

Political journalists are framing the Election

By *Jennifer Wilson*

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The mainstream media is shaping the narrative of the 2022 Election into a battle between two leaders, writes Dr [Jennifer Wilson](#).

PERHAPS ONE OF THE MORE remarkable journalistic observations last week came from ABC's political editor [Andrew Probyn](#), when he declared on [Insiders on Sunday](#) that "Only certain political messages get through".

Probyn appears to be entirely unaware of, or unwilling to admit, the role of his profession in determining which of those messages will "get through".

For example, on Monday, ABC breakfast presenter [Patricia Karvelas](#) amplified an article in [The Age](#) written by journalist [David Crowe](#), with the headline: 'Albanese pays a price for gaffe as voters swing back to government.'

Albanese pays price for gaffe as voters swing back to government
<https://t.co/475Hp8v5O3>

— Patricia Karvelas (@PatsKarvelas)
[April 17, 2022](#)

Given the saturation coverage of Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese's [mind freeze](#) when asked about unemployment numbers (almost [6,000 articles referring](#) to the gaffe were published in 24 hours), it seems likely that journalists played a not inconsiderable role in ensuring that this particular message got through.

Journalists amplifying other journalists' stories on the gaffe takes media determination to embed the narrative in the public consciousness to another level.

Albanese should have had the numbers memorised. However, that he didn't is hardly worthy of almost 6,000 articles in 24 hours.

What is profoundly alarming is that journalists appear happy to ply their trade without considering their role in influencing public opinion. It's hard to believe they are unable to make the connection between the messages they allow to get through and public reaction, so perhaps we can conclude they are unwilling to engage in this much self-reflection.

This Election is apparently about [character and leadership](#). Prime

Minister Scott Morrison comes to the party with an unprecedented record of internationally recognised mendacity, unprecedented levels of alleged rorting, a well-documented disregard for the safety of women in his own workplace, a steadfast refusal to entertain the possibility of a useful federal ICAC, a proven history of cruel incompetence in the handling of bushfires, floods and the COVID pandemic all of which speaks, or rather screams, to both his character and his leadership abilities.

Yet it is as if he has, like [Aphrodite](#), emerged renewed from a dip in the Paphos sea, his political virginity restored. In their efforts to find “balance”, journalists have ditched recent history and veered dangerously in the direction of blatant bias, in their increasingly desperate efforts to portray the Opposition Leader as equally, if not more, unworthy of our trust because he forgot a number.

This is not a contest between two men of similar moral character, which surely is a salient if deliberately ignored point. Albanese has no such history and as Morrison sets a very low bar in the character stakes, we can be reasonably certain of Albanese’s superiority.

You cannot on the one hand claim an election is about character while on the other, scrupulously avoid every reference to the dubious character of one of the contestants.

This brings me to the framing of the Election as a contest between two men by a media that, apparently as one, yearns for a more presidential system of government than that offered by our Westminster system.

There are only two electorates that will vote for (or against) Morrison and Albanese.

It remains the choice of parties, not voters, who their leader will be.

Both major parties can change their leaders whenever they decide to do so. Voters have no influence over their decisions.

We do not vote for our prime minister. And yet, here we are.

Media focus on leaders gives Morrison a considerable advantage. It means we aren’t constantly reminded that the majority of his cabinet is tainted by varying levels of scandal and untested allegations of criminal behaviour. We only have Scott and as we’ve seen, the media isn’t going to remind us of his transgressions so that’s a definite win for them.

A focus on the teams behind the leaders would certainly favour the ALP, not least because they seem to be scandal-free and less empathically challenged, which is a good thing in a crisis.

It is only a contest between two leaders because the media have made it a contest between two leaders. This does not serve the interests of voters.

It is terrifying that the majority of the media seems prepared to overlook the behaviour of the Morrison Government for the last three years and the devastating long-term effects this is having on our society, and are apparently more than willing for this state of affairs to continue for another three years.

Apart from any of that, the “battle between leaders” narrative serves only to undermine our democracy, which journalists well know and apparently don’t care about.

As long as journalists continue to deny that they play a significant role in influencing the public view of politics and politicians, we cannot trust them. The contortions of thought that permit them to hold this belief are astounding. Their reluctance to recognise what they are doing inevitably colours their opinions and commentary.

Andrew Probyn is correct. Only certain messages get through. However, this penetration is not controlled or determined by a mysterious and powerful exteriority. Journalists and editors decide which messages get through and to what extent, and journalists and editors decided which messages get spiked.

Journalists need to own their influence and until such time as they do, the public will continue to be manipulated and deceived by those considered reputable, as well as those considered hacks.

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