn: "In terms of women, there are still too few. When I was young, I thought when I am forty or fifty this will have all changed. And it sort of didn't. It has to some extent, but slowly."

Australian journalists usually feel very autonomous in their work. In fact, the amount of autonomy is what they are most satisfied with in their job, with 80.7 per cent of respondents saying they are “somewhat” or “very satisfied” (Hanusch, 2013: 37). This result is also supported by the journalists in our interviews: “I can’t remember a time that I have ever been told to write a story in a certain way or to not write a particular story because of political sensitivity or anything like that. I feel largely autonomous in my work” (Doherty). Alan Stokes even states that he has “99 per cent autonomy” in his work. However, Gay Alcorn who feels largely autonomous in her work as well, believes that one can never have total autonomy, since “as a journalist, there is this unspoken boundary that you work within.” Folker Hanusch calls these boundaries “unspoken editorial policies” that guide Australian journalist, especially in commercial media, not to write about tenuous issues that can potentially harm advertising partners’ reputation or deviates from the media outlet’s policy. In addition, especially young journalists are more and more restrained by what Alan Stokes calls a “tendency towards using audience or readership metrics. (...) So many journalists, less senior journalists are under immense pressure in Australia to produce journalism that will get the most audience clicks or most engagement time through the internet.” He even believes this issue being “one of the biggest obstacles to autonomy that has emerged in Australian media.” With regard to political influence on journalists’ autonomy, the opinions differ: While Alan Stokes believes that the relation between politicians and journalists “is far too close (...) [since] the media in Australia, [respectively] journalists who report on politics, are too often part of the political process and the political game, rather than independent observers and analysers of the game.” Folker Hanusch supposes that “political dependence is not that incredibly high.” However, as stated before, the scale of partisanship largely depends on the editorial philosophy of the media outlet.

In terms of professionalization, journalists’ education in Australia has largely improved in the last 20 years, with 75 per cent of journalists now having a bachelor’s degree and two thirds of those having specialized in journalistic studies (Hanusch, 2013: 36). However, according to Alan Stokes, “media companies do not regard journalism degrees in Australia very highly. And part of the reason is that many media companies regard journalism schools as (...) ideological journalism schools rather than practical journalism schools.” As a result of “journalism schools becoming less relevant or less important in the Australian media (...) mentorship (...) for young journalists is more important than it was in the past” (Stokes). However, “the structures that existed, the traineeship programs, the cadetship, the mentoring that used to go on in news rooms, doesn’t happen as much anymore” (Doherty) since time restrains are hindering experienced, senior journalists to share their practical experience with younger colleagues.

One reason for these time restrains are degrading working conditions. All interviewees confirmed that wages are going down while “journalists are being asked to do more with less, (...) people are expected to publish more often and to work under much more pressure and far fewer resources. What I’ve seen over ten years is not a huge but a steady degrading of journalist working conditions, its things like timing issues for working weekends or public holidays or penalty rights. Those conditions are slowly being eroded in Australia” (Doherty). Meanwhile, multi-skilling is more important and 72.1 per cent of respondents in a study by Hanusch stated they were producing news for more than one outlet (2013: 36). Gay Alcorn believes “that young journalists are under so much pressure, because they need to write a story, they need to write a live blog, they need to do a quick audio thing or video thing. They are kind of racing around with less time to think (...). It’s so much faster, and the pressure on them is greater.”

Journalistic unions, however, are failing to fight this deterioration of working conditions: “Those conditions are slowly being eroded in Australia. And it doesn’t seem to me that the union is particularly powerful in being able to resist that” (Doherty). The influence of the two major journalist associations in Australia, the Australian Journalist Association (AJA) and the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) is perceived to be declining by all interviewees. While 86 per cent of Australian journalists were members of the MEAA in 1996, this number decreased to only 47.8 per cent in 2013 (Hanusch, 2013: 36). Folker Hanusch names one main reason for this development: “The pressures on journalists to enter independent contractual arrangements with their employers, which emerged in the early 1990s and have continued since, as well as subsequent government moves to discourage employees from union membership” (ibid: 8). In addition to neo-liberal politics and unions being fought by the government, especially under the Howard administration, Gay Alcorn also states that many young journalists simply can’t afford union dues of around 1000 AUD per year and thus “don’t see the value in joining the union”.

As a result of harder working conditions and journalistic unions failing to fight this deterioration, quality and the compliance with ethical codes have suffered. A study by Hanusch shows that more than half of the journalists believe that both the quality of journalistic standards as well as the credibility of journalism has decreased (2008: 103). Alan Stokes expounds three reasons for this development: “One, is that the business models of privately run media companies have been destroyed by the internet and by bad management. Second: Cost cutting has reduced the ability of journalists to do their job properly. And the third reason is that the audience expectations of journalism have changed, and audiences do not demand of journalism the same high standards that they once demanded.” In fact, a majority of Australian journalists perceive an increase in sensationalism, infotainment and profit-making pressures (Hanusch, 2015: 45). In the interview, Hanusch adds that there “are fewer checking mechanism, the entire gatekeeping chain has been shortened. (...) And this is a trend the journalists perceive and view very critical. And this is also based on producing as fast as possible and based on this pressure to publish sensation news that this pressure leads to a corrosion of ethical codes”. Ethical codes in journalism, however, are still widely respected in Australia, though most journalists perceive its influence having declined (Hanusch, 2015: 42). “In the most part, Australian journalists try to behave ethically, but every now and then, they fail pretty spectacularly” (Interview Doherty). As an example for failed reporting, two cases were frequently described in the interviews that have caused sensation and disgrace among Australian journalists. The first example is a young journalist who wrote an article about a murder trial

and disclosed suppressed information. As a result, the jury had to be discharged and the trial rescheduled (Guardian, 2016). The second example was a TV feature by formerly acclaimed show *60 minutes* which runs on Nine Network, whose journalists were involved in an operation to abduct the children of an Australian mother from her estranged husband in Beirut. However, the five journalists had been arrested by Lebanese authorities after hiring a “child recovery specialist” and released after two weeks of detention. The Australian Press Council, however, who is supposed to prevent or sanction this journalistic behaviour, is perceived by many “as a toothless tiger. (...) [In case of a violation of the Press Councils code of ethics,] one will have to publish a correction, if there has been a complaint” (Hanusch).

As a result of declining journalistic standards and an increasing focus on sensationalism and entertainment, most journalists believe that their general reputation among Australian citizens is rather negative: Ben Doherty believes that “journalism like journalists have very poor perceptions among many people in Australia, that they are dishonest, or tricky. I think that’s really unfortunate, but I think journalists often bring it on themselves by behaving stupidly, or recklessly or unethically.” With regard to the 60 minutes scandal, he adds that this “colours people’s perceptions that some journalists would do anything to get a story, even if it means snatching a child and beating up her grandmother on the side of the streets. And I think when that happens, highly unethical behaviour, particularly when it’s a high profile show, the whole industry suffers.” Furthermore, Gay Alcorn states that “people see journalist as out of touch, a bit elite, sometimes a bit like telling people what to think.” Alan Stokes even states that “journalism is the least trusted profession in Australia. The reason behind it is that journalists often betray people in their stories and want to create the most readership or the most audience, and often don’t follow an impartial part or an ethical part.”

In terms of their self-perception, most Australian journalists see themselves as following the fourth estate role of journalism with traditional values such as objectivity, passivity and holding the powerful into account. However, they struggle in finding a balance between giving their audiences what that they want to know (consumer-oriented approach) and what the journalists think they should know (citizen-oriented approach) (Hanusch, 2008: 104). Ben Doherty best describes this difficult situation: “I very much believe in journalism having that fourth estate role. Journalism as a public service and a public good, a watchdog on governance and institutions of power. I think Australian journalism does play that role, but sadly, this really fundamental role that journalism played in any democracy does get lost among clickbait journalism.” This opinion is supported by Alan Stokes, who believes that the demand for serious investigative journalism is simply not as high as the call for fast-working processors of pre-packaged press releases. Though the fourth estate role is “very strong, (...) in a new generation of journalists that’s not so important. Because they want a job, and the jobs that are available and not the ones that hold a fourth estate role, those are the churnalism jobs.” He refers to the neologism churnalism, a blend of to churn (out) and (journ)alism, describing “a type of journalism that relies on reusing existing material such as press releases and wire service reports instead of original research” (The Free Dictionary, 2016). In addition, Alan Stokes also mentions the increasing influence of sensationalism in the self-perception of many journalists: “The best journalists in Australia view their role as holding the government and holding those in power into account. The worst journalists in Australia regard themselves as entertainers.”

## — Sources

### Interviewed experts (remote via Skype and telephone in August and September 2016)

- Alan Stokes, columnist and chief editorial writer for The Sydney Morning Herald with over 30 years of experience in journalism (interviewed on September 2, 2016)
- Ben Doherty, an immigration correspondent at The Guardian Australia; twice a Walkley award winner for his foreign reporting (interviewed on August 30, 2016)
- Folker Hanusch, a German communication researcher who lived in Australia for 17 years (interviewed on August 23, 2016)
- Gay Alcorn, three times Walkley award winner and formerly working for The Sunday Age and The Age, currently working as an editor and columnist for The Guardian (interviewed on September 6, 2016)

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