



Do You Hear What I Hear?

Reception in Australian political
discourse and effects on
engagement with democracy

Jean Ker Walsh

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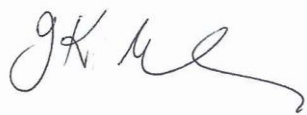
2016

Abstract

This thesis in political communication details a qualitative investigation into how citizens receive and make sense of political discourse in a twenty-first century democracy. Recognising criticism of the national discourse as ‘dumbed down’, it explores with a cohort of Australian citizens what meaning they receive from contemporary discourse and how it affects their engagement with democracy. The project employs an innovative method of recruiting participants at a polling booth in Australia’s most typical suburb, followed a month later by same day data collection from three wide-scope groups in facilitated discussion. Analysis of the data finds citizens diagnose the discourse as negative and of poor quality, for which they first blame the media. There is an expressed fear that the shallowness of discourse is dumbing them down. In contradiction to their expectations of democratic citizenship, they are powerless to make themselves heard within a discourse which neither recognises nor respects them. They find the discourse alienating, although overwhelming support for compulsory voting militates against democratic dis-engagement. Digital age communications are used to support unstructured democratic engagement and circumvent the banality of local political discourse.

Declaration

I, **Jean Ker Walsh**, declare that the PhD thesis entitled ***Do You Hear What I Hear? Reception in Australian political discourse and effects on engagement with democracy*** is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JK Walsh', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Signature

14 April 2016

Date

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Declaration	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Preface	vi
Explanatory notes	ix
Tables and Figures	x
INTRODUCTION	1
PART A: DEMOCRACY, DISCOURSE AND RECEPTION AS SENSE-MAKING	
Chapter 1 Making democracy ↔ Making discourse	12
Chapter 2 The reception context: consumerised, mediatised, globalised	41
Chapter 3 Having a problem with the Australian political accent?	65
Chapter 4 Making sense, politically speaking	81
PART B: HEARING VOICES	
Chapter 5 Turning up the volume: a methodology for hearing ordinary voices	101
Chapter 6 Having a say: citizens diagnose the problems of received discourse	121
Chapter 7 Do you hear what I hear?	181
CONCLUSION	202
Afterword	210
Appendices	212
References	225

Acknowledgements

It is appropriate to acknowledge the privilege of being able to spend three years thinking, reading and writing about a subject that one really cares about. In doing so I acknowledge the interest in politics seeded by my late grandfather, Frank Holmes, who would talk easily about ‘scabs’ like Billy Hughes while conveying complex meanings of working class solidarity and political representation. I acknowledge the gift of imagining democratic politics as being primarily about communities creating social justice through the simple but powerful method of see, judge, and act. The simplicity of method creates a role for everyone. I owe such democratic insight to the life-long influence of the Young Christian Workers Movement and the many friends and mentors, especially the late Kevin Smith, with whom, over the years, we have ‘solved the problems of the world’.

In the making of this project I acknowledge first and foremost the generous participants – the Oak Park 18. I trust their individual and collective voices are heard loudly and clearly through their contribution to this work. They inspire confidence in the good sense of common sense.

The guidance and unflagging encouragement of principal supervisor Dr Tom Clark and Dean Laureate Professor Rob Pascoe have added to the privileged feeling I attach to this project. I thank them sincerely and, recognising that not all PhD candidates get to enjoy the same level of regular feedback and support, recommend them as models of academic supervision. I am grateful to Bruce Best for his final proof-reading expertise. Any errors, of course, are wholly my own.

My loving thanks go to my daughter, Dr Melissa Walsh. As a role model of determination to complete her PhD in tandem with child-rearing, working and active community involvement, I could admire but not dare try to emulate. Her encouragement to take up the project, and her support through the tougher stages, was liberating. To Chris, Cormac and Tilly, Carol, Paul and Jack and all my family and friends who have shown interest and listened to my over-enthusiastic updates on progress – thank you.

Preface

If the year is meditating a suitable gift,
I should like it to be the attitude
of my great-great-grandmother,
legendary devotee of the arts,

who, having had eight children
and little opportunity for painting pictures,
sat one day on a high rock
beside a river in Switzerland

and from a difficult distance viewed
her second son, balanced on a small ice-
floe,
drift down the current towards a waterfall
that struck rock-bottom eighty feet below,
while her second daughter, impeded,

no doubt, by the petticoats of the day,
stretched out a last-hope alpenstock
(which luckily later caught him on his
way).

Nothing, it was evident, could be done;
and with the artist's isolating eye
my great-great-grandmother hastily
sketched the scene.
The sketch survives to prove the story by.

Year, if you have no Mother's Day present
planned,
reach back and bring me the firmness of
her hand.

Judith Wright
Request to a Year

A 'small ice-floe' moment for democratic citizenship

It may be that moments defining how we are to live and go on living can only be fully appreciated 'from a difficult distance'. How else but from the 'high rock' can a complete scene of impending danger, contextual encumbrances and potential rescue be viewed, recorded, and later reviewed in an attempt to make sense of the things that threaten to disrupt our lives?

This thesis has its origins in a growing perception that ordinary people in today's democracy may be balancing on a 'small ice-floe', with good reason to be concerned about the riskiness of their situation and fearful of what lies ahead. Using the 'high rock' and 'difficult distance' of academic rigour enables such perceptions to be tested in context and against existing knowledge while identifying any signs of rescue – if it is needed – or if something can be done to avert what may appear inevitable.

The perceptions of concern prompting this work go to the heart of how Australians have relied on democracy as their kind of political system and understand its importance to the kind of future they want for themselves and future generations. In this second decade of the twenty-first century, Australia as a democratic polity is showing signs of being under internal pressure

from a failure of discourse. The contemporary political discourse dominated by the political and media elite is criticised from multiple perspectives. They include complaints that the discourse is being dumbed down. There are too many slogans and not enough policy. The mediated discourse is angry and uncivil. Increasingly, political leaders withhold information from the public. The lying politician, while demonised on the one hand, is accepted as the norm on the other (fig. 0.1).

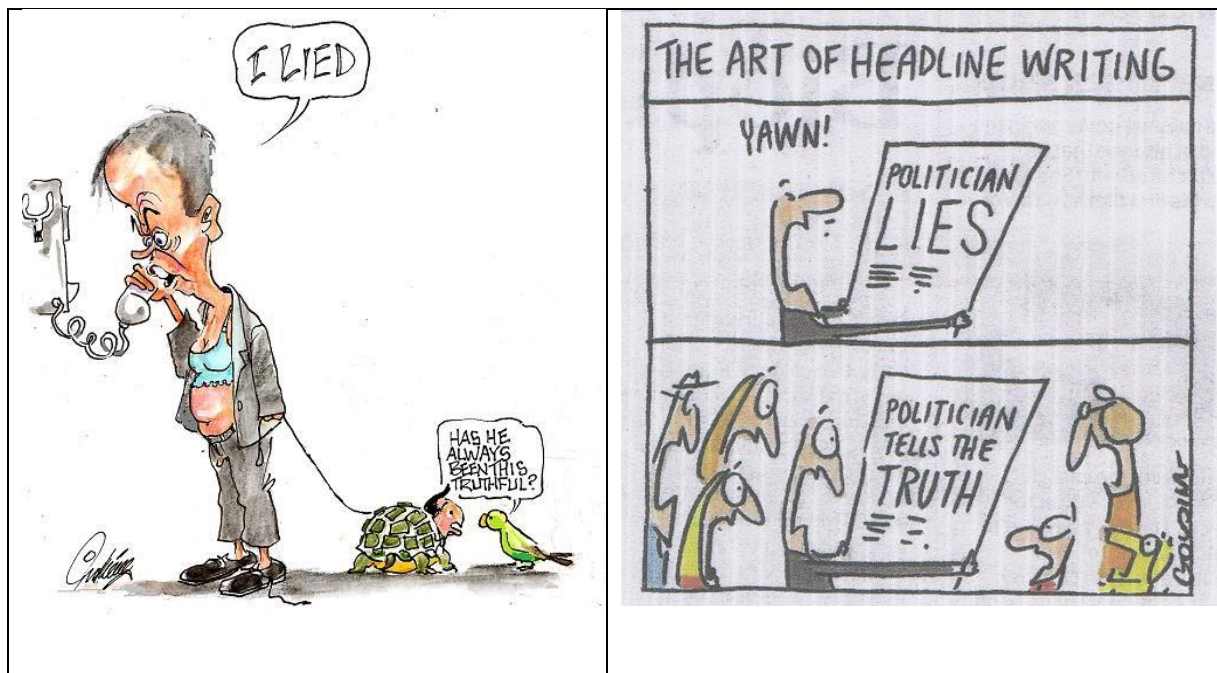


Figure 0.1: Honesty among Australian politicians (Pickering and Golding, undated)

Alongside the ‘isolating eye’ sketches of the political cartoonists, in the words of at least one public policy commentator, the political lie should be illegal (Triffitt, 2015). Without apparent irony, political scientist Mark Triffitt proposes a Truth in Politics Commission with powers to investigate, summon witnesses and impose criminal sanctions. His ‘drastic step’ proposition is justified by the effect of the political lie on the broader public:

The ripple effect of the political lie – particularly election promises that are uttered with no intent to follow through – has the potential to impact on the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people. But more fundamentally, a continual stream of political lies and quarter-truths corrodes our most precious asset – our democratic system. And the cost to our society and way of life is incalculable.

One in five Australian adults now do not even bother to vote. Only about 40 per cent of Australians believes it makes any difference which political party is in power. And only four out of every 10 young Australians in a recent poll think democracy is even the best political system. Why?

Why, indeed?

This project does not presume to find the definitive answer – if there is one to be found – to that specific question. However, it does aim to make a contribution to a better understanding of how ordinary Australian citizens – as non-elite members of the mass population – receive and respond to the contemporary political discourse. It is interested in what they have to say about the political discourse *as they hear it* and what effects the meanings they take from the discourse have on the way they as citizens engage with twenty-first century democracy.

This work is undertaken with a conviction that a healthy political discourse is essential to the making and sustainability of a healthy democracy. The primary and inherently positive *telos* of discourse is the free circulation in the public space of all the information and ideas that deserve to be tested in the public domain so that citizens can make sound judgments about how they are to live well together. In the early conceptualisation of the thesis problem, it was discerned that Australia's political discourse, being widely received as negative and alienating, was causing some people to withdraw politically. How, then, could they have confidence in their roles as citizens to have the information necessary to make sound judgments about the issues and the people to represent them in those issues? It was feared that citizens in their contemporary political context could reasonably infer from the discourse that 'nothing, it was evident, could be done'. Would they give up on the discourse and on democracy itself? What alternative meanings might citizens find in the received discourse and how might they respond?

What follows is the documentation of a three-year investigation into how ordinary Australians make sense of the contemporary political discourse and how this affects their engagement with democracy.

Explanatory Notes

Australian English is used throughout this text which means spelling in quotations and references to internationally published works may differ slightly from the original.

Where mis-spellings have been detected in the original, these have been silently corrected.

Participants' speech as transcript often ignores spelling and grammar conventions in order to give, as closely as possible, a faithful rendering of the unique voices heard and captured as oral data.

In extracts of transcribed data, RF is used to mark the interventions of the Researcher/Facilitator.

Names of the participants have been changed to protect their anonymity as required by research ethics.

Tables and Figures

Table 5.1 Total group profile, Oak Park participants, 2013

Figure 0.1 Honesty among Australian politicians (Pickering, Golding, undated)

Figure 2.1 Quoting John Howard 2006 (Julie Shiels, 2014)

Figure 3.1 The Sound of Democracy (Michael Leunig, 2013)

Figure 7.1 The Listener (Jack Chadwick, 2012)

INTRODUCTION

Where's democracy in this country? I'm yet to find it.

Project participant, Robert, 2013

The Melbourne suburb of Oak Park perfectly reflects the average Australian community in terms of household size, mortgage stress experienced by its residents, educational qualifications, numbers born overseas and degree of social disadvantage. It is a pocket suburb of fewer than 6000 residents tucked in by the larger suburbs of Glenroy and Pascoe Vale and, on its western flank, by the major CityLink tollway that services the airports and Melbourne's newer suburbs to the north and west. In terms of its political geography, Oak Park is situated within the City of Moreland, the State electorate of Pascoe Vale and the Federal Division of Wills. Electors have a history of selecting Labor Party candidates to represent their interests.

In Oak Park we instituted a new research strategy designed to elicit what 'ordinary' Australians – I will return to explain my use of this term later in the chapter – think about the current state of politics and of the democratic discourse in particular. The strategy employed newly devised methods – Polling Booth Participant Recruitment (PBPR), same-day data gathering (SDDG) and wide-scope discussion groups. At the implementation level this involved recruitment of a cohort of prospective participants from electors as they turned out to vote at the main Oak Park polling booth on Election Day 2013. A month later, 18 willing participants met in three discussion groups facilitated by the researcher to talk politics. This same-day data gathering, deliberately avoiding the use of focus group style prompts, produced three sets of video-recordings of free-ranging political discussion. These primary data sets were transcribed by the researcher, and both audio-visual and written transcripts were used in analysis.

The strategic intention of this methodological approach was to ensure that the discussion was as natural (without artificiality) as possible. It would be a brave researcher as discussion facilitator who made a claim of *natural* data collection and I make no such claim. The point being made at the outset is that participants contributed to this project relying on their own lived experience as receivers of the political discourse. No amount of received discourse was too much or too little for valid participation in the research. Conducting the data-gathering on the same day ensured, as closely as possible, that all participants had the same potential for exposure

to the same events and issues driving political discourse to that point in time. No prompts were used to focus attention on certain events or discourse highlights. The data as discussion was constituted by the participants' individual preferences or habits of engagement with the political discourse. The research participants, having been fully informed about the research project in accordance with University Ethics Committee Approvals (see Appendix I), were aware of the topic for discussion. As long as they stayed within the broad topic, the initiative was theirs to take the discussion where it interested them. This wide-scope group method deliberately sets out to generate dynamic interaction between participants and create a wider range of opportunities than those offered by focus groups for exploring a variety of pathways and discovering the unexpected:

Charles Well, the game changer is the internet obviously. So now there's a multitude of voices and, yes, you do have to drill down and, yes, it's one of those things where you know yes, you've got so much more news now in a way. But you, unless you've got the capability, the training and the time to go through all that it's very hard. So you are still in many ways reliant on mainstream media for the bulk of people, you know. And that is that danger of concentration. Is that one of the things that you're looking at? Media concentration?

RF Not specifically. But I'm interested in it because you're interested to raise it. That makes it interesting to me.

Australia as a democracy of interest

Australia as a nation has been infamously described as 'the arse end of the earth' by one of its own Prime Ministers (Milliken, 1994). Despite being geographically challenged, as a small nation of the southern hemisphere Australia is recognised as a nineteenth century innovator in democracy (Markoff, 1999). Regarded as one of the lesser players on the world stage, Australia and others such as its neighbour, New Zealand, may have been considered less rewarding as research sites for comparativists looking for distinct national cases to test their ideas. But historian John Markoff makes the argument that for the past two centuries the great innovations in the invention of democratic institutions have generally not taken place in the world's centres of wealth and power. He cites Australia's lead in the uniform requirement of the secret ballot in 1856 such that it was referenced internationally as the 'Australian ballot' (p. 676); and after New Zealand, Australia was ahead of the more established democracies in granting women the

right to vote in all elections in all of its newly-federated states (1902). Markoff's added contribution to the view – that democratisation is not a single thing, but a collection of things (Dunn, 2005) – is that these many things are 'born in different places' (p. 685).

To these earlier democratic innovations, in 1926 Australia added compulsory voting as a cornerstone of its democratisation. It stands apart from the more experienced democracies of Britain, France and the United States as one of the few nations to do so. Compulsory voting has a significant influence on the production and reception of political discourse. At the macro level, it negates the demand for a political campaign discourse that must first motivate citizens to turn out to vote. In making Australian political discourse, the producers can presume that the receivers are going to vote. For the receivers, the discourse received is a constant reminder of their periodic obligation to choose how and by whom they are governed. It is arguable that making sense of the political discourse demands closer attention from the Australian citizen than is the case for her counterparts in the 'greater' democracies. It follows that Australian democracy calls for a nuanced view of what constitutes engagement and participation. Arguing for voter turn-out as a proxy for political engagement, for example, is a less compelling argument in the Australian context than in most other liberal democracies. In this present project, attitudes to compulsory voting in Australia are of interest as a pointer to how democratic discourse is received. Compulsory voting can also be expected to act as brake on disengagement. It is in both its innovative past and prospects that Australia stakes claim to be a democracy of interest, and its people citizens of interest. So while this research project has a distinctly Australian accent, heard through the work of political historians who have tracked its beginnings and progress, the views of contemporary commentators and the voices of the project participants, it can be expected to be of interest and make a contribution to the international field of political communication.

Hearing ordinary voices

Of particular interest here is how ordinary citizens, as receivers of contemporary political discourse, make sense of that discourse, and how their sense-making affects their engagement with democracy. Of related interest is the pursuit of a methodology that enables citizens to speak for themselves in their own words, with plenty of room to explain and expand upon what they say. Pursuit of these interests has led me to the invention and implementation of a qualitative methodology designed to turn up the volume of ordinary voices in political

communications research. In this respect it follows the works of Brett and Moran (2006) and Andrews (1991, 2008, 2007). It borrows from Brett and Moran the valorisation of Australian ordinariness in the title cited, *Ordinary People's Politics*. In the context of this work, 'ordinary' is intended to mean non-elite, and refers to citizens who consider themselves to be outside the political, media and corporate elite who are understood to be the shapers of politics, setters of the political agenda and producers of the national political discourse.

Traditionally, it has been the role of ordinary people to be audience for political performance (Atkinson, 1988). By putting ordinary citizens at centre stage, and encouraged by Andrews (2007), this project strives to respect the researcher's privileged role as listener and audience before approaching the task of analysis as treating with care the material of other people's lives. The project also offers a balancing contribution to that genre of political communications research where the focus is typically on the producers and the production side of political discourse. Having made that point, and as if to immediately contradict it, this thesis acknowledges the emerging potential for citizens to be receivers/producers in the twenty-first century networked society.

The temporal context for listening more closely to ordinary Australians is significant from two perspectives. First, it is a period of recognised incivility in Australia's political discourse (Aly, 2013; CHASS, 2013; Guthrie, 2013; Leigh, 2013; Pickering, 2013; The Age, 2012; Trioli, 2013; D. Watson, 2003; J. Watson, 2013). This incivility is produced and led, at least in part, by sections of the media and it is not yet fully clear how ordinary citizens are receiving and responding to this shift in the political discourse. Second, the early years of the twenty-first century are marked as a period of unprecedented change in global communications technologies. News in print is old media. New media start-ups are, with rare exception, online productions.¹ Adults without access to the internet via mobile devices are the exception rather than the rule. Governments and instrumentalities increasingly require citizen clients to communicate with them via the internet. Citizens are organising collective actions online without ever meeting face to face. These and more technology-driven changes are having impacts on conceptions of public space and challenging the established concept of evolutionary change from age to age of political communication (Blumler, 2013; Castells, 2013; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011). It is this space/time ecological context that challenges the concept of the

¹ An Australian exception is *The Saturday Paper* launched as a weekly in print and online on 1 March 2014.

receiver in political communication and blurs the once clear definitional lines between reception and production.

Introductory concepts

Sense-making as a research methodology seeks to better understand communication from a more communicative (dialogic) perspective (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003). Communication methodologist Brenda Dervin's approach is useful not only for rethinking communication from the perspective of the researcher. It is also useful in understanding communication reception as a valuing of messages 'only to the extent that they can be understood within the context of receivers' lives' (p. 5). Sense-making is situational. As a reception process, it involves paying attention to situation, and identifying gaps in cognition. It can be both a private and public processing activity. Given this, the receiver as sense-maker is both private thinker/wonderer and public audience/performer. In this work, the receiver in political discourse is imagined as standing at the heart of discourse within a public realm, taking in language, sounds and images, and thinking, wondering, speaking and performing. She is one of the masses, a non-elite. She is marked out as 'ordinary' only for the purpose of addressing her as distinctively other than one who, by virtue of role, status or circumstance, stands among a minority elite with above-ordinary access to power and influence over the production of the dominant political discourse. It is standard for communications research to value the receiver as a survey respondent, a voter to be won over in an election campaign, a target in an audience segment to be persuaded or manipulated. In each of these guises, the receiver is of interest for the purposes important to the discourse producers and senders of messages. Receivers are audience to be played upon and prompted to applaud (Atkinson, 1988) or subjects to be manipulated or persuaded (Luntz, 2007; Packard, 1960). In commissioning surveys, the idea is to get the receivers and producers onto the same page, where the page is the one constructed by the producers (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003):

The objective of such research is to determine if the receivers actually received the message and responded to it as intended; and, if not, why not. Receivers who don't get the message are perceived to be somehow deficient or disinterested or recalcitrant (p. 5).

Dervin (2003) encourages research that reconceptualises audience:

The thing about conceptions of audiences is that no one conception is right or wrong, merely different in usefulness within stated confines. The traditional conception of audiences based on information-as-thing idea was useful within its confines. It shows clearly, for example, that most people were not tuning in to sources on sources' terms. The utility of an alternative conception of audiences based on the information-as-construction idea is that it may suggest ways for sources to tune into receivers on receivers' terms (p. 211).

The alternative conceptualisation is favoured in this thesis. It accepts that any line between the roles of receiver and sender is a blurred one. It recognises the receiver first and foremost as an essential participant in the discourse-making process. It accepts that receivers have 'terms' and is interested in what these might be and how they are formulated. In a truly democratic polity, the ordinary citizen is not confined as receiver but co-creator of political discourse. As such, she can be, and is respected as, both receiver and sender/producer in discourse making. She is further respected for the meaning she finds, her sense-making of communications received, and for the meaning in her responses. Her language and utterances are listened to as authentic contributions to discourse. She has her terms of engagement and she is a contributing source to the common sense. The thesis uses the term 'citizen receiver' for its usefulness in conveying this alternative conceptualisation and its importance to making democracy.

There is another conceptualisation of receivers of political discourse that fits with their role as consumers in what is also a highly consumerised society. For the receiver as consumer, the discourse is constructed with layers of marketing messages produced to push the 'right' buttons. It also fits with the concept of the receiver as a passive vessel that can be filled or topped up with information and the 'right' messages. It is already well argued that politicians and political messages have become products to be sold to voters (Luntz, 2007; Packard, 1960). This thesis accepts the proposition that there is much in political discourse to be consumed and that the receiver may be validly treated as 'consumer' in a society where consumption has grasped the whole of life (Baudrillard, 1998). Consumer freedom of choice is embedded with the freedom and liberty of democracy. Therefore, the term 'consumer' or 'citizen consumer' is used at times when the thesis addresses issues and tensions that emerge between democratic freedom and consumer freedom.

The term 'producer' is used most often in this work when dealing with the pre-internet era of 'old' or 'heritage' media in the context of mediated political discourse. The producer is

conceptualised as one of a select few with acquired power to construct and produce the discourse. The power comes primarily from representative authority, from ownership and control of the means of production and distribution of mediated discourse, or from influence gained by wealth or opinion over the representative authority. Producers can be understood to hold various positions and roles, prominent among them being those of politician, political adviser, media proprietor, media commentator, journalist, corporate lobbyist, or think tank specialist. By virtue of authority, control or influence, producers are able to set the agenda for political discourse. Agenda-setting includes both disseminating and withholding information and comment that builds the content of discourse. As political discourse producers, the professionalised political and media elite enjoyed a powerful partnership in making the twentieth century democracies. But the digital age of the twenty-first century has seen that old power balance upset by a defining shift in access by the masses to the means of discourse production. The pre-digital age concept of ‘producer = elite’ is not yet invalid, particularly in research examining the nature and effects of transition from ‘old’ to ‘new’ media; however, it is fast becoming a concept with historical but limited practical application for understanding contemporary dynamics in political communication.

The coming of the internet has blurred the lines between the roles of receiver and producer. It has created new opportunities for citizens to be both receivers and producers. The significant gain for receivers is access to the means of discourse production and distribution. Twentieth century receivers of the political discourse have acquired the means to become twenty-first century receiver/producers. Citizens – who may have done their civic duty each day as receivers reading the political news in the daily papers in anticipation of exercising their voter responsibility – now have the potential to make political discourse in the dominant public sphere or in a spin-off sphere of a counterpublic. In this work, the term ‘receiver/producer’ or ‘twenty-first century citizen receiver’ is used to infuse the text with meaning of that potential. It imagines the re-birthing of an opinionated atmosphere akin to that of seventeenth century coffee houses as sites where newspapers were read in company and treated as prompts for lively debate and political association.

Central to the aim of this thesis is to better understand received discourse effects on democratic engagement. The term ‘democratic engagement’ is used often in the literature to stand for ‘participation’, which is for social democrats a gauge of a healthy democracy (Hoskins, 2013; Leigh, 2010; Putnam, 2001). When the term ‘engagement’ is used here, it has an intended qualification meant to provide for *an investment of interest in politics that disproves*

passivity but may fall short of demonstrable public activity. It is a particularly useful nuancing in a discussion of Australian democracy since it avoids the danger of concluding that, because around 95 per cent of eligible citizens vote in national elections, the Australian citizenry must be highly active and the polity a highly successful participatory democracy. It also serves as a definition of engagement in a twenty-first century networked society context: it recognises the ‘hidden’ civic interest emerging in networked societies where the internet gives unprecedented access to seemingly unlimited amounts of information about politics, the people in politics and the people commenting about both. Networking citizens may never join an association, participate in a campaign, or sign a petition – even an online petition – but they may be interested in knowing about the process and progress of democracy. The networked society facilitates that interest. Through this definitional approach, engagement has broad application. As a definition, ‘dis-engagement’ is treated narrowly as an absence of interest. In the Australian polity, dis-engagement is no impediment to voting since, engaged or disengaged, Australians are obliged to vote, to perform as citizens. When democracy made with a thoroughly contemporary Australian accent is investigated using these definitions, it offers new perspectives for understanding democratic engagement.

Thesis outline

The core of this thesis consists in two parts. Part A – *Democracy, Discourse and Reception as Sense-making* – contains four chapters that address the key themes and issues raised by and in response to the research question. The dominant themes here surround the historical ideals and practical developments in the making of democracy, and concepts of citizenship and accountability in representative politics. The major contextual issues addressed are those discerned for shaping a society wedded to capitalism and consumerism, where mediatisation drives institutional, social and individual behaviours, and globalisation challenges the concepts of the nation-state and the changing nature of government. Neoliberalism as the globalised political rationality embraced by western capitalist countries is explored for its effects on democracy and citizenship. A case study of recent Australian political discourse exemplifies the problem that prompts the thesis question. It is a narrative of tension between enduring themes of democratic self-government for the common wealth and the contextual realities of neoliberal politics that invests first and foremost in the enterprising individual. When the political discourse is loaded with such tensions, how does one make sense of it all? Part A concludes by exploring inner and outer sense-making through cognition, language and framing

in political discourse. Specifically, Chapter 1 examines the making of democracy and discourse, each being an ongoing process influencing the making of the other. It goes back to basics by reviewing the models of Athenian, Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment self-government, seeking to identify enduring characteristics in the making and re-making of democracy and democratic discourse. Chapter 2 seeks to describe the context for receiving democratic discourse. It considers consumerisation, mediatisation and globalisation on account of their ubiquity in western neoliberal democracies and explores them as dominant influences on making political discourse. Although these influences are unconstrained by nation-state borders, there are local factors at play in the creation of democratic polities like Australia, so this is examined in Chapter 3. It is presented as a case study of problematic political discourse. Prompted by talk of ‘dumbing down’ and being ‘dumbed down’ by the discourse, Chapter 4 goes to the literature that might easily have been more comfortably reviewed by a social psychology researcher. Nevertheless, the possibility that exposure to a persistent type or quality of discourse to affect the cognitive capacities or behaviours of a receiver of that discourse emerged during this political communication project. The possibility could not be ignored – although the reader will recognise a tentativeness in this exploration of sense-making as a complexity that involves the working of the brain and processes of the mind. It takes an inner and outer view of the processing of meaning, drawing from the fields of cognitive science, language analysis and political communication. In summary, this part is a drawing together of what is held in the literature of the great thinkers about birthing democracy such as Plato, Hobbes and de Tocqueville; of more recent minds that have grappled with the dilemmas emerging from democracy in practice such as Rawls and Arendt, and the difficulty in defining democracy such as Dunn; of contributors such as Nader and Packard addressing the challenge to democracy from the marketplace; of Blumler and Castells who have marked out the major social and technological influences on political communication; and of the contemporary researchers and commentators including Brett and Moran, Megalogenis, Soutphommasane, Marr and Tanner who have reflected upon the Australian making of democracy and democratic discourse. This first part acts as light source for conduct and analysis of the work detailed in Part B.

Part B – *Hearing Voices* – comprises three chapters documenting the detailed empirical work of the project. The development and innovative use of the method, combining polling booth recruitment of participants, same-day data gathering and wide-scope group discussion, are described in detail and critically assessed. The voices of the project participants are heard

at length in this section. What they have to say and how they say it are analysed. The findings of overwhelming negativity in tones of evaluation, the themes of powerlessness and lack of respect for citizens are discussed in light of the body of knowledge explored in Part A. Beginning at Chapter 5, Part B presents the methodology devised for this project. It describes the development, planning and conduct of recruitment of citizens attending their local polling booth to be the project participants. It then outlines an alternative method aiming for a natural (that is, not highly managed) environment for data collection. The method relies on wide-scope groups meeting on the same day with minimal prompts to discuss, largely on their terms, what lies at the core of the research question. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the pros and cons of this innovative approach to methodology. Chapter 6 is primarily constituted by the 18 voices of the project participants. It puts on the record their direct words and expressions as primary evidence of ordinary citizens making sense of the political discourse, as they receive it. In having their say, they diagnose contemporary discourse and model how mainstream political discourse might be done differently. They find the discourse overwhelmingly negative. It makes them feel powerless, voiceless, not recognised and not respected. They suggest ways politics can be done better. Chapter 7 is a discussion of these findings, reflecting on what has been revealed by asking: ‘Do you hear what I hear?’ It discusses discourse as counterpublicity and as a signal of de-democratisation. This discussion chapter then makes a deliberate shift to imagine what might be the future for citizen engagement with democracy. The final chapter of the thesis draws conclusions about how citizen audiences in the process of becoming receiver/producers of democratic discourse make sense of the discourse and of their engagement with twenty-first century democracy. In conclusion, this chapter reflects on the project for its contribution to the field of political communication and as a response to the ongoing challenge for innovation in qualitative research methodologies.

Part A: DEMOCRACY, DISCOURSE AND RECEPTION AS SENSE-MAKING

Chapter 1

‘To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence.’

Hannah Arendt
The Human Condition (p26).

Making Democracy ↔ Making Discourse

This project assumes the position asserted by Arendt, quoted above, that there is a powerful interdependence between the political and the parley in democracy. It is a position institutionalised by the enduring brand of *parliamentary* democracy that uses terms and meanings derived from the Old French *parler*, to talk. A polity like Australia, then, is a democracy powered by the political discourse. A perception of decline in the political discourse, as is the contemporary case in Australia, necessarily raises questions about possible impacts on democracy itself. Responsibility for making the discourse in the classical birthplace of democracy was a shared responsibility among all Athenian citizens who were expected to speak for themselves; they were trained in the skills of rhetoric (Pascoe, 2013b) empowering them in the art of persuasion. As this chapter explores the making of democracy through key moments in political history, especially the rise of representative democracy, it looks at how the centrality given to political discourse and citizen power has fared. The principles of rhetoric laid out by Aristotle in the context of the fledgling direct democracy presumed a citizen audience listening to the speeches of noble and virtuous men. The Agora in Athens and, later, the Forum in Rome were the designated places of production and reception of public discourse. This chapter explores what is known about the receivers and producers of discourse and the political public space in representative democracies like Australia. In particular, it pays attention to concepts of citizenship and looks for manifestations of change in the nature of citizen engagement with democracy.

The People are Citizens²

The unambiguous statement that in Australia ‘the people are citizens’ (Civics Expert Group, 1994) is rhetorical flourish belying the fact that the word ‘citizen’ is entirely absent from the nation’s Constitution (Davidson, 1997; Osborne & Lewis, 1995, 2001). That doesn’t stop Australians from behaving like the citizens of other participatory democracies by, broadly speaking, claiming their status and entitlements to have a say in how they are governed and to enjoy the benefits that flow from their style of government. Unlike citizens in similar representative democracies, Australians are voters by obligation. Legislation in 1924 made it compulsory for adult citizens (although indigenous persons were not included until 1962-1965) to register to vote and to attend the polling booth³ at each election to receive a ballot paper. Consistent with liberal democratic principles, what they then do with the ballot is a matter of individual freedom. The majority make a mark, usually in support of one or the other major political party. Having done their civic duty, Australian citizens can opt to do nothing more until the next election looms. Those who want to be part of the democratic process between elections do so with little or no prescription. They make their way relying on political institutions inherited from their predominantly Anglo-Celtic roots and aspirations absorbed through media and entertainments promoting the American model of democracy as the ideal for free, self-governing people.

Democracy had its 2500th anniversary in 1994 (Warden, 1995) counting back to its conception in classical Greece (Dunn, 2005; Lane, 2014). In its original Athenian construct, what later became recognised as the first democratic polity was a place-based, self-governing political community within the wider Greek city-state. By vesting political authority in the community rather than kinship, power shifted from relatives to residents (Reilly, 2007). Athenian democracy bore little resemblance to the universal suffrage system of government characteristic of modern democracies. For the ancients, it was not a governing system of *all* the people, for *all* the people. In the *polis* of classical democracy, there were *haves* and *have nots*. Only those on whom citizenship was conferred – certainly neither women nor slaves – constituted the body politic that was permitted to debate and deliberate on what was required

² Closing sentence of the introductory paragraph to *Whereas the people: civics and citizenship education*, the Report of the Civics Expert Group (1994) commissioned by the Australian Government to prepare a program of public education on civic issues.

³ Applications for postal ballots may be made by those registered citizens unable to attend in person for reasons related to age or poor health. Pre-polling operates to accommodate those travelling, in remote locations or overseas. In reality, increasing numbers use both postal ballots and pre-polling stations to avoid the crowded inconvenience of Election Day polling booths.

for the good of the citizenry (Dunn, 2005; Mahajan, 2013). The concepts of *polis* and citizenship constructed in ancient Athens were driven by the humiliating experience of defeats in war and the need for stability in the midst of Athens' Persian enemies (Borowiak, 2011). The Greek philosopher schools were engrossed in trying to establish the conditions necessary for 'a flourishing life' (Plato, 2007) and the virtues required for 'the good and honourable life' (Aristotle). The Athenians among the many ancient city-states were looking for a system of rule that was free of corruption and despotism and allowed for Athens' development as a centre of trade and naval power. For Aristotle – who collected and studied 158 constitutions (Ropes Loomis, 1943) in search of the ideal – the task then was about 'what form of political community is best for all those who are most able to realize their ideal of life' (p. 270). But it wasn't the philosophers who devised the solution of *demokratia*; indeed, Plato and Aristotle were among its fiercest critics. The Athenians' system of citizen-rule, attributed to the nobleman Kleisthenes (Dunn, 2005), was based on the equality of citizens, wealthy or otherwise, and was deeply reliant for its stability on a requirement for citizen accountability as a means of people power. By placing emphasis on the freedom of the individual and the voting power of the Assembly, Athenians aimed at preventing power being cornered by a particular group; this was no place for party politics (Pascoe, 2013a). For historian Robert Pascoe, the radicalism of democracy was in the invention of citizenship that 'meant that elites could not claim any special connection with the gods' (p. 108). The connections that would matter in the democratic city-state would be the connections between free citizens. Historian Craig Borowiak (2011) highlights 'this relational concept: one is accountable to others' (p. 88); in this sense, mutual accountability of citizens constitutes the political community. Accountability for Athenians meant holding public officials (although not Assembly members) to account and, when their own turn in public service came around, themselves being held to account. Public office positions turned over yearly in most cases, with most male citizens participating in the rotation during their lifetime. So it was a highly participatory form of self-rule without being popular representative rule (Pitkin, 1967). Public hearings would be held during the term of office to ensure the role was being performed to expectation. Another would be held at the end of the non-renewable one-year term. Failure to pass the public evaluation test could mean loss of citizenship and civic rights, exile or even death. So public performance was serious civic business with all citizens engaged and involved in one side or the other of the appraisal process. Public accountability applied to all citizens. Each could expect to appear before others in public and, in turn, have others appear before him. It regulated behaviour and established norms of citizenship. This accountability process was, Borowiak (2011) emphasises, necessarily public:

Such publicity helped ensure that wrongful behaviour would be exposed: through public scrutiny and debate the truth would presumably be learned and justice would be delivered. If the rise of the democratic *polis* marked a shift away from the secret power of monarchs and priests, the rule of the people marked a commitment to the publicity of power. For officials to be held accountable meant that they were to stand before the public gaze, face public accusation, publicly justify themselves, and face potentially grave consequences (p. 86).

Honourable performance and justice were deliverable, not token expectations. The early making of democracy set out what was required of citizens and public office holders and what they could expect in return.

A cornerstone of the Greek *polis* was public speaking and incessant public talk among citizens (Villa, 1999). A legacy of the Athenian polity is the emphasis on speech as a means of persuasion and Aristotelian rhetoric endures as a political art (Arendt, 1958):

To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence...[It was] a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other (pp. 26-27).

Dunn (2005) agrees on the centrality of persuasion to the practice of democracy in Athens. He cites ‘the direct force of persuasion, exercised on innumerable and overwhelmingly public occasions’ (p. 132) as the means by which political leaders held or lost control over the city’s political decisions. Such oratory demands an audience, and the audience held the collective political power. While rhetoric and oratory was an art developed and practiced in the Greek Assembly, beyond the Assembly citizens were required by the accountability process to speak out and be heard publicly questioning and explaining. The citizen’s voice was fundamental to the earliest practice of self-rule. Speech was the medium of political deliberation – and of action (Couldry, 2010). Arendt also couples speech with action, both of which ‘need the surrounding presence of others’ (p. 188). Publicity is central to democracy.

In this first modelling of democracy, citizenship had to be deserved, and demonstrably so. It required performance – active participation, that is, use of citizenship status – and such performance was built around acceptance of equality within the accountability process and equality of voices in debate. There was no place for passivity – no apparent silent majority – in the Athenian *polis*. The concept of citizenship embodied participation in civic discourse. All this was practicable because the body of citizens lived in proximity to one another; it was a

bounded *polis*. But history records that Athenian democracy didn't last; for Pascoe (2013a), it 'sputtered out'.

Roman conquests and domination of the Mediterranean region meant Greek ideas flowed into Rome (Lane, 2014) and influenced the 'complex constitution consisting of the balanced competition' of kingship, aristocracy and democracy (p. 261). The philosophers, Cicero and Seneca, for example, and later in the second century, the Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, adopted Stoicism from the Greeks as a guide to living ethically and with virtue as a citizen of the Roman empire (Stokes, 2008). Rome experimented with Greek ideas of equality, citizenship and accountability yet the two regimes remained significantly different so that comparisons have been made and conclusions drawn from both fields of governmental experience (Lane, 2014):

Athens and Rome furnish vivid models of the strengths, if also the weaknesses, of democratic and republican regimes: they readily impress observers with the wealth and power that they gained at their zeniths; with their staying power as regimes, roughly 200 years in Athens and more like half a millennium in Rome; with the remarkable art, architecture, literature and scientific ingenuity that they attracted and produced. Yet to the critical eyes of Plato and Aristotle especially, all this power was deployed to profoundly wrong ends. It was used to serve private ambition and public aggrandisement, rather than to cultivate ethical self-control and justice, or to pursue knowledge of how to live. The message of these philosophers is that with power comes responsibility. It is futile and often self-defeating to pursue power without a clear idea of the good that it can bring; to clarify that, however, requires the pursuit of knowledge of the good as the most fundamental aim of all (p. 321).

It was not until more than a millennium later in Europe and medieval England in particular that forms of citizenship and representative rule made a comeback of enduring significance, initially through the instrument of the Magna Carta (Kiser & Barzel, 1991). The history surrounding the 1215 and subsequent iterations of the Magna Carta is well recorded (and popularly celebrated by British tourism www.britainmagazine.com in the 800th anniversary year of its signing). Historians Edgar Kiser and Yoram Barzel contend the significance of the Magna Carta was that it served as a model for the constitutions of other countries. The English Parliament, a protodemocratic institution giving voting and other rights to subsets of the populace, also established a model for medieval Western Europe where representatives were drawn from outside the landed nobility (Downing, 1989): 'Citizenship

found its expression in participatory government and in the chartered liberties of village communes and frontier settlements' (p. 243).

Medieval power sharing was more of a co-operative necessity between rulers in need of raising taxes and those with wealth-generating potential and an understandable interest in keeping the appetite for taxation under some level of constraint (Kiser & Barzel, 1991). As with the Athenian experiment, this attempt at orderly government proved fragile. Political scientist Brian Downing finds that the pre-democratic medieval constitutionalism didn't survive in many parts of Europe. However, its continuity in England provided the critical components of representation, citizenship, checks and balances on absolute power, and the rule of law as a basis for what is later described as liberal democracy.

English constitutionalism effectively reversed the relationship between the state, as an entity to manage society by an absolute ruler, and the population (Poggi, 2013):

Far from society being treated as an object of political management by a state operating chiefly in the light of interests exclusive to itself and to which those of society had to be subordinated, the state itself had to become an instrumentality of society's autonomous, self-regulating development. The state's very existence, and its mode of operation, would have to seek justification in the extent to which it allowed that development to unfold according to its own logic, rather than imperiously directing it and bending it to the state's own ends. This reversed relationship between state and society required in the first place that state power be constrained, rather than absolute (pp. 53-4).

The English polity managed this relationship reversal better than continental European states (Poggi, 2013). Significant to this success was the rise in the seventeenth century of an opinionated public in clubs and coffee houses arguing openly over issues published in newspapers and periodicals. Perhaps even more significantly, the English Parliament, in its make-up and distinctive bench seating arrangements, had not just accommodated dissent but legitimised opposition. It became the model for parliamentary democracy.

During this period of innovation in constitutional rule and government, the Florentine public servant and diplomat, Machiavelli, was a close observer and analyst of Italian and European politics. His reputation endures through the often quoted, simplified summary of his political theory (Bondanella & Musa, 1978; Harris, 2007) that 'the ends justify the means'. Famed through the ages for his authorship of *The Prince* (1573), Machiavelli was 'basically a republican, who saw the state as a secular and autonomous structure relying for its survival upon

human skills and mass support' (Harris, 2007). In *The Discourses* (1531), Machiavelli makes clear his view that the masses can be relied upon to be wiser and more constant than princely rulers (Chapter LVIII). From his observations, the people exercised better judgment and were capable of making better choices and fewer errors (Machiavelli, [1531] 1979):

As for its judgment in various matters, when the people hear two equally able speakers, each arguing different opinions, only very rarely does it happen that they do not choose the better opinion and are incapable of understanding the truth of what they hear (p. 284).

As a critic of Roman social virtues, Machiavelli placed his confidence in the men of the republic understanding 'the truth of what they hear' rather than in the moral tradition of personal loyalties and trust or *fides* cementing bonds of duty and reciprocity between leaders and followers (Clarke, 2013). Rather than deference to authority based on *fides*, citizenship in the ideal of republican government required holding political leaders to account through the public discourse (Machiavelli, [1531] 1979):

Well-organised republics encourage other citizens to proclaim publicly a candidate's faults in order to warn the people before they make their choice. When the people has enough information, it judges men running for offices better than princes do (p. 407).

Machiavelli's contribution to the art of government is contested: Foucault, no less, in his 1978 course at the College de France is interpreted as rejecting any conception of Machiavelli as the father of historico-political discourse (Senellart, 2013) and casts him more simply as a man marking the end of an age dominated by the prince and sovereign rule. For others, however, as Sennellart's contribution to debate over the true nature of Machiavellianism argues, he anticipates modern liberal republicanism (Vujadinovic, 2014), remains relevant as a theorist of citizenship, the bounded and contained nature of politics and the limits of political power (Clarke, 2013), and is a source of insights into the realities of power and decision-making in the modern public affairs industry (Harris, 2007).

In similar vein to Machiavelli, whose reputation is forever linked to something he may or may not have intended to say, is Hobbes ([1651] 1952), most likely brought to mind by his misquoted characterisation of life as 'nasty, brutish and short'. In truth, he observed that life in the state of nature was 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short' and he was concerned with how that solitary life could be improved. He imagined the creation of the 'great Leviathan called a Commonwealth or State (in Latin, *civitas*), which is but an artificial man, though of greater

stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended' (p. 47). As Machiavelli can be remarked upon as a republican who wrote about princely power, Hobbes is notable as a staunch monarchist who nevertheless defined the essence of collective authority and power in the institution of the political Commonwealth. It is from his legacy that the concept of the social contract emerges where, in return for the prospect of a more communal, improved, not so nasty or brutish and potentially longer life, individuals holding natural power forgo some of that personal freedom and submit themselves to the Leviathan as the holder of their combined multitude of power. Hobbes' construction of the Leviathan was by intent to hold the subjects of the State in awe of its power and, being in awe, to comply with the State's demands for resourcing their own defence. It was an anti-democratic construct. It would work through authorisation of the sovereign to act on behalf of individuals who then had no way of disowning actions taken on their behalf (Runciman, 2010). Once authorised, there was no issue of accountability. To require accountability in return for authorising representative government was to invite consideration of concepts of electoral representation and responsive representation. It was not Hobbes' intention to revive the democracy of the Athenians but, in effect, his concept of a Commonwealth permitted a reformulation of the same question with which the Athenians had grappled – how are we to live?

Democracy re-imagined

By the time of what is considered to be democracy's second coming (Dunn, 2005), populations, boundaries and states had changed dramatically. The known world was a bigger place, a larger stage than the city-state, a more challenging environment to keep secure and in which to maintain order. The idea formulated in the seventeenth century was that large government of a state with all its problems could be modelled on the way the city-state once was governed (Rabinow, 2010). In the eighteenth century, the re-imagining of self-government became more urgent and aggressive when dissatisfaction with monarchical and distant power led to revolution in the New World of the American colonies and in the Old World, in France in particular. So how did democracy's demand for an active and vocal citizenry fare in the second coming of democratic rule fuelled by these revolutionary spirits in America and Europe?

As a form of self-government, the democracy of the Republic was driven by ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity (solidarity) as the French would have it, and the pursuit of happiness as it was envisioned by the Americans. In the New World, the freedom of being a

long way from their old homes under aristocratic dominion was worth fighting for. Indeed, the very nature of the well-educated Pilgrims fleeing persecution and other adventurous immigrants, together with the unsuitability of the land in the northern colonies for master-tenant farmer territorial aristocracy (Tocqueville, [1863] 2004), were cause for establishing laws ensuring freedoms based on equality. This Tocquevillian thesis, that America has been shaped by these free and egalitarian ideas and the prevailing material conditions, has been challenged in part on the basis of the numbers of women and non-whites excluded from full civic participation (Smith, 2003). Nevertheless, the non-hierarchical American ideal nurtured republican and liberal ideas of citizenship. Under the civic republican model based on Greek and Roman philosophical thought, there was a need for citizens to act politically within the public sphere and to be actively engaged in their political community (Hoskins, 2013). Explicit value was placed on public spiritedness, solidarity, and the responsibility to act for the common good. Political theorist Bryony Hoskins contends that at the core of civic republicanism is a belief in the importance of political engagement. The liberal model based on individual liberty and implied self-interest makes fewer demands. Citizens might be encouraged to exercise their right to vote, for example, but it was the right of the autonomous and free citizen to participate or not as the case may be. In either case, the spread and natural inequalities of the whole citizenry in the 'new' democracies created challenges for participation in terms of accessibility to the process and citizen competency.

The New World constitutional democracy 'made' many more citizens on the basis that giving power to the whole people (original exclusions aside) would deliver the nearest possible expression of universal reason and justice (Wiebe, 1995). However, permitting citizenship on a large scale had the consequence of separating citizens from the everyday exercise of governance playing out some distance from them (Borowiak, 2011). For practical reasons and convenience, political representation offered a way forward but it was a highly contested model (Pitkin, 1967). The Hobbesian concept of representation, for example, as a once-and-for-all event of authorisation was not an acceptable model for individuals wanting to retain the capacity to object to what is done by the state in their name (Downing, 1989). Again, as Pitkin steps through the various arguments (1967) about representation of person or interest, obeying the will of the people or acting wisely as an elite participant present in the debate and arena of deliberation, obligation to the national good or the home constituents, representative government had mixed success – short-lived in France but surviving and apparently thriving in the new world (Tocqueville, [1863] 2004).

Representative democracy, while claiming the authority *of* the people, was at the same time less visibly accountable *to* the people between elections. In reality, citizens ceded aspects of individual power to a power elite and the nature and scope of citizen participation became a variable within the democratic process. Performance of citizenship could be reduced to voting or even less than that where voting was optional. Accountable government no longer required the presence or active voice of the citizen in public debate. The citizen's voice was effectively subsumed by the vote.

Representation 'freed' citizens of the burdens of personal performance, accountability and deliberative public debate in the American version of government by and for the people. Freedom would shape the new democracy (Wiebe, 1995):

Democracy's radical new principle was self-rule: people ruled themselves collectively, people ruled themselves individually. In a very general way, the twin roots of democracy separated along those two channels. Self-defined authority gave white men the mandate to rule collectively; self-directed work gave them the freedom to strike out individually. From one trunk came community self-governance, from the other economic self-determination. Exceptions abounded: a multitude of communities committed themselves to developing their economies, a multitude of individuals to improving their characters. Nevertheless, in the brazenly, vibrantly petty bourgeois world of early 19th century America, white men tended to measure their individual freedom by economic means, just as they measured their collective authority by political means (pp. 39-40).

This entwining of the economic and the political suggested a duality in the re-imagining of citizenship. A citizen could adopt an outward-looking community focus or an inward attention to individual well-being. In effect, citizenship became a blurred notion with no clear definition of what was expected or required in terms of individual participation. Nineteenth century liberalism was preoccupied with economic progress where each citizen would be free to realize his aims and develop his individual capacities to the full (Fawcett, 2014). Individualism was, in a sense, more important than direct democracy. Economic opportunities in abundance demanded political delegation:

[M]odern citizens had better, more diverting ways to spend their time than on politics. Prestige and excellence could now be had without governing or holding office. Modern people were acquiring a self-confidence rooted in property and education to send others to do their bidding. If their bidding was not done, the

stewards could, in elections, be recalled...the only credible form of democracy was representative (p. 150).

Representation, according to Coleman (2011) is an act of mediation that must be visible, authentic and efficacious. Only when the exercise of delegated power is visible can it be held to account. Only when representatives are recognisable as consistently truthful and genuine in their dealings can representation be valid. And only when the citizen can believe that she has a communicative relationship with the people and institutions claiming to represent her can it be efficacious representation. Coleman observes that the third age of political communication made representatives more visible and reachable, and technologies made it easier for citizens to be engaged and consulted by their representative agents and institutions. And yet:

Over a number of years political scientists have charted a global trend pointing towards public disenchantment with and disengagement from the institutions, actors and processes of formal representative politics. How can we explain this paradox between what seems to be a more pluralised and popularly accessible notion of representation and the persistence of public belief that the represented are somehow locked out from the citadels of political power? (p. 52).

Inside the citadels of power, the critical criterion for representative government is that its legitimacy should be beyond doubt. As post-colonial Australia loosened its ties with Britain, governments became alarmed that attendance at the ballot box had declined to the extent that the legitimacy of claiming a mandate from the people was open to serious question. In the period 1915-1924, compulsory voting was introduced as a minimal obligation of civic participation for Australian citizens (Evans, 2006) although most other representative democracies took the position that individual freedom trumped concerns about institutional legitimacy. In Australia, this obligation places an emphasis on citizenship that reframes it as 'votership'. It requires Australian citizens to become registered *opinion-holders* in an electoral democracy, giving their opinion intermittently and leaving their politician rulers effectively insulated for long periods against the judgments of the citizens at large (Dunn, 2005). Civic participation for the majority could be no more than choosing who to like or dislike among their politicians. For Dunn, this calls into question the legitimacy of claiming or applying the 'democracy' brand to electoral rule:

Is democracy a good name for a system of rule in which, in the end, a steady and substantial majority can be confident that it holds the power to dismiss rulers it has come to loathe (p. 164)?

Whether by choice or minimalist obligation, the citizens' ideal role as 'makers' or co-creators of democracy had been given over and all but extinguished between elections. Relieved of the classical democratic citizenship obligations and distracting burden of democratic government, the majority of citizens were primed to be *receivers* of modern democracy crafted and shaped by others.

Making discourse

The casting of electors as jurists who are called to duty once every few years devalues the role of citizens' voices outside the polling booth. Yet both popular culture and political theory esteem public voices and public debate as essential to democracy. Contesting the privileging of elite voices in modern politics, ordinary voices continue to matter among the widely different perspectives taken by political scientists and philosophers in examining how we are to live (Castells, 2013; Couldry, 2010; Putnam, 2001; Rawls, 1996; Sen, 2005). Couldry, specifically setting out his argument for why voice matters, settles on 'a vision of democracy (as) acting together through voice' (p. 137). The value of voice in complex societies is that, as a process of exchange of narratives, it can be enacted on different scales – from interaction between two individuals, through to families, community, many large communities, a polity of large communities linked by a representative structure, a federation of political units and ultimately in global political organisations. At all levels, voice is a form of agency; perhaps *the* most critical form of agency since it discloses us to others. Voice is always more than language or discourse, Couldry argues; it makes a claim for recognition as a self-understanding being, taking responsibility for one's own narratives whilst recognising the same in others.

Couldry's argument for the democratic voice as a form of agency adds a practical dimension to the Rawlsian idea of public reason in politics. Public discussion and reasoning are fundamental to the process of democratic societies determining how they are to live. A Rawlsian view would argue for the conduct of fundamental discussions as means for negotiating pathways through the rational and the reasonable to reach a position of justice as fairness. The justice position is found in the sphere of overlapping consensus among diverse doctrines essential to political liberalism (Rawls, 1996). Rawls says that something as fundamental as understanding how to conduct oneself as a democratic citizen includes understanding an ideal of public reason. This ideal of public reason is realised when democratic people, recognising their status of equal citizenship, reason what is the good of the public on the basis of their shared

conception of social justice; and this is done publicly, open to view and scrutiny. Rawls' ideal of citizenship imposes a moral duty to be able to explain *to one another* how the principles and policies citizens advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason. This 'duty of civility' involves a willingness to listen to others and a fair-mindedness in deciding or reaching consensus:

Each of us must have, and be ready to explain, a criterion of what principles and guidelines we think other citizens (who are also free and equal) may reasonably be expected to endorse along with us (p. 226).

Allowing for the ambiguities within Rawls' idea of public reason (Habermas, 1995) and the uncertainty of whether he regards public reasoning to be an ideal or a practice, Rawls appears to be arguing for the individual citizen – 'each of us' – to have a required capacity to join 'an orderly contest' (p. 227). Citizens also must have a self-conception that they are entitled to make claims on their political institutions to achieve their aims, that there will be reasonable disagreement based on plurality of views but these are tolerated and, ultimately, that they accept the principle of overlapping consensus. This requires what Rawls calls 'the publicity condition'. It consists of public awareness and shared recognition of the principle of justice on which society is to work; each needs to know that all the others know the *basis* on which they are to live fairly together. The second level of the publicity condition is a common sense of *how* political and social institutions are to work, and the third is that what is done in the name of society is to be fully justified, that is, publicly known and received, and accepted. The idea of public reason and the publicity condition may be possible or even essential to liberal democracy but, as Habermas questions (1995), does Rawls also mean that they are practical? In modern parlance, how does one walk this talk? Rawls sets up significant expectations about the capabilities and capacities needed if citizens are to exercise their rights and prove their claim to be democratic people. Others – more practical thinkers, perhaps – have taken up the challenge of operationalizing a practical approach to meeting democracy's need for *competent* citizens.

From the time of its post-Enlightenment re-imaginings, democracy meant different things to different people (Dunn, 2005; Wiebe, 1995) and so the expectations and demands on citizens were varied. If democracy, as is accepted in this work, is a dynamic process for 'making the state' (Sandel, 1996) by the citizens of the state rather than a political application for government use and administration, democracy must produce and sustain an *active* citizenry engaged and involved in an unending process. Central to the success of such a process is the competent citizen engaged with other (similarly, if not equally) competent citizens (Hoskins,

2013). Hoskins draws from liberal, civic republican, and critical models of citizenship to formulate a civic competence model that explicitly states the values needed for active citizenship. From the liberal tradition she borrows the qualities of valuing equal rights for participation, human rights and respecting the democratic process. From the civic republican perspective she takes the value placed on political engagement and the related skills needed to evaluate government performance, effectively holding government accountable, and to participate in public debates. Critical citizenship offers the disposition towards collective action that aims at dismantling injustice and the quality of critical reflection on social structures and power relations. Finding compatible values and qualities in the models she reviewed, Hoskins compiles the following as a Civic Competence Inventory (p. 32):

- Values and knowledge of Human Rights
- Values and knowledge of equal rights for engagement
- Values and attitudes towards the importance and interest of political engagement
- Knowledge and respect for the democratic process
- Having the higher levels of knowledge and skills combined with the disposition to be able to actively engage in politics including being able to:
 - Evaluate government performance
 - To recognise and prevent corruption and
 - To participate in public debates
- The qualities needed for organising or joining collective action towards dismantling social injustice
- Social values
- Solidarity, awareness of others and public spiritedness
- Empathy and care
- The qualities needed for critical reflection on social structures and power relations.

Hoskins' inventory can be read as holding true to the Athenian model's needs of its citizens since it calls for a disposition and ability to evaluate government performance, recognise and prevent corruption and participate in public debates. Among the Inventory's other criteria for modern citizenship are values and qualities consistent with the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition of living well together. This can be viewed as evidence of the spirit and key fundamentals of democracy and civic and political citizenship enduring through the ages. It offers an expanded view of citizenship. Hoskins' inclusion of 'awareness of others' and 'empathy and care' is a recognition of a social citizenship where social rights and public services are an important part of the citizen experience (Procacci, 2001). Social citizenship rights serve

to equalize the status between citizens. They provide an inclusive protection for individuals in the interests of the overall cohesiveness and wellbeing of the society. But social citizenship is in tension with the market view that individuals needing welfare are a drain on society. Safety net welfare is not a right but a symbol of failure to work, pay taxes and consume, that is, failure to be a good citizen.

The practical value of a Civic Competence Inventory is contestable. It can be read as little more than a wish list in the face of other evidence such as the ‘contemporary crisis of voice’ identifiable in the sphere of public discourse (Couldry, 2010). Couldry locates the crisis of voice within the economic, political and cultural domains of neoliberalism, an amoral market-political rationality. Arguing on the evidence thrown up by 30 years of Thatcherism followed by New Labour political rule in Britain, Couldry cites significant report findings of ‘moral lack’ leading to ‘faulty values’ and ‘excessive individualism’. These, it is argued, arise out of market-based values within neoliberalism with its devaluation of political liberty, equality, substantive citizenship, and the rule of law in favour of governance according to market criteria (Brown, 2006). Couldry, in step with Brown’s political theory of de-democratization, confesses to a ‘bold’ stance against the ‘oxymoron’ of a neoliberal democracy on the basis that it is an ‘affront to the very idea of a socially grounded democratic process, a democracy that is more than formalism’ (p. 16):

Neoliberalism’s discounting of voice is so deeply embedded that alternative discourses that value voice will not simply emerge as if from a vacuum. They must be worked for, in opposition to forces that, even after what many regard as the worst financial crisis the world has seen late in 2008 (a crisis in which doctrines of market self-direction were acknowledged to fail even by their proponents), insist that nothing in neoliberal discourse, beyond perhaps a few superficial slogans, needs to change (p. 17).

How does neoliberalism discount voice? It is important to recognise that neoliberalism is more than a suite of economic policies which happen to be favoured by political parties; it is a political rationality, a specific form of normative reasoning that permeates a society and dictates the terms of governance. As such, the rationality ‘governs the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth criteria’ (Brown, 2006) (p. 693) of that society. The discourse of neoliberalism, true to its anti-collectivism genesis (Fawcett, 2014), is a good fit for the individual voices of entrepreneurs, consumers and self-helping individuals whilst being a discomfort and a disengaging sound to those who value, or need, a more equal – a more democratic – existence based on the public

good. Couldry hears sounds of resistance within the dominant American political discourse; he interprets the election victory speech of US President Obama in 2008 as a declaration that the neoliberal insistence that nothing matters more than markets was trumped by ‘a vision of democracy as acting together through voice’ (p. 137). He imagines a post-neoliberal politics that would rely on voices; not just more voices but new voices articulating values from across the political spectrum. Space would need to be made within market-driven politics to enable voice to matter. Making space for more and new voices would reduce the struggle for citizens when they are engaged and motivated to participate in democratic life. New technologies of voice have the potential to further reduce barriers to citizen engagement and participation. Paperless publishing, for example, removes newspaper editors from their positions as gatekeepers of information and opinion (Tink, 2010). Among users of new technologies there is a mutual awareness of the many and new voices in discourse; the internet creates new scales of organisation when voices coalesce around issues; virtual power is boosted by networks of political organisation unlimited by local or national boundaries (Couldry, 2010):

Finally, the combined result of all these changes is to generate potential new intensities of listening: each of us as citizens can, and public bodies including governments arguably must, take account of a vastly increased range of public voices. Governments cannot any longer say they don’t hear (pp. 140-41).

Governments get a mixed report card as receivers of (listeners and responders to) public voice. There have been political corruption, mismanagement and a worldwide crisis of political legitimacy (Castells, 2013) consistent with the crisis of voice. However, in the digital world, widespread mistrust of politicians and political institutions that might otherwise cause citizens to withdraw from the political system can actually be a mobilising force for people with access to the new technologies of voice. Castells is at the forefront of conceptualizing a new communication power based on twenty-first century technologies. Technology supports civic engagement. It is a means to alter the balance of power between political and media elites by widening the domain of power to include the public, newly aware of its collective power and re-engaged through new networks of participation. This is not to suggest that all significant barriers to citizen voices have been removed by technologies or that new ones have not been or are not likely to be erected. While mass self-communication increases the ability of the citizen audience to produce its own messages and challenge established power relationships, Castells considers those in established power positions – especially in media – are still close to or in

control of ‘the *network-making power*, the paramount form of *power in the networked society*’ (p. 47, emphasis in the original).

If technology is to be the power tool that Castells envisages, citizens will require a new range of competencies. Competency in any field of endeavour is not an endowment; it is acquired through knowledge and experience; through praxis, practiced learning. This calls for a safe condition where ideas can be put ‘out there’ for testing by others. Borrowing Castells’ notion of the public space as a training ground for action and reaction, democracy needs a learning and exercise ground for democrats ‘under continuous development’, where engaged citizens can experience the promise of equal opportunity and the power to prepare their agenda of public issues (Wiebe, 1995). This is consistent with and extends Rawls’ publicity condition.

Making democracy ↔ discourse with an Australian accent

Civic discourse and the democracy-making process within nation-states proceeds with its own unique political accent. In Australia, as the 2001 centenary of the nation’s federation approached, the federal government took the prompt to be officially curious about the state of the citizenry; so it commissioned a national civics survey (Civics Expert Group, 1994). The survey found informed citizens were a minority and, among the majority, their actual understanding of the system of government, its origins and the way in which government can serve the needs of citizens, was often lower than they professed:

Only 19 per cent of people have some understanding of what Federation meant for Australia’s system of government. Only 18 per cent know something about the content of the Constitution. Only 40 per cent can name the two federal houses of parliament and only 24 per cent know that senators are elected on a state-wide basis. Sixty per cent lack knowledge about how the Constitution can be changed, despite having voted in referendums (sic). Only 33 per cent have some knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of citizens; for most, citizenship is an abstract concept that is never given much thought (p. 19).

The Civics Expert Group, in line with its terms of reference, proposed a civics education program for schools and, with less detail, a community citizenship education program. Both were heavy on the mechanics of the system of government, with the Expert Group noting a sensitivity around the issue of teaching *values* of citizenship due to the frequent misapprehension that values are concerned with propaganda. However, it quoted from a

submission pointing to the risks of failing to bring values education and civics education together:

Professor Brian Hill of Murdoch University argues that Australia has slipped into a values vacuum...students need to be taught the skills to evaluate the various values positions and engage in ethical discussions...This is not seen as indoctrination but a position where a student can articulate the various values systems – showing empathy, but not assimilation – and being free to live a life guided by a clearly defined value system...Failure to engage in such a process leads to a position where many of our students are adopting the hidden values of the popular culture, eg. violence and racism that are opposed to the values of a civilized country. *Submission from the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia* [elisions in the original] (p. 54).

This is not to take the exploration of Australia's democratic competencies off on a tangent about school civics, but to demonstrate the point that discourse about competency in citizenship is largely confined to considerations within the formal educational framework. When contemporary discourses of citizenship are identified and analysed, the sources relied upon tend to be the scholarly and curricular texts and works where the primary focus is citizenship education (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Ferres & Meredyth, 2001). Non-pedagogical debates about citizenship in all its forms – civil, political and social – tend towards cynicism and apathy and disconnection among citizens without including ordinary (non-elite) citizens in those debates. One has to look elsewhere, primarily to the media, for what Davidson (1997) calls the unofficial discourse on citizenship. He cites, as an example, the 1985 debate about global media owner, Rupert Murdoch, who gave up his Australian citizenship so that he could meet the conditions necessary to hold onto his US media investments. The change of nationality for Murdoch was explained as simply a legal and technical move that meant a different colour of passport which had no bearing on his 'Australianness' (p. 137). The ensuing media debate around issues of nationality and belonging was largely procedural, focused around rules for determining insiders and outsiders. It only hinted at the discourses of exclusion Davidson goes on to identify and his discussion of Australia's poor record 'past and present' in its attitudes to the active citizen and democracy 'in any of its forms' (p. 217). He argues that Australia was not like other democracies where active citizenship was born out of a struggle against the imposition of a national identity. In the first 50 years of nationhood, the people – most with Anglo-Celtic ties – were a homogenous lot who felt no threat or need for nationalism for or against the state. There was a consequent weak sense of national identity: 'Nobody cared about

being Australian the way the people of the bitterly constructed nations of Europe cared about their nationalism precisely because no one had had to fight against any state power to do so' (p. 252).

This suggests a shaky start to the birthing of democracy in Australia and a hesitant conceptualisation of what it means to be an Australian citizen. Warden (1995) also sees something distinctive, perhaps not even real, about Australia's development as a self-governing polity, describing it as a 'bunyip democracy'⁴— a bunyip being a mythical Australian creature at home in swampy billabongs. In the bunyip democracy, civic culture is built around memories of war sacrifice in far off places and monuments of remembrance and civic symbolism such as the Australian War Memorial and the Parliament House. In planning Canberra to be the national capital, these two monuments were sited to face each other across Lake Burley Griffin. What goes on inside the Parliament building, in the House of Representatives and the Senate sets the tone for the nation's political discourse. To make the point, Warden recalls that Senators were once caustically described by then Prime Minister Paul Keating as 'unrepresentative swill over there' (p.106). On landmark days, such as the day of National Apology to the Stolen Generations led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008, what is said in the Parliament can help unify the country and make citizens proud. Often, though, the quality of parliamentary 'debate' as democratic performance is the subject of public criticism:

History is replete with periods when politics was indeed momentous and magnificent, when elected men and women engaged in dignified, respectful argument about ideas for change. Lamentably, contemporary Australian politics is a shadow of what our citizens deserve. It can be drab and shabby pantomime, littered with animosity and characterised by lust for power, rather than a thirst for enlightened change and inspired leadership. Parliament, particularly question time, has become too much an arena of vilification and discourtesy, a place almost bereft of uplifting discussion, a place where politics is about power rather than purpose (*The Age* editorial, 26 September 2012).

Does it matter what the citizen thinks of all this? Political theorist Walter Lippmann would say it is inevitable that the citizen will be 'a disenchanted man' (1927). In any case, in Lippmann's view, it is all too difficult. The citizen gives only a little time to public affairs and has no more than a casual interest in facts:

⁴ A play on the 'bunyip aristocracy' quote attributed to Daniel Deniehy (15 August 1853) in his speech attacking a proposal to establish a house of peers proposed by W.C. Wentworth, a prominent landowner in New South Wales (Jose, 2009).

He cannot know all about everything all the time, and while he is watching one thing a thousand others undergo great changes. Unless he can discover some rational ground for fixing his attention where it will do the most good, and in a way that suits his inherently amateurish equipment, he will be as bewildered as a puppy trying to lick three bones at once (p. 15).

When Lippmann charges democracy with failing to define the function for the public and failing to educate members of the public to have reasoned opinions, he questions the very concept of deliberative citizenship and democratic choice. For Lippmann, voting can be no more than an act of alignment with a proposal; it cannot be a reasoned choice. Appeals for support are not a compliment to voter intelligence but an imposition on the voter's good nature and an insult to his sense of evidence (Lippmann, 1921). This arguably makes a fiction of self-government. The priority, Lippmann contends, should be to organise intelligence with disinterested experts and insiders following sound procedures responsible for daily administration of society. It is an argument for government by administrators under the direction of elected representatives, although small government and non-interfering bureaucracies are a modern neoliberal mantra. As journalist Laura Tingle reflects on Australians' expectations and experience of government (2012), that is not a set and forget solution:

Politicians may be the conduits who try to persuade us from time to time that they can make government work better. We talk endlessly of how they let us down, of how hopeless they are. I think this is only *partly* born of the fact they may *actually* be hopeless. It is also – and this is much less discussed – born of the fact that we don't really know what we expect of them, or of government, in the first place. A friend of mine calls Australian politics 'aorta politics': as in, 'They oughta do something about it,' even if what 'they' oughta do is not clearly defined (p. 5).

In her essay, Tingle tackles the difficult question of what Australians expect 'the commonweal' to provide to the people, what they believe they are entitled to and how this has translated into Australian political debate. (Rarely is the Commonwealth spoken about as 'the commonwealth' or 'commonweal' as part of the nation's democratic *raison d'être*. The Commonwealth of Australia exists as an entity, somewhat like a prize package, control of which passes like a trophy at the declaration of election results to the party most successful at reading the polls.) She finds that voters are angry and confused about what politicians can do for them in a changing world. The politicians have failed to explain 'their new impotence' (p. 61) and so the people's expectations are still driven by the settlement made at federation more than 110 years previous. It has been, Tingle concludes, a significant failure of political discourse.

Nevertheless, politicians keep asking the people to think well of them and they monitor the strength of their support. Reasoned or not, Australians have opinions and they are often asked to give them to the professional pollsters paid by political parties and media organisations (McAllister, 2011; Mills & Tiffen, 2012). Those buying the survey results are interested in public attitudes to the issues of the day as indicators of voting intention. They are not much interested in what those attitudes say about the success of the democratic process in making a flourishing life for all its citizens. The opinion poll is the mechanism through which the citizen's voice is given value. That value is arguably relative to the time of 10-15 minutes taken to complete the typical poll, the mediated nature of the telephone 'conversation' conducted by an anonymous agent, and the frequency of contact given that ~1400 participants are randomly selected from a population of more than 20 million in a typical national survey. Long conversations with voters are deemed unnecessary since attitude on one issue can be expanded to construct the voter's attitude to a bundle of issues (Cater, 2013). It is not logical, but correlation between opinions is used by survey analysts to give the interviewee a notional voice without needing to say a word on the matter. There is an incestuous vibe to the public voice created through opinion polls owned, conducted and reported by the media. Having told the public what 'they' think on particular issues, as soon as a week later some others randomly chosen will be asked what their attitudes are on the same issues, and so the cycle goes on until the poll that matters in political terms, the election, gives a definitive result based on everyone lining up with their team on the same day. The reporting of opinion polling in the Australian media has become all pervasive and 'swallows' the political conversation in a way 'that cheapens and demeans our politics' (Chalmers, 2013):

Worse than that, it creates incentives for politicians to think in weekly and fortnightly blocks in order to guarantee their survival. The victim is long-term thinking and considered policy risk-taking. No sophisticated, successful country should turn its future over to polls in this fashion, using policy to fill the gaps between breathless poll commentaries rather than punctuating a decent policy discussion with the odd sense of a government's fortunes or the national mood (p. 114).

From within the ranks of the media itself, polls are criticized as meaningless, yet they dictate news judgment and enable the media to create an impression of mass engagement that isn't really there (Megalogenis, 2012): 'We have to end the weekly or fortnightly genuflecting to the polls' (p. 359).

Adding to the analysis that Australians are at times irritated by the political discourse, and that the fetish for political polling undermines decent policy discussion, is one seasoned politician's summary view that informed democracy as the basis for political decision-making is being eroded and the erosion is set to continue (Tanner, 2011). He calls for Australians appalled by the 'childish quality of the 2010 election campaign' to start 'voting with their feet', changing the channel, abandoning a subscription, supporting or opposing individual politicians or just talking to friends (p. 202). It is a call for engagement and back-to-basics individual and collective action. It is a call for social and political trust despite the damning evidence of political scandals creating a crisis of political legitimacy and demise of public trust on a global scale (Castells, 2013). Does Australia have the reserves of social capital (Leigh, 2010; Putnam, 2001) needed to engage and motivate before Tanner's diagnosis of sideshow syndrome turns Australian democracy into a sham? Social capital, treated at length by Putnam in his analysis of the collapse of American community, is about good will, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse (p. 19). It is a communitarian view in contest with the self-interested individual perspective taken by neoliberal governments (Fawcett, 2014). In the Australian context explained by Leigh – a former academic colleague of Putnam's and elected in 2010 as a Member of the Australian Parliament – social capital is built around organisational membership (down), church attendance (down), political party and union participation (bleeding members), sporting participation and cultural attendance (down), volunteering (trending down from its post-war peak). Added to that, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Australians had fewer friends and were less connected with neighbours than in the mid-1980s (p. 129). Consistent with the simple grassroots engagement and action Tanner suggested, Leigh proposes ten ideas to boost social capital:

1. Hold a street party
2. Reclaim the footpaths
3. If you have a local store, use it
4. Be selfish: donate
5. Use technology to build face-to-face connections, not replace them
6. If your organisation is dwindling, revive it
7. Give time
8. Contact two politicians
9. Break bread with others
10. Try a new activity

This non-confrontational, inclusive approach to strengthening democracy through building social capital may not be costly or extreme in terms of difficulty but it depends, nevertheless, on a receptive citizenry – citizens who are amenable and open to suggested action, ready to

respond – to be engaged. Participation follows engagement when motivation overcomes passivity or ambivalence and drives engaged citizens towards active performance. It develops an openness to opportunities and encouragements to act, either as an individual or collectively. In the best of democratic ecologies, it is an eagerness nurtured by substantive freedoms, those being access to education, employment, adequate health care (Sen, 1995) and habitual experiences of satisfying involvement in political processes. For political habits to form, the receptive citizen must encounter a responsive government, which eminent US Supreme Court Justice Brandeis argued was essential for democracy (Strum, 1995). Otherwise people are rendered powerless. The disempowerment involves loss of power *to be recognised by* government, not loss of power *over* government (Borowiak, 2011). This is resonant of Sen's concept of freedom *to*, rather than freedom *of*; freedom to have a say and be heard rather than freedom of speech that is simply freedom to talk, for example. When people are heard by government, their trust is not being taken for granted.

Claiming recognition is not a challenge to the model of elite power where the few make decisions and the majority comply (Moyer, 2013). Neither is it a demand for an inverse model of direct democracy where power to decide on action is placed in the hands of the people. It is rather about the way political elites exercise power held with the trust and acquiescence of the whole people and not only those who voted for the winning side. It is a challenge to trust the people with the information government has about its policies and implementation plans and with the full knowledge of the pros and cons in the decision-making process. It is a challenge to share the public space where ideas and values can be formed, conveyed, supported and resisted (Castells, 2013). Citizens denied meaningful interaction may be said to be politically misrecognised (Couldry, 2010) with no opportunity to give an account of themselves. It cannot be concluded, however, that misrecognition interpreted as *de facto* exclusion from participation naturally breeds mistrust and political withdrawal.

In their investigation of political participation, trust in government and e-government in Australia and New Zealand, Goldfinch et al (2009) found trust in government is *not* associated with greater political participation. Confounding their expectations, the study found lower levels of trust are associated with *greater* use of some participatory and e-government measures. Effectively, distrust in government was a driver to political participation. The study further found that e-government and opening up access to information might further cement the marginalization of already marginalized groups and further empower those already powerful.

It also urged caution about seeing the internet, e-government and new technologies as inherently encouraging of greater political participation, inclusion and e-democracy.

There is a problem *of* democracy (Eder, 2001) and for some, there are problems *with* democracy (Brown, 2010). Eder identifies two distinguishing principles central to the idea of democracy: first, the principle of enabling the equal participation of people and, second, the principle of collective will formation through rational discussion. If there is a problem of democracy, it lies in the way in which these principles are applied to context by social actors, the 'imperfect' citizens:

The problem of democracy...is one of the adequate application of democratic principles to social reality. The real problem is democracy in context...it depends on the people who put into practice the principles of the democratic organisation of society. It is here that the problem of citizenship comes in. Democracy depends on the people inhabiting democratically organised spaces. As long as we reduce the problem of democracy to creating it (even by making it a long-term project which permanently has to be built, thus never leaving the state of its creation), we do not have the problem of citizenship. We have a problem of the avant-garde creating its conditions and educating the people inhabiting future spaces. When turning democracy into an endless project we avoid the real world of imperfect democratic institutions and imperfect people...This is the core of the citizenship debate: how to create democratically organised societies with imperfect people (p. 215).

Eder has doubts as to whether modern political institutions can still embody democratic principles. He cites the ritualization of elections, the institutional form of participation, where people vote not because they believe in the democratic character of elections but because they have feelings of obligation. In the Australian context, the obligation is based on following the rules, no matter the feelings. Eder also points to the public space as problematic since the arena of public debate has become an arena of spectacles staged by the mass media. So his rules underpinned by two distinguishing principles of democracy – rule of universal election and rule of public discussion – are imperfectly applied and democracy is compromised by their ritualization.

Political scientist Wendy Brown's (2010) problem with contemporary democracy is that it 'has never been more conceptually footloose or substantively hollow' (p. 44). It is an empty

signifier on which any and all can attach dreams and hopes. She picks up Dunn's notion of democracy as brand:

Or perhaps capitalism, modern democracy's non-identical birth twin and always the more robust and wily of the two, has finally reduced democracy to a 'brand', a late modern twist on commodity fetishism that wholly severs a product's saleable image from its content (p. 44).

Brown accepts democracy as an unfinished principle (2010) and now, despite its popularity around the globe, the people are not in any sense ruling in common for the common. She sees this in a twenty-first century political context: a convergence of neoliberalism, understood to be a market-political rationality, and neo-conservatism, essentially a moral-political rationality, which has de-democratising effects (Brown, 2006). Tilly (2003) warns that de-democratisation is not simply regime reversal as occurred in Latin American countries, for example, in the second half of the twentieth century; it is 'a possibility everywhere in the world' (p. 37), being bound up with the capacities of governments to manage relations around inequality, trust and political participation. De-democratisation occurs when:

[T]rust networks proliferate insulated from public politics, their proliferation saps state capacity, reduces citizens' incentives to collaborate in democratic processes they find costly in the short run, weakens protections for the bulk of the citizenry, and increases the opportunities of the rich and powerful to intervene selectively in public politics on their own behalf (p. 40).

Brown, looking at the well-established democracies, found signs of de-democratisation in the intersection of ends and means neoliberalism with the expressly moral and regulatory nature of neo-conservatism, effectively 'hollowing out' democratic political culture and producing the undemocratic citizen (2010):

This is the citizen who loves and wants neither freedom nor equality, even of a liberal sort; the citizen who expects neither truth nor accountability in governance and state actions; the citizen who is not distressed by exorbitant concentrations of political and economic power, routine arrogations of the rule of law, or distinctly undemocratic formulations of national purpose at home and abroad. This is the hollowing out that confronts us as a sustained political condition... (p. 692).

The political condition Brown analyses is marked by four de-democratising influences: (1) The devaluation of political autonomy, (2) the transformation of political problems into individual problems with market solutions, (3) the production of the consumer-citizen as available to a

heavy degree of governance and authority, and (4) the legitimization of statism (p. 703). She finds the de-democratising discourse is one that re-makes reality by re-making truth to be what derives from inner religious conviction or moral certainty that no amount of facticity or argument can counter (p. 707). State declared truths are wrapped in a sort of religious fervour that requires submission. Brown gives the example of American patriotism with its yellow ribbons and 'Support Our Troops' bumper stickers. There is a parallel in the Australian context; the 2015 centenary ceremonies and celebrations attached to the wartime defeat at Gallipoli sustain a myth of glory and religious fervour around the ANZAC spirit that no-one is permitted to deny. A sports journalist employed by one of the national broadcasters was summarily sacked for tweeting facts and comments inconsistent with the official construction of the ANZAC story: *SBS reporter Scott McIntyre sparks outrage on twitter with 'despicable' ANZAC comments* (Hamblin, 2015). This is de-democratisation, analysed according to Brown, on evidence of freedom of speech denied, social ostracism and economic retribution for non-conformity with a neutered citizenry.

Occasions of fervour for state declared truths may generate more noise, colour and movement within the discourse. However, despite what appears to be increased participation, the political discourse – shaping and shaped by context – can emerge confused as to its democratic principles (Eder, 2001):

The more actors participate in the institutional game, the more they have to communicate their views; the more they engage in ritualistic forms of argumentation in dramatisations that solicit the attention of the public, above all the media. The media turn out to be the public space co-ordinating the networks of issue-specific public spaces. Media communication, however, does not follow the model of rational argumentation, but the model of selective representation of reality. Media are constructing a reality, and the more they do so, the more the communication increases. Does this mean more democracy or less? (pp. 227-28).

If more communication does, indeed, signify more democracy, it can be reasonably expected that citizens would find more satisfaction in their political reality; but the evidence does not match that expectation. Research finds Australians are not as satisfied with democracy as they used to be: *Poll data reveals Australia's waning interest in politics, decline in support for democracy* (McAllister, 2014; O'Neill, 2014). While Danes are way out in front with 94 per cent saying they are satisfied with their democracy, Australia at 72 per cent sits in a pack with

USA, Germany, Japan, Canada and New Zealand in the 70-78 per cent range (McAllister, 2014):

General attitudes to democracy remain high in Australia by international standards. However, the longer-term trends suggest that public support has not recovered from the low points recorded after the 2010 election. Indeed, measures of efficacy – a key indicator of individual political empowerment – are at their lowest recorded levels (p. 9).

Later, in a national media interview, McAllister interpreted his findings as a problem for the stabilising influence of democracy (O'Neill, 2014):

Professor McAllister says the ANU-SRC poll shows that Australians still have very high levels of confidence in key institutions such as the courts, the police, the defence force and universities.

But he worries there could be a looming crisis because of a collapse in engagement with mainstream politics among younger voters.

‘The two indicators that worry me the most are the high number of young people not enrolling to vote and the very low numbers of people joining major political parties,’ he said.

‘The health of democracy depends on the largest number of people engaging in it and if we have significant groups of people that don't, then potentially if there's an economic problem or a threat to democracy this can be a real problem.

‘They can turn to charismatic leaders and protest parties and turn away from the major established parties that provide the long term stability for the system’ (website page).

Political parties may be important for the stability of political systems, but an audit to assess Australia's strengths and weaknesses as a democracy found Australians ‘don't care much for their political parties’ (Jaensch, Brent, & Bowden, 2004) and are reluctant to join them. Parties are highly secretive about membership numbers. However, Jaensch et al were able to assess party memberships at less than two per cent of the population. The audit – the first undertaken in a country with a federal system – looks at the quality of public debate and discussion as one of four basic democratic principles. It finds party debates are not open to the public, and when they are at State and Federal conferences, the performances and debates are highly scripted. The overall assessment is that, rather than serving a stabilising function within the polity, political parties foster voter de-alignment, volatility and disenchantment:

In terms of policy-making, the major parties dominate, but it appears that a growing proportion of the electorate seems not to be convinced by these policies. The extent of disaffection, even cynicism, about politics and major party politics is increasing. The functions of interest aggregation and articulation may still be the province of the major parties, but it appears that their domination is under serious threat. The major parties seem to be weakest in their functions of democratic socialisation of the electorate. This has two levels. Internally, the parties seem not to be able to convince people to join them as members; but, on the other hand, the membership of other interest groups seems to be growing. Externally, the major parties, especially, have taken on new electioneering techniques; the 'professional' party does not need a large and committed membership, nor does it need democratic procedures, which may, in fact, be a hindrance to its activities. The evidence of voter de-alignment and volatility, and the signs of significant shifts to minor parties and independents, suggest a growing disenchantment with the entrenched political parties, and hence a clear suggestion that they need to reform (pp. 73-4).

This poor performance assessment invites a further criticism – that the Australian political parties, in their failure to nurture democracy within their own structures and within the community, are effectively part of de-democratising the polity. Political party reform is poorly conceived if it is addressed as a need to modernise or update the party rules. The need for reform of political parties deserves to be reconceptualised as how best they can fulfil their democratising potential within the polity. Given that an estimated 98 per cent of the Australian population chooses not to join a political party, what other significance can there be for them in the suggested need for party reform? Political parties have been central to the Australian polity for more than a hundred years and they continue to be so. It is the political pattern for the two major parties to control the functions of power through government and opposition. Consequently, the political system is stable – but is it democratic?

What began as a review of the literature charting the origins of democracy in classical Greece, its rebirth through the English constitutional period to revolutionary France and America, and its innovative construction in second level democracies like Australia has become a review of a dynamic political process that has the potential to be both democratising and de-democratising. What determines which part of that process is in play? Changing technologies, shifting social values, shifts in people and market power, the rise of individual liberty and decline of social capital, the complexity of representative government, compulsory voting for

some but not others, civic education and political styles have all been touched upon and might well be considered part of democracy's contextual warp and weave. Dominant in the patterns discernible in the economic, social and political fabric surrounding today's citizens are consumerism, mediated communication, and a 'self-interest first' style of globalised politics. As the context for making/un-making democracy and controlling the ecology for reception of democracy's discourse, these provide the focus for the next stage of enquiry.

Chapter 2

‘Context is everything.’

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The reception context: consumerised, mediatised, globalised

Those on the receiving side of political communication are described variously as readers, listeners and viewers. These terms convey more about the twentieth century media used to deliver the message content – via print, radio or television – than they convey about the importance of the act of reception to political discourse. Receivers are also described as public and audience, terms that put receivers in their place ‘out there’, not among the main players on the stage when the communication performance happens. As public hall audiences, in the days when politics was played out locally and face to face, members of the audience had their own particular role. They were there to applaud, to support, or to be won over. Some went to heckle. If they were in doubt as to what they were hearing from the stage, they could take their cue from the others around them. The clever orators would give them prompts, effectively trapping them into applauding (Atkinson, 1988) and signalling their endorsement. In that era of political communication, the receiver could be in close proximity to the performance. In the following era, what the literature marks out as the third age of political communication (Blumler & Kavenagh, 1999), modernity left public hall meetings behind, dispersed the audiences and reconfigured political discourse through the one-way medium of television. The mass of the population became a television audience; in effect, the audience was fragmented to family size groupings sitting in front of a magical box. Any applauding or heckling would henceforth be done in the privacy of one’s own home. The production of political news, information and opinion shifted to a new mass media stage with its own distinctive power – and reception of political discourse was consequentially and irrevocably changed.

The television set in lounge rooms was more than an information source; it was a symbol of better economic times that favoured the middle class (Friedman, 2002; Picketty, 2014). It was also the means for displaying and marketing new products (Packard, 1960). The economy needed individuals to be both, simultaneously, buyers and consumers. Sophisticated consumer marketing techniques aimed at persuading newly affluent consumers to define their status by what they purchased. Market economies promoted freedom of individual choice. In quick time, in western democracies, retail marketing techniques were adopted and adapted for politics. Subjects of targeted political communication were soon being treated and described as

consumers (Packard, 1960). Here was a term for the individual in all her engagements – whether reader, listener, viewer, purchaser or citizen. In the political realm, treating citizens as consumers re-shaped the government-citizen relationship; it morphed into a government-client relationship (Freedland, 2001) and ‘the marketisation of citizenship’ (Crouch, Eder, & Tambini, 2001).

The technological changes facilitating the rise of media and the consumer society may, in their infancy, have been location specific. The third age of political communication and now the digital age are powered by technologies and interests that have no borders. The context for the marketisation and mediatisation of society and citizenship is a global political context. Each of these contextual influences on making politics as democracy, and talking about politics as democratic discourse, deserves detailed examination.

Consumerisation

‘Conspicuous consumption’ was often used to describe displays of wealth by increasing numbers of people in developed economies of the post-war twentieth century. The term was a shorthand acknowledgement of Baudrillard’s (1998) analysis of society where:

Today, we are everywhere surrounded by the remarkable conspicuousness of consumption and affluence, established by the multiplication of objects, services, and material goods (p. 29)... We have reached the point where ‘consumption’ has grasped the whole of life (p. 33).

This abundance on display, according to Baudrillard, affected the ways in which people related to objects and how people related to one another. Objects were produced and displayed to have meaning. They were consumed – purchased and put on display again in personalised spaces – as a means of speaking about the lives people led, their values and prestige. Only 30 years earlier, Galbraith (1958) had warned against the affluent society that evaluates people by the products they possess. He criticised the production of goods to *create* wants rather than *meet* needs. Galbraith was revisiting the classical dilemma presented in Socrates’ discussion of the ‘city of pigs’ where the inhabitants lived with mutuality in meeting everyone’s needs and the ‘fevered society’ where wanting and getting more must inevitably lead to war (Plato, 2007). It is a matter of history that western societies, and an increasing number of eastern societies evidenced by the twenty-first century rise of China and India, have typically embraced wanting rather more than needing.

In the increasingly affluent society of the 1950s, so-called ‘hidden persuaders’ (Packard, 1960) soon created a new multi-million dollar public relations and marketing industry to influence or control the daily acts of consumption of American customers. What proved effective use of mass merchandising techniques to recruit business and retail customers soon led to the same principles being tested and applied to political campaigns. American voters were re-conceptualised as ‘spectator-consumers’ and political candidates were packaged as ‘personalities’. Although Packard’s work focused on the image builders and producers of political marketing, he made occasional telling remarks about the targeted receivers of marketing messages and how they were perceived in the persuasion process:

Americans, in their growing absorption with consumption, have even become consumers of politics (p. 185)... The aim was to make them [the spot commercials] inescapable, hammering in on the average person several times a day. This ceaseless barrage was conceived by ad executive Rosser Reeves, who later was reported summing up his strategy in these words: ‘I think of a man in a voting booth who hesitates between two levers as if he were pausing between competing tubes of tooth paste in a drugstore. The brand that has made the highest penetration in his brain will win his choice’ (p. 193).

What this makes clear is that, in the rise of modern affluent society and growth in ‘discretionary’ income surplus to basic need, the individual in her role as citizen engaging with politics – even when in the privacy of the voting booth – is being framed as a consumer and a target for manipulation. Baudrillard found that individual control could be undermined. Instead of the ‘accepted sequence’ (Galbraith, 1958) where consumers signal their preferences and needs to manufacturers, he identified a ‘revised sequence’ where the *producers* direct and control behaviour. His finding blew apart the myth that the individual exercising consumer choice is in control in the economic system. It followed that individual control through freedom of choice could be undermined in the political system, too (Baudrillard, 1998):

Again we must agree with Galbraith (and others) in acknowledging that the liberty and sovereignty of the consumer are nothing more than a mystification....in fact the consumer is sovereign in a jungle of ugliness, where *the freedom of choice is imposed on him*. The revised sequence (that is to say the *system* of consumption) thus ideologically supplements and connects with the *electoral system*. The drugstore and the polling booth, the geometric spaces of individual freedom, are also the systems’ two mammary glands [emphasis in original] (p. 39).

‘Imposed freedom of choice’ is surely a contradiction. Tampering with freedom of voter choice is inconsistent with pure liberal democratic ideology where the notion of power residing in the people to freely choose their representative government is fundamental. The language of liberalism – or liberalisms (Fawcett, 2014) – is all about ‘people who will not be bossed about or pushed around by superior power, whether the power of the state, the power of wealth or the power of society’ (p. 25). If, indeed, the liberty and sovereignty of the consumer are systemically undermined, how can it be done to people who will not be bossed about or pushed around?

The theory of deep capture is highly useful in revealing how consumerism relies on saying one thing but doing quite the opposite – and gets away with it. Theorists in the space where law/economics and the mind sciences intersect, Jon Hanson and David Yosifon (2003) pick up the myth-busting role from Galbraith and Baudrillard. They theorise that freedom of choice is not simply undermined but *captured* by forces targeting the way that people think and the way that they think they think. Their theory of deep capture challenges the neoliberal economic model that promotes the premise that individuals are rational beings, with freedom of choice and, having exercised their free choice, are responsible for the choices made. Their work builds on that of Nobel Prize-winning economist George Stigler who identified the phenomenon of capture in the regulatory processes of government. Regulations were not created in the public interest but in the interest of politically influential groups at the expense of those with lesser influence. However, Stigler’s work, Hanson and Yosifon maintained, identified only a *shallow* form of capture of regulatory bodies. By looking below the surface behaviour to the invisible influences that could motivate disregard for the public interest, they argued that a deeper form of capture was in play. They defined the phenomenon:

By ‘deep capture’ then, we are referring to the disproportionate and self-serving influence that the relatively powerful tend to exert over all the exterior and interior situational features that materially influence the maintenance and extension of that power, including those features that purport to be, and that we experience as, independent, volitional and benign. Because the situation tends to be invisible (or nearly so) to us, deep capture tends to be as well (p. 218).

This invisibility is due, in part, to the centrality of ‘dispositionism’, that is, to the persistently promoted notion that the consumer society functions on the basis of freely-willed preference-driven choice behaviour. Hanson and Yosifon cite the ubiquitous presence of dispositionism in various aspects of the law, in economics and as a cornerstone of liberal

political theory. But, they contend, this simply shows the extent of society's self-deception – a smokescreen of saying one thing but doing another which large commercial interests and powerful institutions seek to advance for their interest rather than the public interest. In a lengthy outline of their theory, they cite multiple examples to support their hypothesis. One of these conflates the economic and the political when the former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Michael Powell, makes his argument for deregulation of media cross-ownership:

A well-structured market policy is one that creates the conditions that empower consumers. It lets consumers choose the products and services they want – which is their right as free citizens (p. 232).

A deep capture reading of this statement reveals how the market, not the consumer, is in control. Note that the market 'creates' the conditions; the market 'lets' consumers choose. The choice, such as it is, is between products and services produced by the market. The external situation is controlling, and yet the message is dispositionist. The message dresses this control as empowerment, as choice, as satisfying a want. It masks the real situation of external control with the language of democracy so that the truth is not apparent or even visible. Deep capture means, individually and collectively, people as consumers and citizens act without being in control, while all the time believing quite the opposite. In developing their theory, Hanson and Yosifon argue that capture is deep and hard to see, but it is not inevitable. They go on to contend release from capture or avoidance of capture is possible through greater awareness of situation. If prospective captives were alert to the dangers of the situation they might be able to wrest back some control – both in the drugstore and in the polling booth. Where might such risk alertness come from and how effective might it be in sustaining the ideal freedoms of consumer and political choice?

Ralph Nader and his activist 'Nader's Raiders' in the late 1960s (Bollier, 1991) made it their mission to raise awareness among Americans of their power potential as consumers and citizens:

Nader had a keen appreciation for the dynamics of unaccountable power in American society. Equally important, he saw that the consumer -- active, informed, questioning -- could play a critical, transforming role in making business, government and other powerful institutions more accountable to the American people. But no transformation could occur until consumers first recognised their very identities as consumers. They needed to realise the immense latent power they

could wield, if only they would choose to use it. How could the great potential of a consumer-driven economy be illustrated and dramatised? This would become one of the central challenges facing Nader and the consumer movement in the years ahead (web page).

Nader was effective in mobilising citizens as consumers because it was in that realm, he helped them recognise, that they held everyday power. Withholding or re-directing discretionary income on a daily basis according to a consumer's political stance could be more effective than withholding support at the ballot box or re-directing one's vote just once every few years. In addressing the phenomenon of political consumerism, political communication theorist Janelle Ward (2011) recognised that citizens are usually juxtaposed with consumers, the former seen as being more conscious and active and the latter politically disinterested and passive. Also in the field of political communication, Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmer (2011) point to the partial disappearance of the citizen and political engagement in the tradition of liberal democracy and a shift towards consumption, product purchasing and lifestyle choices as manifestations of political preferences.

This is consistent with the marketisation of citizenship (Crouch et al., 2001) and specifically the marketisation of public services (Freedland, 2001). In the 1990s in the State of Victoria, the demand for efficiencies from government departments and agencies saw delivery of welfare and other public services 'contracted out' to the private sector and non-government organisations. Other Australian states and the national government followed this new administrative approach. It had the effect of creating a buffer between government and citizens, re-casting citizens as 'shoppers in the market-place' in marketised relationships with intermediate public-service providers (Freedland, 2001):

The fundamental implication of this way of conceptualising and presenting those relationships seems to be that they are bilateral ones between the public-service providers and each individual citizen. Each citizen has his or her own set of dealings with a set of providers, and it is the right and duty – in short, the role – of each citizen to deal on the terms most favourable to himself or herself. In other words, it is for him or her to consult his or her own individual interests... (p. 101).

The citizen, required first and foremost to be a self-regarding individual, must necessarily push mutual and common interests into the background. Consumerisation of citizenship changes not only the nature of the citizen's relationship with the government, but also her solidarity relationship with her community.

Evidence of the disappearing citizen and the shift to self-regarding consumer emerges in media research that analyses the ways in which television news presents public opinion and the degree of political engagement suggested by each analysed reference (Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). Lewis et al found that citizens, on the whole, were shown as passive observers of the world responding to politicians, speaking as consumers, or speaking about sports, celebrity and entertainment with fewer than five per cent making proposals and representing an active form of citizenship. Viewers of television news would come to recognise themselves, therefore, as self-interested consumers or passive observers largely excluded from deliberative citizenship. But if the news bulletin was projecting a negative image, a more optimistic view of citizenship could be found in research analysing entertainment – branded as ‘reality’ – programs that adopted the language and practice of politics, by liking, choosing and voting for who should stay and who should go, for example, from the *Big Brother* house. Cultural theorist Valentino Cardo (2011) explored how television communicated participation through an analysis of *Celebrity Big Brother 2007* [abbreviated to CBB07] and concluded:

[T]he content, logic and format of the program...suggest that the citizen has not disappeared, that ‘ordinary’ people *should* represent us and that participating means engaging with specific issues that are relevant to ‘us’ and allow ‘us’ to exercise our decision-making power. Participation in *Big Brother* is framed as a public act that viewers are invited to perform and that translates to the larger world as an exercise in everyday decision-making. In this sense, *CBB07* constructs participation as political because it encourages viewers/citizens to have a say in what happens in their community (p. 243).

Whilst a program such as *Big Brother* may be said to construct ideas of citizenship, this is inconsistent with other research into reality television programs (RTVPs) as a promotional platform that play on complementary obsessions with ‘celebreality’ and reality stars and a consumer preference for ‘instantly-gratifying, self-referential, shallow information-processing modes of communication’ (Tran & Strutton, 2014). Others conclude that reality television is not about valuing the voices of viewers/citizens (Couldry, 2010). Instead, it sets up a culture of judgment and normalised surveillance, absolute unseen authority, team conformity, enforced authenticity; it disallows reflexive uncertainty or challenges to arbitrary decisions; and finally it is about individualisation where so-called team members are in constant contest with one another and ultimately there will be one winner and the rest will be losers. Couldry finds RTVPs reinforce the neoliberal social landscape features of increasing inequality and intensification of class differentials. Although reality television is a small space within a much wider media

landscape, the evidence appears to confirm warnings from the early research into television that viewing can be amusing, but there is a risk of considerable downside (Postman, 2005 [1985]).

Mediatisation

A modern consumer society without the media is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine. In Australian society, media owners and organisations are the content makers (Simons, 2007). How they came to amass their considerable power and influence over the nation's economic, social and political development is tracked in the scholarly review and analysis of *Communications Traditions in Australia* (Osborne & Lewis, 1995, 2001). Reviewing their own work at the start of the twenty-first century, Osborne and Lewis asserted:

[T]he general tendency in the history of communication in Australia has been towards the use of communication to manage rather than liberate Australians and their society... By the year 2001, the story has become more complicated. The media and the communication industries have become much more important in Australia, as they have internationally, and with the impact of globalisation the discourse of management and economic rationalism has extended far beyond its original applications in the area of national development... Australians should recognise the need to assert their own rights. It is time for them to realise that the discourses of communication management and economic management that have come to dominate public communication in the last generation have outlived their usefulness and to move on to a more articulate approach to asserting their own communicative rights and obligations (pp. 216-7).

Rapid technological progress is changing the media landscape. The body of knowledge built up through researching media technology and its uses during the latter part of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first centuries reveals the emergence of a 'mediatised' society (Brants & Voltmer, 2011; Stromback, 2010). Terminology is important here. *Media*, *medium*, *mediation* and *mediatisation* are all frequently-used terms in the literature. In this work, *media* is used when referring to the technologies that are used by the communication industries (printed works, radio, television, the internet) but is more frequently used to mean the institutionalised domain of power and influence comprising interests of ownership and control. *Medium* is used to mean a gateway of distribution, a vehicle through which a communication is delivered from sender to receiver. Television is a medium. That is not to exclude, however, the internet being described as a medium through which data messages are both sent and received.

Put most simply, *mediation* describes the act of communication via a preferred medium rather than in a face-to-face environment. Acts of mediation are likely to be much more complex than the simple definition suggests; they are an intervention which may involve filtering out some information, interpretation, emphasis, trivialisation, even misrepresentation. The key term *mediatisation* is used here in line with its use by European scholars (Hjarvard, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Stromback, 2010) who agree that it is distinct from mediation, the term favoured by Anglo-American scholars (Agha, 2011; Corner, 2011), referring to a process which is ongoing. Although mediatisation has been most often researched and discussed in the context of mass media and mediated political communication, a more recent theoretical perspective takes a broader view of mediatisation as a social and cultural process (Hjarvard, 2013). In doing so, Hjarvard cites the 1978 work of Norwegian sociologist Gudmund Hernes who developed the concept of a ‘media-twisted society’ in which the media had a fundamental impact on all social institutions and their relations with one another. Translating from the Norwegian, Hjarvard says Hernes urges us:

...to ask what consequences media have for institutions as well as for individuals: the ways public administration, organisations, parties, schools and business function and how they relate to one another. In what ways do media redistribute power in society? ... In short, from an institutional point of view the key question is how media change both the inner workings of other social entities and their mutual relationships (p. 9).

Public communication and political scientists Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh contribute to understanding media power in society by identifying distinct ages of communication (1999). They identified something of a seismic shift in mass political communication when electronic media emerged alongside print media, when conditional licences to broadcast were assigned by governments to a few with wealth and nascent power. In the first age, the decades immediately after World War II dominated by party politics, political power trumped media power. By the 1960s, however, both politics and media had changed significantly, which warranted definition as a second age. Television, because of its reach into communities, became preferred as *the* medium for political communication. The public hall lost relevance as a site of political speech-making. For the politicians, television could deliver something beyond the capacity of any Town Hall – an audience of millions; and they couldn’t talk back! So the shared experience of being in the audience and participation in a two-way political discourse gave way to an individual or family experience of one-way

communication in front of the television set in the lounge room at home. The format and values of television news coverage of politics demanded different language and tactics from politicians. Pictures became more important than words. Politicians, even those renowned for their stage oratory, changed their political practice and style. In Australia, Prime Minister Robert Menzies – having enjoyed success already in seven federal elections (NAA, 2015) – delivered a campaign address on television for the first time in 1963. Brett (2005) notes how the traditional victory speech replacing ‘the angry, self-righteous language of division’ with the ‘reassurances of unity’ (p. 2) was also televised:

This is an election night ritual, but it can be more or less convincingly done... In 1963, after his last election, he delivered the same message on television, thanking the ladies and gentlemen for the victory and again promising to govern for all. Menzies delivered the message seated alone at a desk, looking straight down the camera into the Saturday-night lounge rooms of the nation. There was none of the triumphalist hullabaloo of the election-night victory party to remind that this was all about winning and losing; there were no journalists present to ask awkward questions; there was no flickering of the eyes from the camera to the party faithful and back again. His voice was calm, intimate and reassuring, and he spoke only to you (p. 2).

Decades later, in the context of politicians, media and audience by now well-versed in the mediatised art of politics, another Liberal Prime Minister, John Howard, put his case for election on television’s leading national current affairs program. An edited extract from the interview transcript demonstrates how the mediatised politician has learned to pay tribute to the medium (and key media players) and stay on message, communicating reassurance with visions of Australians feeling relaxed and comfortable (Jackson, [1996] 2005).

Q. Do you like television?

A. Love it.

Q. What do you watch? What’s your favourite show?

A. Ah, well, I watch ... I watch ... the news and current affairs (laughs here). *Four Corners*, I always watch *Four Corners*....

Q. Can you give us a John Howard vision for the Year 2000 to the Australian public, such that they will see yes, this is the person we would like to be PM?

A. Let me respond to your question by saying this, I would ... by the Year 2000 I would like to see an Australian nation that feels comfortable and relaxed about three things: I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about their history; I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the present and I'd also like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the future. I want to see an Australian society where the small business sector is providing more jobs for young people. I want to see an Australian society that sees this country as a unique intersection of Europe, North America and Asia. Australia is incredibly lucky to have a European heritage, deep connections with North America, but to be geographically cast in the Asian/Pacific region and if we think of ourselves as that strategic intersection, then I think we have a remarkable opportunity to carve a special niche for ourselves in ... in the history of the next century.

Q. But do you think... to pick up on those words, comfortable and relaxed, do you think that's a dynamic enough vision to inspire Australians as they move into the next millennium? Do you think people think, well – I want to feel comfortable and relaxed? Is that dynamic enough for Australians?

A. I think... I think people do want to feel comfortable and relaxed.

Q. They don't want to feel excited?

A. Well you can't possibly hope to feel excited about something unless you feel comfortable and familiar with it. If you really want to drive Australians away from interest in something, you... you disturb their sense of ... of sort of comfort about it and you will succeed in driving them away from it.

Q. But if you're making a pitch for the vote, John, certainly you're comfortable and familiar to people, but are you dynamic and enticing and exciting enough to take the country into the next millennium?

A. Well, that is a decision that the Australian public will make.

The term 'relaxed and comfortable' has endured within Australia's political discourse, although it is not always received or reproduced with the meaning of the original utterance (Fig 2.1).



Fig. 2.1. *Quoting John Howard 2006*. Reproduced with kind permission. Julie Shiels, 2014.

A paradox emerging from the first and second ages of political communication was that, at the very time when the producers had the capability and the receivers had the inclination to entertain different approaches to the political problems of the day, citizens were served an emptier and less nourishing communications diet (Blumler & Kavenagh, 1999). Yet there was more to come, in the form of multi-channel radio and television through cable and satellite technologies; and a third age of political communication emerged. It would be characterised by media abundance and consumer choice. The mediatisation of the political sphere had accelerated (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) 'to the point that the subordination of the media system to the political system in the first age seems to have changed into the acquisition by the media of great power in the public sphere and the political' (p. 249).

A consequence of this media-twisted development was that politicians came to be promoted as products and themselves became 'products of a media-saturated style of politics' (Blumler & Kavenagh, 1999). Mediatised politics professionalised the politicians, their aides and communications advisers, spin-doctors, PR practitioners, corporate affairs staff and lobbyists. Spin became a dark and toxic art, often invisible, and manipulative (Burton, 2007). Political parties became highly professionalised in their market research, using permanent campaign strategies and electoral campaign advertising to sell their products (Lewis et al., 2005). Smart and clever tactics and the language of politics were framed in formulas and rules about what would and would not work (Luntz, 2007). Strategies and tactics overwhelmed

substance and policy. Marketing slogans in the consumer retail sphere became the model for the soundbite in the political sphere.

The third age might be seen as evidence of the consummated relationship between the consumer society and the mediatised society. Indeed, socio-linguist Asif Agha (2011) writes that to speak of mediatisation is to speak of institutional practices that reflexively link processes of communication to processes of commoditisation. But describing synergies in function and behaviours is not the whole story, according to Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) and endorsed by fellow political communications theorist Jesper Stromback (2010) who considers the consequence of mediatisation of politics as ‘politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media’ (p. 250). Stromback goes on to add that, as Hernes had suggested, this has a consequence for individuals:

The more people depend on media for information that is used to form impressions of and opinions about societal processes, events, and issues, the more susceptible they are to media influence and the more difficult it becomes to separate what people think and feel from the media-created pseudo-environment (p. 369).

Blumler and Kavenagh (1999) also flag implications for how people receive politics. They question what ordinary citizens might make of the new-found political communication system, and what audience and citizen roles people are encouraged to adopt by the system. More recently, however, Blumler (2013) revisits the ongoing process of mediatisation and canvasses the emergence of yet another, perhaps a fourth, age of political communication that coincides with the transition from traditional or ‘old’ to ‘new’ media. In his paper delivered to a research project team meeting in Berlin in September 2013,⁵ Blumler reflects on features of the third age that spill over into a notional fourth age. He cites the avalanche of ‘communication abundance’, far greater than he and Kavenagh had imagined in 1999, with intensified competition for audience attention and greater audience choice; ‘mediatisation’, with particular reference to constraints on politicians to deal with journalists in the ‘mainstream media’ now open to challenge by internet-based communication facilities and opportunities to communicate messages without journalistic intervention; ‘centrifugal diversification’ gathering steam so even more diverse content can be produced, more voices heard and more audience members reached;

⁵ The author attended the workshop as an observer and received a copy of the paper which was subsequently published on the website <http://www.fgpk.de/2013/gastbeitrag-von-jay-g-blumler-the-fourth-age-of-political-communication-2/>.

and an increase in the number and range of non-party but civic-minded bodies on the political scene. It is worth quoting Blumler (2013) at length when he reflects on the transition to the fourth age of political communication and critiques his own third age pyramidal concept of communication from politics to media to audience as no longer applicable:

[I]f there is a fourth age of political communication, its crux must be the ever-expanding diffusion and utilisation of internet facilities – including their continual innovative evolution – throughout society, among all institutions with political goals and with politically relevant concerns and among many individual citizens. All this has evidently produced a vibrant communicative sphere, which though not coordinated or coherent overall, includes many new opportunities for expression and exchange – and also for learning what others are saying elsewhere. Hence, what we used to call interpersonal communication in politics – which mainly took place in the family, among friends and with workmates – has been completely transformed. All this has unleashed an incredibly diverse range of globally expansive and temporally synchronous communicative networks, enlarging opportunities for linkage between dispersed social actors. It has also complicated the lives of politicians wanting or feeling they need to manage news and publicity to their advantage. Whereas in the past political leaders and their strategists geared up to cover and intervene in television, radio and press outlets, now they are involved to a considerable extent in multi-dimensional impression management.

In consequence, the model of the political communication process that dominated our scholarship in the past, my own included, is kaput – well, if not kaput, then is hobbling round on two amputated legs! That model was essentially pyramidal on a politics to media to audience slope. According to it, most audience members most of the time were simply receivers of institutionally originated communications. Most involvement beyond that was organised and conducted by elite personnel. But with the arrival of the internet, those individuals have become a communicating force – or a set of forces – in their own right to [set] opinion trends and to whom the former monopolists of political communication must now closely attend.

In her first-class book on *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy*, co-authored with Kees Brants, Katrin Voltmer has referred to all this as a process of ‘de-centralisation’. I’m inclined to put it differently. It seems to me that what we are experiencing is *the emergence of an ecology of two different levels of political communication – for shorthand purposes, call them institutionalised*

ones and grassroots ones – which are productive in the main of two different forms of political communication. And if so, perhaps we should eventually aim to establish a) how they compare and contrast with each other, b) how they relate – or perhaps do not relate – to each other and c) what this could mean for citizenship and democracy [emphasis added].

When Blumler talks about the complete transformation of interpersonal communication in politics, and individual audience members who used to be simply receivers of institutionally originated communications becoming a communicating force in their own right, he is marking an irreversible shift in reception of political communication. The change he identifies is a power shift. The receiver is now a player on the field. The ‘de-centralisation’ of political communication described by Brants and Voltmer (2011) challenges the established notion of mediatisation as an exclusive balance-seeking tension between mass media and journalists on the one hand and political institutions and politicians on the other. What they identify is the potential for intervention by citizens/voters/audiences to force a triangular relationship with the political elites and the media. What Blumler and Brants and Voltmer agree is that there is a new power in the act of reception because the receivers’ range of responses to each political communication has been expanded by ease of access to and widespread use of media technologies and networks. What was monologic producer-to-receiver communication via television was overtaken by opportunities for two-way dialogue via internet and email. Now, communication in the mediatised marketplace has become multi-directional where receivers with approximately equal access to a suite of media platforms can connect horizontally through peer-to-peer political communication and, if they are engaged and motivated to do so, can rally their combined force in a vertical challenge to both media and political logic. Some see this as a reconfiguration of the public sphere where members of the public give opinion or contribute facts by engaging in citizen or participatory journalism (Bakker & Paterson, 2011). However, assigning the role of citizen journalist – effectively bringing the ordinary member of the public into one of the established power groupings – uses the language of established power and serves to maintain the paradigm of a horizontal power balancing act between elite media and political forces. It denies the power potential of the third party role of the receiver as a non-elite member of the public newly equipped to be on the field of play. Mediatisation has enabled members of the public to be simultaneously receivers and producers of political communications and empowered them in this duality. In a mediatised environment, the consumer of political communication may be said to have acquired a hybrid – and more powerful – role. Castells (2013) is more adamant. He says that the interactive capacity of communication in the digital

age gives rise to unprecedented autonomy for consumers. New media technology theorist Damian Tambini (2001) agrees by foreshadowing the potential of the civic networking movement to constitute a new democratic public space.

In step with these developments is the theory of a new era of minimal effects (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) where access to media technologies has made it feasible for consumers to be both selective and partisan in their political news and commentary preferences. While the new era of minimal effects does not go unchallenged (Shehata & Stromback, 2013), it theorises that while the enduring power of traditional media to exert influence through agenda-setting is qualified, it maintains influence over public opinion on the big issues and among those consumers making limited use of online news sources. The reduced power of a 'mass-less' media to tell people what to think and how to think within a managed political discourse also undermines the power of government to impart a dominant ideology (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). This may be read as an institutional loss of power that is a direct consequence of gains in personalised power made possible only by mediatisation. Significantly, in the mediatised society, despite concentrations of media capital and production in the global communication system, the technologies of mass self-communication have created a new communication realm (Castells, 2013).

During the era giving birth to this rebalancing of communication power, the media itself has driven the shift from 'old' media to 'new' media (Flew, 2002). Those parts of the media which have been relatively slow to respond to diversification, such as newspapers, have suffered loss of readers and advertising revenue. But other sections of the media such as talk radio and cable television have built successful business models around segmenting, targeting, polarising and holding onto their audiences with diversified offerings. Taking these initiatives can be interpreted as corporate media strategies to survive but, even so, they are helping to shape the new communication realm where media power is not what it used to be.

Recent research provides some key insights into the behaviour of mediatised consumers in an environment of polarised political discourse. In 2008, Arcenaux and Johnson began investigating choice, attention and reception in political communication. In its pilot stage, they reported, their project was conducted in an environment of polarised political communication, oppositional media hostility and abundant choice in America's complex media environment. Subjects were exposed, either by choice or lack of choice (forced), to samples of uncivil political debate which the researchers selected from actual media sources. Subjects were subsequently asked about their willingness to trust politicians, government and television news, and to

express their views of the general responsiveness of the political system (external efficacy) and their level of competence to effectively participate in politics (internal efficacy). Responses were measured against a control group not exposed to the stimuli used in the experiment. The researchers found that where observing political conflict is unavoidable, there may be a negative effect on political trust. However, the more intriguing finding reported was that subjects in both the forced and choice conditions exhibited lower levels of internal efficacy than control group subjects:

We do find that uncivil political debate reduced internal efficacy in both the forced and choice condition to the same degree. It is possible that even among those who enjoy political debate shows, the level of rancour leads to a feeling that politics is just too difficult to understand. Perhaps political bickering leads people to believe that public discourse is a disingenuous show that produces an impenetrable fog. We could especially see this as a side effect among those who like watching these shows. Because these individuals tend to be partisan, they likely already have strong views on many of the topics discussed, and the inability of the opposing side to see the folly of their ways may lead them to believe that working through the political system to change hearts and minds is a hopeless endeavour. Such an attitude may lead them to leave the dirty business of politics to the partisan political elites whom they trust, and eschew becoming more personally involved in politics (pp. 16-17).

Other researchers have also been drawn to investigate the political diet being served to build audiences in the genre of ‘angry’ media whose attention can then be sold to advertisers (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Their analysis of content suggested an increasingly toxic environment for consumers of political discourse. They found evidence of a media business model of outrage-oriented political discourse which succeeds by employing new media to polarise consumers whose attention is held by simultaneously shocking and congratulating audiences for their moral and intellectual superiority over the other side. Such outrage discourse most often includes insulting language, name calling, misrepresentative exaggeration, ideologically extreme language and, above all, mockery and sarcasm. It is something more than rudeness as incivility because it aims to provoke a visceral response from the audience, playing to instinct rather than intellect, to provoke anger, fear or moral righteousness. In outrage discourse broadcasts, blogs and newspaper columns, political conservatives outnumber liberals two to one; and, as cautiously estimated by Sobieraj and Berry, outrage rhetoric or behaviour was used on average once every 90 to 100 seconds of political discussion. The researchers did

not investigate the full effects of outrage discourse on audiences. But they did give future researchers clues to the size of the sphere of its potential impact:

New outrage venues abound and their audiences continue to grow. Tens of millions of people a day consume talk radio alone. The combined cable audiences are smaller but still impressive. The blog world is splintered into a staggering number of sites, though the top sites (which include the ones we studied) attract a lion's share of the traffic. Today the number of outrage media outlets and the size of outrage audiences are both impressive and unprecedented (p. 35).

Other audiences, perhaps preferring laughter to outrage, are engaging with political discourse through entertainment programs. In the US, researchers (Kim & Vishak, 2008) have analysed viewer data and concluded entertainment media is an important venue for 'infotaining' citizens. However, the late-night shows and comedy programs are associated with generating recognition of campaign information and political impressions, rather than the acquisition of accurate information that is retained and retrieved for considered citizen decision-making. Outrage discourse and infotainment may be recognised as political products packaged for easy consumption in a mediatised marketplace. How these product offerings are received is yet to be fully explored. But it may be said that on the discourse spectrum bounded by derisive mockery at one end and amused laughter at the other, the mediatised environment is becoming a space for promoting impressions over facts as a basis for citizen-consumer engagement.

Globalisation

A feature of modern democracy is its global popularity (McAllister, 2014). Equally popular on a global scale is neoliberalism. It is a political rationality that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms, where all domains are markets and individuals are market actors (Brown, 2015). A contested view is that neoliberalism is hegemonic (Barnett, 2005). There is arguably an inevitable tension, if not an outright conflict, created when the market replaces the *demos* at the political centre. Indeed, political theorist Wendy Brown's most recent work asserts that neoliberalism is 'undoing democracy'. What is it about neoliberalism that would enable that to happen? Brown relies heavily on Foucault's lectures at the College de France (2008) to chart the origins and examine neoliberalism as a political rationality. Like Foucault, the political observer Fawcett in his recent history of liberalism (2014) traces the beginning of the new or advanced liberalism to the period between the wars in Europe

when concern over the rise of fascism and Nazism prompted the Lippmann colloquium of 1938. Intellectuals from the United States and Europe combined in an effort to renew liberalism to be an effective resistance to totalitarianism and the threat it posed to liberty and freedom. The colloquium participants agreed on the coined term ‘neoliberalism’, but what it actually meant lacked definition. They might not have been clear about what they were for, but they knew what they were against. They turned their focus on the anti-liberal Other and subsequently, notably through Hayek’s self-confessed political book *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), conceptualised an anti-collectivist opposition. Fawcett observes that neoliberalism was supported not for what it offered but for the horrors of the collectivist alternative. It began as a negative rationality, defined by what it was not and with a negative *modus operandi* of proposing measures that would weaken the anti-liberal Other. Over ensuing decades and with the dominating influence of economist Milton Friedman and the Chicago school, neoliberal theory was articulated as being *for* an unfettered market (Friedman, 2002) which in practice required a radical winding back of the size and scope of government (Cahill, 2009). In the post-war boom and rise of consumerism, the ‘market first’ rationality began to be more widely shared and less contested. So-called western societies grew more alike and found commonalities of interest in their pursuit of prosperity. Growth in globalisation with its regional pacts and trade agreements can be interpreted as a necessary strengthening of neoliberalism over any other political rationality.

Insofar as neoliberalism valued representative democracy over the totalitarian alternative, it was for its potential to get rid of unwanted rulers peacefully, in the event that they interfered with the freedom of the market. The question of leadership in the neoliberal polity, then, became not who can lead us to be the best we can be collectively, but who can we trust in government to do as little damage as possible to the market and the market economy. Neoliberal policies of deregulation were formulated primarily to remove barriers to market freedom rather than to share out what the market produces as fairly as possible. Neoliberal political discourse used the language of deregulation, of individual rights and liberties to prosper, on growth in freedom of choice. Western capitalist countries came to be referenced as ‘liberal democracies’.

During the 1980s and early 90s when Australia was becoming increasingly aware of its geo-global relationships within Asia, the Hawke/Keating governments opted for membership of the global club of neoliberal economies dominated by the US and Europe. In the discourse,

Hawke and Keating were ‘modernising’ the economy with reforms that took the country onto a global stage (Rudd, 2009): ‘they internationalised the Australian economy’ (p. 25). Despite the neoliberal theory of smaller, non-interventionist government, here was the state taking an irrevocable step in the reproduction of global neoliberalism (Cahill, 2009). It is significant to note that it was not a Liberal but a Labor social-democratic styled government that made the move to throw in Australia’s lot with the promise of ‘universal prosperity on the basis of the systematic contraction of government interventions in the management of economies, and the global expansion of free markets’ (Manne, 2009).

Economic globalisation means there are few if any geographic barriers to individual consumption of goods or information. In capitalist, mediatised societies like Australia citizens can be ‘consumers without borders’. Can they also be ‘*citizens* without borders’? The question is pertinent in the context of the crisis of the nation-state and hyper-globalism (Axford, 2013; Stalder, 2006). Stalder, reviewing Castells’ work on the network society, points to the loss of nation-state sovereignty as economic, social, political and cultural processes operate globally rather than within the contained realm of the nation-state. Democracy as the practice of self-rule has traditionally been located within a bounded jurisdiction. Yet in the global context, the boundaries of nation-states are virtually and technically being erased. Increasingly, democratic nation-states are joining other nation-states in multi-lateral trade partnerships, coalitions ‘of the willing’ in wars and in global anti-terrorism networks. Events affecting a particular polity are capable of destabilising others: the Greek debt crisis rising out of the 2007-08 global financial crisis escalated as an issue in 2015 that threatened the stability of the European Union and the economic and political sovereignty of Greece (see the issues and coverage, for example, at <http://www.politico.eu/> which ran intensive live coverage across Twitter and online). The international efforts and resources required to solve the Greek debt crisis showed how one nation’s problems could force multiple governments into becoming day-to-day managers of supra-national political alliances globally and infrastructure and relationship managers domestically.

The global financial crisis tested the validity and future of neoliberalism with irrefutable evidence of the failure of the market to always get it right. In the discourse generated by the GFC, joined with a significant essay contribution from then Australian Prime Minister Rudd (2009), neoliberalism was declared finished although other contributors suggested it was a premature call (Cahill, 2009; Manne, 2009). A more distant review of neoliberalism’s greatest test and its aftermath suggest that as a rationality it may have taken a beating but as a practice

it has survived and has come back, perhaps, stronger than ever – that it still has a global future. The discourse was all about helping the market to come through the crisis. As Rudd saw it, ‘the markets have suffered...the real economy is facing one of its toughest periods on record...the crisis is producing unprecedented costs and debts for governments’. It was almost an afterthought when he noted people would be affected, becoming a ‘bewildered and increasingly enraged public’ when ‘the economic crisis touches the lives of families through rising unemployment, reduced wage growth and collapsing asset values – while executive remuneration in the financial sector continues to go through the roof.’ (p. 21). Rudd may not have intended it, but his essay reveals how successive Australian governments have bought into the rationality of global neoliberalism and differ only on matters of degree. Backing up the decisions of his Labor predecessors in government, he ensured the open, competitive market economy survived because, like certain individual private enterprises, it was too big to (allow to) fail. Extreme capitalism and unrestrained greed might have to be reined in to assuage public anger, but enough capitalism and enough greed to fuel a competitive global marketplace was confirmed as a given.

Among the many lessons learned in the aftermath of the crisis for neoliberalism is that the ideal of a democratic *polis*, as a community that self-governs for the common wellbeing, is increasingly and persistently under challenge from circumstances that have their origins in no one single domain. The boundaries of the political are expanding (Eder, 2001) under pressure from climate change, international terrorism and mass migration – all global issues that logically demand deliberation and decision by global communities. They constitute a collective interest in a global domain where the collective is Other. However, national governments with international (formal and moral) obligations are concerned to manage, in the first instance, their domestic constituents so that they do not create impediments to the international order. Increasingly, governments like Australia’s are addressing global problems as complex domestic managerial challenges by imposing limits on democratic discourse and democratic freedoms. Since 2013, the Australian government has invoked security as the basis for secrecy about ‘on water’ or ‘operational’ activities related to turning back boatloads of asylum seekers and unlimited detention of refugees. In contradiction to democratic principles, government ministers simply refuse to answer media enquiries or respond to public demands for transparency. With varying degrees of parliamentary co-operation, legislative changes are proposed to limit freedoms and threaten citizens with punishment without bringing matters

before the courts. Globalised political problems are forming ahead of the capacities and governance infrastructures required to address them democratically.

Meanwhile, people who participate in debate and action through global social movements effectively move on an expanded public arena (Eder, 2001):

Politics is shifting towards a different field: it is no longer tied to the state and the field of action defined by state institutions. Social movements are thus not the result of pressure for more democracy but an element in the development of new institutional forms of politics in modern societies (p. 220).

Issues, technologies and events cause social, economic and political communities to be re-imagined around a common fate that requires a widely shared policy, regulatory and legal response (Paehlke, 2014):

It is in this context that global citizens embrace the collective interests of all nations and all people. We who hope to see where a wider acceptance of this perspective might lead are not a majority, but we can imagine a global interest, very open in its content...Presently national leaders embrace that vision comprehensively at considerable political risk. Thus it is frustrating that those who see the potential of active global citizenship are for the most part isolated from each other (p. 169).

Institutions such as universities have positioned themselves for the twenty-first century as sites with perspectives and educational programs that prepare students for global citizenship. From a random selection, Bournemouth University was found to have set a 2010 target for all its graduates to be 'aware of and confident in, dealing with issues relating to equity, justice, diversity and sustainable development. Bournemouth has developed an approach that focuses on the development of 'global perspectives' and 'global citizenship' where the 'global citizen' operates effectively in the context of diversity, and is empowered to bring about change to enhance society (Shiel, 2007) because:

International events since 2001 have reinforced the importance of developing global citizens who are equipped to live and work in multi-cultural, international contexts and who are better stewards of the planet, than their forebears (p. 153).

The role of the global citizen is being learned and lived ahead of the formulation of structures required to empower these trained citizens to be self-governing individuals in accordance with ideals of democratic citizenship (Paehlke, 2014). Or is that a presumption? Is the global citizen not to be a democratic citizen, after all? There is a new reality of citizenship emerging from the

tension between the ideals – a ‘braiding’ of civil, political and social rights – and the will and ability of institutions to deliver on the ideals (Crouch et al., 2001):

States appear less inclined or able to take responsibility for making citizens. Neo-liberal privatisation policies, which are not being reversed by the ‘third way’ (Blairism and Schroederism), shift the emphasis to the market, whilst the emerging civic republican and communitarian solutions seek to embed participation and redistribution in the non-state, non-market realm. In sum, the ideal of citizenship may have grown out of a concern with the social and political necessities of realizing ideals of civil rights, but as globalisation, complexity, and liberalization allow the threads of citizenship to unwind, there ensues competition over how to re-organise the various elements (p. 263).

The notion of an unwinding of citizenship is consistent with Brown’s (2015) view of the neoliberal citizen being ‘configured by the market metrics of our time as self-investing human capital’ (p. 177). Education, vocational experience, health maintenance, retirement planning all have to be value-enhancing. Brown finds that ‘human capital is distinctly not concerned with acquiring the knowledge and experience needed for democratic citizenship’ (p. 177). In what may be received as calm contrast, Paehlke (2014) contends citizenship is inherently an amateur activity ‘in the best sense of the word’ (p.175). It is something people do when they are not trying to earn a living and for the majority, it is an incidental matter. He agrees that citizenship may have a global dimension and is an optimist about the future of global citizenship. He doesn’t look to the state; he sees global citizenship being driven by social movements and people-to-people connections around the globe using the technologies of the networked society.

From this mapping of the twenty-first century political context as mediatised, consumerised and globalised, it is possible to see how these influences bleed into one another. It is also possible to see, if one takes the footing that making democracy ought to be a priority among nations that claim it for their own and use the brand, that something fundamental to democracy is missing from this context. The priority of the *demos* has been lost. Either in their beginnings or in the course of their development, consumerisation, mediatisation and globalisation have displaced the *demos* and placed the market at the political centre. Nowhere in the literature of these contexts was there evidence of an *a priori* commitment or determination to protect the essence of democracy and a ‘people first’ approach to changing context. Consistent with the review of literature in the previous chapter about the making of discourse,

the democratic voice in changing context has been sublimated by an economic voice. These voices are not the same; they may be in dis-chord. The benefits of mediatisation and globalisation have served to make the consumer voice stronger and given it a greater reach and power than the democratic voice. The citizen has become an economic unit, a market substitute for the citizen as a person sharing power in a community that decides how all can live in harmony. Citizenship has become a part-time excursion for those who can take time from their market-driven activities. If it is true that context is everything, then it is *the* determinant shaping everything – polity, discourse, citizen. This chapter finds nothing to contradict that truism. The chapter to follow moves from the global to the local to further examine questions of democracy, discourse and citizenship through what might be read as a case study of democracy in the making by a twenty-first century nation.

Chapter 3

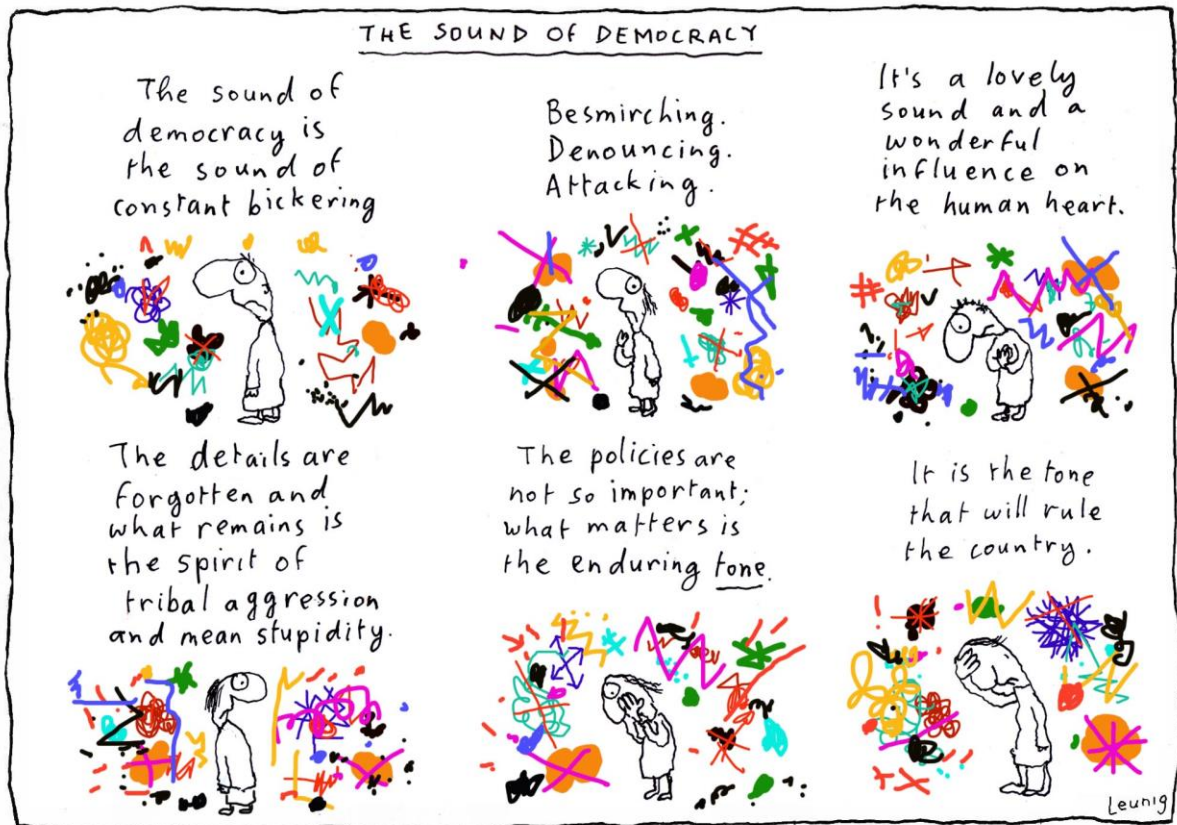


Fig. 3.1: *The Sound of Democracy*. Reproduced with kind permission. Michael Leunig August 2013

Having a problem with the Australian political accent?

This chapter moves from the global to the local Australian context by first suggesting through popular commentary that it is how the political discourse sounds – its enduring tone – that determines how the country is ruled. When the tone of political discourse is received as particularly negative and claims of political decline emerge, there is a question to be explored: is there something new and threatening to democracy about twenty-first century politics in Australia? To explore this question, the chapter begins with an event widely received as a new low point in Australian politics. The case for a new and nasty decline is made through the vehement responses of commentators and analysts to the 2011 ‘Ditch the Witch’ rally. Challenging these claims of decline are those who take a longer political view. The chapter looks at these claims and counter claims with particular attention to language and a brief historical review of precedents in political brutality. The honesty and the trustworthiness of politicians, considered a contributing factor in the condition of political malaise, is explored as a hallmark issue of the Howard government, the most successful in terms of durability of

Australia's twenty-first century governments. But politicians are not the sole contributors to the political tone of Australian democracy. The chapter considers the self-interest of the media in denigrating politicians and politics, effectively nurturing a persistent tone of negativity and concludes by referencing the part Australians themselves play – or decline to play – in resisting or repairing political decline.

On 23 March 2011 a political rally was staged in Canberra, the national capital, having been promoted by right-wing media ostensibly against the proposed carbon tax. Determined to capture media attention, protesters carried hand-painted signs branding the Australian Prime Minister a 'liar', 'witch' and a man's 'bitch' (Laurie, 2011; Summers, 2012). The event, primed to be an attack on the Government and the credibility of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, was attended by Opposition MPs and addressed by the Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott. Veteran journalist and political commentator Paul Kelly observed the event as a new fault line and injection of poison into the political environment (Kelly, 2014):

Abbott, initially reluctant, addressed the rally of a couple of thousand people. But he was condemned by association when, after he began talking, placards were raised behind him saying 'Bob Brown's Bitch' and 'Ditch the Witch'. They framed the event. Having called for a people's revolt, Abbott could not dodge the rally. Labor demanded that he apologise. He refused, saying some people had gone 'a little bit over the top'. Gillard slammed Abbott for 'associating himself with One Nation, with the League of Rights, with anti-Semitic groups and with grossly sexist signs'. The fault line was drawn: Labor denigrated the sexism against Gillard while Abbott said people were justified in being angry over a deceitful prime minister. The poison had entered the minority Parliament (pp. 366-67).

As political events in Australia go, this one was so out of the ordinary in its authorised incivility as to confirm claims of the deterioration of Australian politics (Chalmers, 2013):

All of those in attendance were united in their hatred for the Labor Party, and they took their cues from arguably the worst combination of political lynch-mob leaders this country has assembled in one place. Their agreed target was the Prime Minister, and their heroes were Tony Abbott and his frontbench colleagues, who jostled for prime position next to him on the stage. But as Abbott grabbed the microphone and began his own remarks, it was the holder of the colourful sign that labelled the Prime Minister 'JuLIAR: Bob Brown's bitch' who secured prime position in the night's news broadcasts. The cameras had framed a perfect picture

of the Opposition Leader and that demeaning sign. In the process they provided the neatest image of the deterioration of our politics and the starkest enduring demonstration that something is deeply wrong in Australian public life (pp. 102).

That Canberra event led the evening television news bulletins across the country. It depicted politics at the heart of the nation as abusive, devoid of respect and threatening. Where similar language and tones used by some in the media had been explained away as shock-jocks simply plying their trade, on this occasion it was officially endorsed by the presence of the nation's most senior conservative politicians. Making the point that it was not a one-off, accidental event, another rally of similar style and tone was staged three months later in Sydney (Don, 2011). The personalised nature of the political discourse continued and intensified. The political language referencing Prime Minister Julia Gillard was particularly crude and gendered (Crooks, 2012; Summers, 2012). In an internationally acclaimed parliamentary speech – one the national political reporters initially failed to recognise as significant – the Prime Minister called it for 'misogyny' (Gillard, 2012). But this naming and global shaming did not halt the decline. Seasoned journalists began devoting columns to the new phenomenon (Trioli, 2013):

Something truly awful has happened to the public discourse. I have been a journalist for more than 20 years and I have never seen such hatred... The confected anger that has been for some time now the stock-in-trade of some radio broadcasters and columnists has done its work, and has unleashed a nasty, antisocial and destructive power that has real consequences for the cohesion of our society (p. 3).

The hate language and spectacle of this media-generated political incivility being played out on a national stage can be recognised as 'outrage discourse' defined by United States researchers (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011) as the genre of discourse intentionally provoking a visceral response from the audience in the form of fear, anger and moral righteousness by sensationalism, personalised attacks and patently inaccurate information. It occurs largely in the domain of conservative, anti-Democrat American politics. Among the local commentators, conservatives were more willing to accept the gendered and insulting language directed at the Australian Prime Minister on the basis that conservative female leaders on the international stage had learned to accept criticism and dismiss abuse (Henderson, 2012):

Conservative female leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel - and social democrats such as Hillary Clinton - have learnt to accept criticism and to dismiss abuse. Last week in Greece, for example, Merkel was confronted with banners depicting her as a Nazi. It is difficult to imagine a greater insult. But she

did not take offence. Likewise Thatcher, when some radical feminists declared she was really a man. Gillard was very popular when she became Prime Minister in June 2010. Her credibility was diminished by Abbott doing his job as Opposition Leader and by the damaging leaks against her from inside Labor. Then, after the election, the Prime Minister did the unnecessary deal with the Greens and broke her promise not to introduce a carbon tax. Her problems stem from politics, not gender. Gillard has suffered no greater abuse than that experienced by such predecessors as Fraser, Keating and Howard. Commentators who look at contemporary Australian politics and see wall-to-wall misogyny, diminish the very real achievements of Australian women in recent decades (website page).

Henderson's inability to see a problem in the abusive content of the political discourse – although he did concede there might have been some overreach in the crudity of one cartoonist blogger out on the fringe – represented a refusal to recognise that the discourse itself had become a political issue.

Amid the claims and counterclaims as to whether the terms of engagement in mediated politics had reached a new low, the Prime Minister was challenged by a radio program presenter to clear up the rumour that her partner – for almost two years he had carried out official duties in the tradition of Prime Ministerial spouses – was 'gay' (Sattler, 2013). This contribution to the political discourse was regarded by many as offensive to the Office, if not to the person of PM Gillard herself. In the event, it was a step too far for the radio man's employer who first suspended then sacked the presenter, effectively acknowledging the accepted limits surrounding political discourse of the day had been breached. Meantime, weekly opinion polls conducted and reported by multiple media organisations persistently reminded people how disappointed they were with their politicians and how dissatisfied they were with their political and economic circumstances (Chalmers, 2013). In late June 2013, denigrated in the discourse and languishing in media polls behind both the Opposition Leader and her predecessor who had been a destabilising force within her own party, Australia's first female Prime Minister was abandoned by her colleagues. Prominent author and columnist, Anne Summers, commented under the headline that the bully boys had won 'but we all lose' (Summers, 2013):

It's not just about her, it's also about us. What it means for us ordinary Australians that Julia Gillard was hounded from office in the way she was. We are now, apparently unashamedly, a country where bullying, stalking, undermining and outright treachery are not just tolerated but the new way of doing business (p. 35).

These events and others similar but too numerous – or offensive – to cite without due warning (Summers, 2012) make a strong argument that a new tone of negativity surrounds the business of Australian politics. As it took hold and endured, commentators, columnists and consumers united in the view that political discourse was in a new stage of decline. It had been dumbed down (Hartcher, 2012; Soutphommasane, 2012, 2013), politics was looking and sounding like a sideshow (Tanner, 2011) and was alienating people reading, watching and listening via the media (Hawken, 2012). As a measure of concern at this state of affairs, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, on the first occasion he addressed the Parliament after being returned to the leadership role, called for parliamentarians to be a little kinder and gentler with each other in the further deliberations of the Parliament (Ireland, 2013). It was recognition from the highest level of government and in the house of representative democracy that the nation's political discourse received and interpreted through these events had officially reached a notable low point.

Negative views of politicians' performances, media reporting and the discourse around democratic government increased during the term of the minority government 2010-2013 and in the months surrounding the election of the Liberal (conservative) government at the 2013 federal election (Aly, 2013; Fien, 2014; Green, 2014; McFadyen, 2013; van Tiggelen, 2013; J. Watson, 2013). Responses from consumers show overwhelmingly support for the proposition that the state of politics is in decline: 'I've turned off', 'We're a selfish bunch', 'Focus on squiggly line – a case of Australians getting the government they deserve', 'Tackle disengagement', 'Deceptive packaging'⁶. Commentators began canvassing a consequential decline in terms of voter disengagement with democracy, already characterised as fragile (Maddox, 2008), and now descending towards a critical condition (Soutphommasane, 2013):

But you can't help sense there's something also rotten in the state of Australian democracy. For some years now, political theorist John Keane (my director at Sydney University) has argued that democracies are sleepwalking their way into deep trouble. Representative democracy, in his view, has reached its historical exhaustion. Political parties and politicians are no longer responsive to citizens' aspirations.

⁶ A selection of headings on letters and emails to the editor, *Sunday Age* on the same day of publication 25 August 2013.

This view is countered by commentators more sanguine about the nation's political condition and the prevailing discourse maintaining 'it was ever thus' (Dyrenfurth, 2012). They take the long political view. Dyrenfurth is one whose citation and quoting of some of the 'brutal' language characterising political debate when the Australian Parliament was not yet a decade old is offered as evidence that there is little new about contemporary politics or the tone of political discourse:

The truth is politics is necessarily imperfect, messy and, yes, sometimes brutal. The beauty of representative democracy is that Parliament and parties institutionalise conflict, minimising and, in Australia's case, largely eradicating political violence.

In any case, partisan brutalities have ever been thus. One of the more heated passages in Australian political history occurred in 1909 when the "Liberal Protectionist" leader Alfred Deakin and the "Free Trade" and "Conservative" parliamentary factions, headed by Joseph Cook and Sir John Forrest, agreed to a "fusion" of the non-Labor groupings. Henceforth Australian politics conformed to a "Labor versus the rest" model.

Shortly afterwards, the newly aligned "Liberal" forces defeated Andrew Fisher's minority federal Labor ministry on the floor of Parliament. Deakin formed a new ministry in June 1909, but at the next election, in April 1910, Fisher became the first majority Labor prime minister in the world after a landslide victory. The nine-month period between "fusion" and the election was hallmarked by vitriolic debate and personality politics. Labor attacked and obstructed the governing fusionists at every opportunity.

Deakin was the target of unprecedented abuse. Then Laborite Billy Hughes memorably responded to former NSW premier Sir William Lyne's denunciation of his old friend Deakin as "Judas" by sarcastically declaring, "I do not agree with that; it is not fair - to Judas, for whom there is this to be said, that he did not gag the man whom he betrayed, nor did he fail to hang himself afterwards."

The labour movement press was less temperate. *The Worker*, a publication of the Australian Workers Union, had this to say of the prime minister (and up until then, Labor's "progressive" ally): "Office is [Deakin's] vice, and is as indispensable to him as opium is to the Chow and grog to the drunkard."

This abuse reached a crescendo in Deakin's home state in the pages of the ALP's official newspaper, *Labor Call*. One scribe alleged that "Deakin could, if required, deliver a funeral oration over a sewer rat which would bring tears to the eyes of [his conservative rival George] Reid's dry dog. He is all gab and no spine."

Victorian Labor politician Frank Anstey, who campaigned against the protectionist Hume Cook, alleged the Deakinites were "living liars, liveries of the double life, pretenders of one thing and doers of another; white sepulchres, public deceivers, foul frauds and miserable sycophants".

Rhetorical violence was routinely practised by both sides during the 20th century. Yet whether it was the titanic debates over military conscription during World War I, the trauma of the Great Depression or the heated emotions produced by the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government, our democracy has survived and prospered (p21).

From the historical perspective, there were repeated threats to Australian democracy throughout much of the twentieth century (Hirst, 2002) and, on occasion – such as the rise of the red flag revolutionaries in the post-war bitter social divisions of 1919 – it seemed that ‘something new’ had happened then, too, in Australian politics (p. 129). In the 1930’s Great Depression era, the perceived threat of socialism led to a call for semi-military rule and the forced shipping out of communists ‘to the Antarctic with tools, six months food supply and each man a gun, and let them put into practice their political theories – with full power to use the guns’ (p. 149). In the past, Prime Ministers were fair game, also. Already branded ‘Pig-Iron Bob’ for enforcing exports of crude iron product to Japan, Menzies was portrayed in the debate surrounding the 1951 referendum to ban the Communist Party as a criminal ‘wanted for attempted murder of Australian democracy’ (p.172). Arguably the greatest threat for Australian Parliamentary democracy was triggered by the 1975 dismissal of Prime Minister Whitlam by the Governor-General John Kerr (Fraser & Simons, 2010; Hirst, 2002; Hocking, 2012). Hirst noted some felt they were no longer living in a democracy (p. 200). Hocking pays attention to the sound of democracy in the three years prior and then at the moment of crisis, noting how the phenomenon of denial of the legitimacy of the Whitlam Government was seen as ‘immensely significant’:

From Senator Reg Withers’ early denunciations of Whitlam’s mandate and assumption of office as an ‘aberration’, as the ‘temporary insanity’ of the Australian electorate, the language of illegitimacy surrounding the Whitlam government was unceasing and ever expanding...This was more than just a difference in political tone or a disagreement over policy: it was a different vocabulary altogether, one that effectively closed normal political debate, as arguments over policy options, differences between the political parties and over specific government decisions were reduced to claims of illegitimacy. A linguistic continuum emerged: from self-interest to incompetence, from impropriety to corruption and even criminality (pp. 97-98).

As an orator, Whitlam surpassed all around him but the democratic emphasis he used when speaking to the men and women of Australia was ultimately overwhelmed by the negative tone of illegitimacy applied to everything his government represented. Within minutes of being struck down politically, Whitlam delivered his linguistic blows still sounding like a statesman: nothing would save the Governor-General, Malcolm Fraser would go down in Australian history as Kerr’s cur, and his government’s supporters should ‘maintain your rage and your enthusiasm’. The moment of Australia’s greatest political crisis was marked by a speech

memorable for its precision and its passionate yet controlled fury (Hocking, 2012) yet, at a critical moment when it could easily have been otherwise, it was primarily a speech upholding parliamentary democracy. Rather than cause voters to disengage, the events of 11 November 1975 spawned a movement called Citizens for Democracy and, in 1977, the creation of a new mainstream political party, the Australian Democrats. On the face of it, this political low-point of constitutional crisis, strengthened rather than weakened democratic engagement.

Three decades later, brutal politics and vitriolic debate supporting and supported by the phenomenon of outrage discourse, utilised a language threatening to democracy. Incivility was sufficiently present and prevalent in Australia's political discourse in 2013 that a major national forum was held to discuss its manifestations and potential remedies (CHASS, 2013). Some politicians openly addressed the issue of incivility (Leigh, 2013) and the responsibility on politicians to lead in the face of deteriorating political discourse. An alternative view on the matter of responsibility put the system at fault (Turnbull, 2012):

[M]ost Australians believe it (the adversarial system) is not working effectively in our political system. Important issues are being overlooked, barely discussed and, where they are, routinely misrepresented. I am not suggesting politicians are innately less accurate or truthful than anyone else. But rather that the system is not constraining, in fact it is all too often rewarding spin, exaggeration, misstatements....So what can be done? Well for a start all of us can consciously do a better job at explaining issues. Shouldn't one key benchmark for politicians be: have we made an issue clearer and the complex comprehensible? We all want 'cut through' messages – how about cutting through with clarity, rather than with spin? (website page).

Turnbull's words are worth noting since he was at the time⁷ the former leader of his party who lost the position by a single vote to Tony Abbott. They are the words of an experienced politician, less arrogant than in his early political life, yet aware of the ongoing political struggle of sounding liberal while his conservative party colleagues hold sway. It was the conservative Abbott who, although no great orator, became Opposition Leader – a master of three word slogans framed as promises: he would 'stop the boats', 'axe the tax' and 'balance the budget'. It was Abbott, not Turnbull, who delivered the negative messages that cut through and subsequently won the Prime Ministership and majority government. The theory of positive political discourse and making the complex comprehensible may be idealistically attractive to

⁷ Turnbull regained the leadership from Abbott and stepped immediately into the Prime Ministerial role in September 2015.

some but experience shows that, in the ‘right’ climate, it is less successful than the practice of simple slogans and persistently negative language. The options Turnbull defined as being between his preferred approach of making the complex comprehensible on the one hand, and the implicitly more simple option of spin and misrepresentation on the other, was heroic given the latter, as he conceded, was all too often more rewarding than the former.

Sound bites – phrases or sentences that easily fit the demand for electronic media ‘actuality’ or a quick news ‘grab’ – became stock in trade for the media in the third age of communication when reception was tending to be more hearing and viewing rather than reading. In political communication, sound bites are words that work (Luntz, 2007). Clever brevity, however, in the context of deeply contested policy around treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, for example, is increasingly delivered as mantra without any background detail or rational argument. For more than three years, Abbott stuck to his message that he would ‘stop the boats’ carrying asylum seekers to Australia without ever describing how it would be achieved or at what cost. It was one of his ‘signature promises – to scrap the carbon tax and stop the boats’ (Bolt, 2013). And when eventually pressed for detail 12 weeks out from the scheduled election, the simplicity of the mantra converted to a simple implementation plan which was, he promised with biblical overtones echoing Genesis, to be achieved on Day One (Johnson, 2013):

‘If elected, we will stop the boats, we will repeal the carbon tax and we will get the budget back under control....

‘If elected, our first day will begin with instigating the carbon repeal process. The second job will be to talk to the navy about new instructions for our naval forces in the seas to our north,’ he said.

‘The third job will be the establishment of the Commission of Audit, but *I wouldn’t want the day to end without* serious discussions on indigenous issues and in particular on ways to advance the recognition referendum’ [emphasis added] (website page).

How was this political rhetoric meant to be received by the citizens? Were they meant to believe that all these things would be achieved on the first day? If it was a metaphorical pledge, how was one to know? If promises were not kept as promised, would it constitute a breach of trust on Abbott’s part or a case of naiveté on the part of the receiver?

Abbott matured politically as a member of the Howard government. It was Howard who introduced the concept of ‘core’ and ‘non-core’ promises (Maddox, 2008) although it was

never made clear when promises were made which category applied, so all promises became suspect. Early in his role as Opposition Leader, Abbott revealed how he thought Australians should interpret his utterances. He told a national media audience (O'Brien, 2010) that the things he could be understood to mean, and so be held accountable for, were only those 'carefully prepared scripted remarks'. In saying this, which ironically did not appear to be a carefully scripted remark, Abbott effectively disclaimed ownership of anything he had said or might say that was not confirmed by him as being carefully prepared and scripted. Abbott's trustworthy rating at the time was 39 per cent according to a national poll (EMC, 2010). Without claiming any direct cause and effect, it can be noted, however, that his trustworthy rating dipped to 33 per cent at the next poll in July. By the time he was elected Prime Minister in 2013, Abbott's rating for trustworthiness had lifted to 38-40 per cent (EMC, 2014). It was at 33 per cent again in early 2015 when he faced the threat of an internal party challenge to his leadership. While it might appear to be problematic for a democratic polity when only one in three electors has trust in the Prime Minister of the day, such evidence is insufficient on its own to qualify as a marker of significant political decline.

The trustworthiness of Australia's politicians in general has long been an issue of interest to public opinion pollsters and researchers with an interest in measures of political engagement (Goot, 2002; Mills, 1986). The Roy Morgan Research organisation has conducted annual surveys since 1987 to gauge how the public rank people in the professions for their ethics and honesty⁸. Federal politicians consistently rank low down the scale among those who earn a 'very high' or 'high' rating, falling as low as 9% in 1995 and 1997 then dropping further to 7% in 1998 before climbing to 20% in 2004 and reaching an outlier height of 23% in 2008. By 2012, this figure had more than halved to 10%. In the most recent period 2013-15, federal MPs were given a 'very high' or 'high' rating for ethics and honesty by no more than 14%, 12% then 13% of survey participants. This presents as a poor regard for the leaders of Australian democracy. Goot (2002), who takes an historical perspective of the public's opinion of politicians, accepts that the electorate is becoming more cynical and that the data he analysed points to a decline in the reputation of politicians for ethics and honesty (p. 43). But it declined for other professionals, also, and there may have been common factors at play. He does point

⁸ As coincidence would have it, the 2011 Roy Morgan telephone survey was conducted on the nights of March 22-24 when many respondents were likely to have seen national television news coverage of the March 23 Canberra 'Ditch the Witch' rally. That 2011 survey saw a fall in the ethics and honesty rating of Federal politicians from 16% to 14%. The following year, it fell again to 10%. The 2012 decline was attributed to ongoing scandals involving the Speaker of the House of Representatives and a former Labor MP accused of misconduct as a union official (Research, 2015).

out, however, that the televising of federal parliament since 1991 and television news reporting of question time is a factor unique to politicians and may be a possible cause explaining their decline in standing. Dickenson (2013) examines the same factor, citing the case for and against televised parliamentary proceedings including concerns that Members might play to the camera, that proceedings could be so boring that audiences would disappear, and that voters might see lots of empty seats and ask why their representatives are not where they expect them to be. And then there is the cumulative effect:

Exactly how television affects voters' opinions of politicians and politics is complex and contested, but the idea that it has accelerated the personalisation of politics seems beyond dispute...Studies suggest that the cumulative effect of television's presentation of politics is that voters focus less on what the truth is about a political issue and more on who can be trusted – voters will apparently accept policies they might otherwise oppose so long as their advocate seems 'sincere' and 'honest'. Voters might not trust politicians, they write, but they do trust television (p. 221).

The personalisation of politics via television needs to be taken into account when analysing surveys about trust in politics. Goot (2002) found that whether a voter is asked about politicians generally or an individual can throw up quite different results:

It is one thing to ask 'ordinary Australians', 'middle Australia' or anyone else about politicians, members of parliament, 'people in government', en masse; to ask about local members (Aitken, 1982: 367-68, 390), individual politicians (Lyons and Stewart-Weeks, 1999: 10) or cabinet ministers (Daniel, 1983: 64) may be quite another. Attitudes to leaders underline this point: in recent years, the approval ratings of a number of party leaders, some in office for more than one term, have been much higher than would have been predicted by the 'crisis of cynicism' thesis (p. 43).

This may be both a reflection of the move over time towards personality politics and a rationale for it, explaining why campaign strategies focus all the attention on winning votes for the party leader and any reference to the local member is as a minor accomplice. Goot concludes there is only limited support for claims of a crisis of cynicism enveloping democracies like Australia. He warns that the evidence is not sufficient to support claims of greater voter disengagement from politics than was the case in the 1960's. Voters continue to think that elections

matter, for example, and informal voting remains remarkably low. Neither does he consider that compulsory voting is ‘masking our discontents’:

This is partly because the extent of the discontent has been exaggerated and decontextualized, partly because certain forms of discontent are clear, notwithstanding the ‘mask’, and partly because compulsory voting itself may have helped sustain interest in politics and a belief in the political system (p. 44).

Trust is not just a political issue, it is a democracy issue. Trust is a fundamental of representative government and democratic institutions because it allows people to believe that, if their people are not in power now then there is a chance they could be next time around (Maddox, 2008). That is why in well-established democracies, when those in government lose power, they go peacefully without resort to violence – even under extreme provocation, as happened when Whitlam accepted his fate in 1975. Trust is a ‘live’ political issue because politicians make it so. They call for citizens to place their trust in them, especially during election campaigns. Paradoxically, according to Condren (2002), they are the ones in the political discourse who reinforce distrust:

More than anyone else, we have politicians to thank for reminding us of our civic duty to be sceptical towards them – not necessarily because they do behave particularly badly but because each group has persuaded us that its opponents are likely to (p. 147).

In 1995, John Howard set the bar high when he told the ABC radio program, AM, that ‘truth is absolute, truth is supreme, truth is never disposable in national life’ (Maddox, 2008). Howard’s Prime Ministership attracted severe criticism over its record of political veracity. On Maddox’s list of truth-telling failures is the ‘Children Overboard’ affair. In the weeks before the 2001 election at which Howard was re-elected, he and his Immigration Minister claimed asylum seekers on a boat heading to Australia had thrown their children overboard in an attempt to force their rescue and entry to Australia (Opinion, 2001). A Senate Select Committee later found no children had been thrown overboard and photos used by the Government as evidence were found to depict people in the water after their boat had sunk. In the same period, PM Howard committed Australia to support the invasion of Iraq on the basis of claims that Saddam Hussein had prepared weapons of mass destruction. These claims, too, were subsequently found to be false, adding fuel to claims that there was a pattern of public deception in the

Howard Government (Maddox, 2008). Howard's prime ministership 1996-2007 has been critically analysed by multiple essayists (Brett, 2005; Gaita, 2004; Marr, 2007) for its impact on democracy and citizenship. Gaita's criticism of Howard as the first among his international contemporaries to demand and then breach the trust placed in them is a caution against presuming that leading in the conduct of politics is an automatic positive for the polity:

George W. Bush has been re-elected decisively and we are still enlisted in his war on terror. He asked the American voters to trust him. Tony Blair has asked the same of British voters. John Howard did it first, I believe. To him, it appears, the world owes the novel idea that, in politics at least, one might distract attention from mounting evidence that one has been systematically mendacious, perhaps even a liar, by laying claim to the people's trust. I suspect that few people were fooled (p. 1).

Why leaders lie and risk losing the trust of the people is systematically analysed by Mearsheimer (2011). In cases of international strategy such as fearmongering to legitimise waging a preventive war, he contends the main reason that a leader would likely incur his public's wrath is because the policy failed, not because he lied. From a utilitarian perspective, lying can make good sense although Mearsheimer concludes that it can backfire internationally, as happened for John Howard and George Bush with the 2003 Iraq war, and cause 'blowback' at home:

Leaders who lie to the citizens for good strategic reasons might nevertheless do significant damage to their body politic by fostering a culture of dishonesty. This is why fearmongering and strategic cover-ups are the most dangerous kinds of lies that leaders can tell (p. 105).

Political scientist Judith Brett (2005) points out that any dangerous lies told by Howard did not prevent him being elected Prime Minister at successive elections in 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2004 until he lost his own seat (he was only the second Australian Prime Minister to suffer this indignity) and the Liberals lost government in 2007. Her analysis of Howard's success drew on evidence from interviews with ordinary people who voted Liberal. They were variously lacking in political engagement, found Howard an embarrassment or unattractive, disbelieving of politicians or not worried by the lies, especially if the political leader was 'taking care of Australia' (p. 70). Howard had mastered the middle ground and the Liberals had come through the 1980s changes of softening party identification more skilled at electoral politics than their Labor opponents. He was more inventive and ruthless in wedge politics and skilled at 'dancing between the rhetorics of unity and division' (p. 49).

Journalist David Marr's criticism took the form of furious attack in which he argued that the Howard years had been marked by suppression of public debate, and a concerted attempt to gag democracy (Bennister, 2007). Public debate had been corrupted, Marr contended, by a man who 'lies without shame' and who 'invented the breakable or non-core promise' (p. 5). But he hadn't done it alone:

Most of what troubles us now about the state of public discourse began under Labor. Many of us complaining now did not complain loudly enough back then as Paul Keating bullied the press, the public service and the parliament. But Howard has come to dominate the country in ways Keating never could. To the task of projecting his voice across Australia, he brought all the ruthless professionalism that marks his government (p. 5).

This last sentence of Marr's suggests that it wasn't that Howard told lies when other politicians – historical or contemporary – were bastions of virtue, but that he may have been more successful than others engaged in the rhetoric of dishonesty which has assumed a central role in combative politics (Condren, 2002). It may equally be the case that, although a majority of people polled believed the Howard government had lied to them, it didn't matter to them (Maddox, 2008). Maddox is especially critical of the Fourth Estate. Having measured the public's 'don't care' attitude, the media fails by not challenging it and pointing out to the public how the interests of the community are undermined by a government that frequently lies to them. Neither is it acceptable to Maddox when journalists excuse politicians for lying on the basis that they all do it, or that politics is not a morality contest and drawing a distinction between personal and public morality where public morality has a lower threshold for truth. Members of the media also have vested interest in undermining levels of public trust in politics. They add to voter anxieties by encouraging voters to believe that their representatives are nearly all useless (Dickenson, 2013): 'it makes for good copy' (p. 254). Inciting hatred of politicians is a staple for talk-back morning radio listeners to Australia's most syndicated and politically powerful shock-jock, Alan Jones. It was he who, among other insults, called for PM Gillard to be tied in a chaff bag and dropped in the sea (Holmes, 2011). He later said Gillard's recently deceased father had died of shame because of the political lies she told. Jones was forced to apologise, but was later defended

by Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, adding to the public debate about the tone of the national political discourse (Gardiner, 2012).

In his exasperation with the Howard years, Marr (2007) sought to understand why Australians put up with these behaviours. He resolved that Australians became habituated – desensitised to John Howard. Further, it was the Australian way to claim larrikinism but practise orderly love for authority; to grumble instead of challenge; to despise politicians yet belittle them as a class to cover up their own passivity. He traced these things back to Australia's settler origins and structural ties to Britain.

Touring the United States in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville observed a 'mature and calm' individualism he had never witnessed in Europe. But had he returned to France via New South Wales, de Tocqueville would not have found the same character developing here. Where the United States was building a new society by balancing individualism and the needs of a free community, we were getting on with the business of being a British society at the far end of the earth: deferential, businesslike and orderly. That is not all loss by any means. The benefits of living in such a peaceful and lawful country are profound. But even today Australians remain subjects more than citizens (p. 26).

Another long distance view is offered by the historian Hirst (2002) who found that, right from the start, Australians were making their own brand of democracy grounded in egalitarianism: 'Australian democracy is first of all a democracy of manners' (p. 303). This democracy of manners, however, owes nothing to democratic politics, *but it has implications for politics* (emphasis added):

Politics is necessarily about power, about inequality. In democracies, those who exercise power gain their authority by the votes of the people. That inequality Australians are reluctant to recognise. Their egalitarianism is a bond of equals, in part directed against the disruption of authority. Australians will recognise that a boss or a military officer must have power, though they will respect him only if he exercises power properly. But politicians have no excuse for wanting power; they have wilfully put themselves above the rest. They will have trouble therefore, in gaining respect, no matter who or what they do. Many Australians seem to think politics exists only because there are a few egomaniacs wanting to be

politicians...so that all men can be equal, politicians have to be dishonoured (pp. 311-12).

The unresolved conundrum of being Australian and democratic emerges in the contemporary work of the journalist and author, George Megalogenis, who reviewed and analysed Australia's political and economic performance over the previous four decades and branded it *The Australian Moment* (2012) or, in the award-winning three-part television program, *Making Australia Great*. With a long lens view, Megalogenis gave his summary of the national psyche:

We still have a self-sabotaging streak. Apathy and parochialism ensure that the national focus never strays beyond the bitumen of suburbia ('Did you see what they paid for that awful house up the street?'). Our largest city, Sydney, has caught the global disease of intolerance. Our politicians are getting duller by the doorstep, and we have few genuine heroes to look up to.

In a group setting we are wilfully inarticulate. The chant 'Aussie, Aussie, Aussie! Oi, oi, oi!' is a form of national Tourette's. This tone-deaf cry acts as a shield to protect us, and the rest of the world, from taking Australia too seriously. Only a people that genuinely fear self-reflection would carry on like this. Perhaps this is why we celebrate the military defeat at Gallipoli, as an extension of our aggressive adolescence, a young nation still not ready to find an independent voice. The Anzac tradition serves the dual purpose of making us feel like victims while giving vent, in some sections of the community, to a boorish the-world-can-get-stuffed patriotism.

We are better than that (p3).

Australians may, indeed, be better than Megalogenis characterises them to be, less inclined to be the reluctant citizens Marr surmises, or the egalitarians bound by a democracy of manners that extends to everyone except their politicians, as Hirst suggests. It may well be that, in this period of making democracy, there are problems peculiar to Australia bound up in the claims and counter claims of political decline. But like citizens in all democracies, the challenge remains to go on building the polity that works for them. Essential to that task is making sense of what they see and hear around them – politically speaking.

Chapter 4

Whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent it can be spoken about. There may be truths beyond speech, and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular, that is, to man in so far as he is not a political being, whatever else he may be. Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves.

Hannah Arendt
The Human Condition (1958)

Making sense, politically speaking

Making sense, to oneself and to others, is part of being human and being present in community. When Arendt (1958) asserted that it is only in talking with one another that humans can make sense of their world, she embraced the Aristotelian concept of political activities present in human communities, the '*bios politikas*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*) out of which rises the realm of human affairs' (p. 25). In the modern realm of human affairs, acting and speaking remain central to conditioning the democratic polity. The ideal citizen is an active citizen. The burden of citizenship is to be informed, to participate in the discourse, to consider policies, to weigh up competing claims, to assess facts, to process impressions received and, ultimately, to pass judgment on candidates in periodic elections. However, it is entirely possible – and quite acceptable to some citizens – to bypass all that time-consuming activity in the years between ballot box appointments, and simply act on a whim. In reality, the ubiquity of media and the networked society make it difficult for citizens in western democracies like Australia to approach Election Day without having given politics some thought, applied a measure of judgment, and made a choice. Democracy and the surround-sound nature of democratic discourse demands that people make sense of the political.

Arendt theorised on the life of the mind and the relationship between thinking, judgment and action (1971). Her original work on the separateness of these essentials of political life is both challenging and challenged (Villa, 1999). Villa's useful commentary connects Arendtian representative thinking with Socratic thinking as a public exercise of reason. For Arendt, thinking prepares space for judgment by emptying out prior conceptions and reliance on custom and habits. Representative thinking, rather than being a solitary activity, considers the perspectives of others prior to judgment as the consummate form of political action:

To judge is to engage in rational public dialogue, deliberating with others with whom I must finally come to an agreement and decision. This, in a nutshell, is the Arendtian vision of democratic politics as a politics of judgment and debate, one whose principle of legitimacy is found in the idea of unforced public dialogue (p. 98).

Arendt relies heavily on Plato for whom the integration of reason, emotion and instinctive appetite constituted the human psyche or soul. If these are held in balance, where instinctive appetite is tempered rather than out of control and emotion is in check to be motivating rather than destructive, then reason leads to sound decision-making and wisdom guides the nation-state (Plato, 2007). Arendt's thinking and judging, and the psychic integration Plato imagined can be approached as a process of 'making up one's mind' on any range of matters of human significance. The point is that, as process, making (up) one's mind is never a fixed state.

Researchers whose work is concerned with the political mind and cognition in political communication (Castells, 2013; Lakoff, 2008; Westen, Blagov, Harenski, Clint Kilts, & Hamann, 2006) have sought to understand the brain as the site of mind which, as Castells defined it, 'is a process, not an organ' (p. 138) and because 'communication happens by activating minds to share meaning' (p. 137). The landmark reference for these researchers seeking to understand the brain as it goes about the business of making mind is the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994). After decades of research, the mind-making business remains full of wonder and mystery still to be fully realised (Damasio, 2011). That is a long-term agenda for neuroscientists. In the meantime, since contemporary politics and political discourse are increasingly about laying down impressions and triggering visceral responses rather than they are about encouraging Arendtian thinking, judgment and action, there is good reason for political communications researchers to develop more than a passing interest in mind processing.

Being mindful of the diversity and complexity of the contemporary citizen's life context, from Damasio it is safe to say that the mind is a flow of mental images increasingly stimulated by vision, sound or touch. These images are made in regions of the brain where prior information, previously stored images, can be added. So past and present images contribute to mind-making. The regions of the brain are networked and the integration of perception images with memory images is known as consciousness. Damasio contends that the *conscious* mind has a unique self, an organising principle, an internal milieu which remains the same day after day, establishing a kind of personal continuity. This is what introduces a subjective perspective

to interpreting events – what Goffman would call a footing (1986). So the subjective self may be regarded as the personal point of stability in the world – where so much else is inherently unstable and changeable. There is also the autobiographical self; we remember, we make plans for the future, we construct images of what the future will be when plans are realised, or alternative plans in case earlier plans fail.

At the same time the brain processes emotions and produces feelings. While Damasio draws a distinction between emotion and feeling (because all emotions generate feeling if a person is awake and alert, but not all feelings originate in emotions), political communications researchers have a particular interest in emotions since appeals to emotion feature so prominently in political rhetoric. Emotions make a difference in decision-making. Castells (2013) contends that political cognition, that is, information processing, is emotionally shaped. He cites support among political psychologists for the notion that emotional appeals and rational choices are complementary mechanisms in the decision-making process. When emotion is in play, the conscious mind still maps according to established networks of association. That is, past information processing using particular neural connections will be reused when triggered by new information as emotional prompts.

As a precursor to exploring communication as political persuasion (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986), it is worth noting – again guided by Damasio – that neural circuitry has two distinct emotional pathways, positive and negative, which are networked with that region of the brain where much of the human decision-making process takes place. It happens when an emotionally competent stimulus (ECS), such as a particularly powerful political speech or an angry shock jock's call to mobilise on a political issue, detected by the brain, sets off distinctive patterns of chemical and neural responses. Research has identified six basic emotions attributed by Castells to Ekman's work: 'fear, disgust, surprise, sadness, happiness, and anger' (p. 140).⁹ They are perceived as feelings, derived from emotionally driven changes in the brain that are associated with memories of other events directly experienced or learned culturally. This linking of emotions to events uses those distinct neural pathways according to the special insistence of feeling, positive or negative, generated by secondary emotions, those that are acquired rather than instinctive. To illustrate the point, an adult fear of needles piercing the skin is an insistence of negative feeling acquired from a remembered childhood experience of uncontrollable crying, even though the visit to the doctor so many years earlier, the actual injection and any associated pain are dis-remembered. Special insistences of feeling, called

⁹ Five of these emotions appear as characters in the children's movie *Inside Out* (2015).

somatic markers (Castells, 2013; Damasio, 1994), are acquired during the process of education and socialisation and are relative to the individual's experience of events. Part of the wonder of the mind is that these somatic markers can operate instantly and covertly without coming to consciousness. Societal interventions such as learning 'good' manners and how to share toys with other children extend the mind-making that starts with the basic survival instincts at birth. They add socially permissible and desirable decision-making strategies as the person develops. Somatic markers serve, Damasio theorised, to increase the accuracy and efficiency of decision-making by sorting through the myriad of options for action in response to a situation and immediately rejecting those that are perceived as having negative outcomes. So, for the needle-fearing adult, say, acupuncture is immediately discounted as an option among the remedies for muscular problems even though evidence of its likely effectiveness is readily available. Emotion can dominate in decision-making but it is not inevitable.

Damasio contends that somatic markers support rational decision-making. The alternative, to apply logic without emotion at each and every decision point of everyday life, would require a cost/benefit analysis to be developed for every possible option while allowing for every variable to each element of each option and a weighting of the consequences for each notional outcome. With so many options to evaluate and compare, Damasio found that decisions would never be made in those circumstances, just as he had observed in his patients with damage to that region of the brain essential to processing emotions. Therefore, he concluded, emotion is essential to reasoning and decision-making.

Castells, as a follower of Damasio's mapping of brain activity, adds that emotions are essential for communication, including political communication. They are a source of empathy, identification with or rejection of narratives, including the narratives of election candidates. Much of what human beings consider and communicate and do in the field of politics is highly subject to emotional triggers. As has been said, it is often not a conscious response but is dictated by a person's event history which causes the developing brain circuitry to be wired so that certain connections, and not others, are made when the appropriate prompt is received.

Political discourse is loaded with persuasive prompts. Prompts or cues can be signals for cognitive processing short-cuts. In the field of social psychology and research into attitude persistence, Petty and Cacioppo (1983, 1986) based the theory of Elaboration Likelihood Modelling (ELM) on their conclusion that there were two distinct cognitive processing routes to persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1983):

The central route occurs when a person is both motivated and able to think about the merits of the advocacy presented. Depending on whether the advocacy elicits primarily favourable or unfavourable thoughts, either persuasion, resistance, or boomerang may occur. Attitude changes induced via this route tend to be relatively permanent and predictive of subsequent behaviour. When a person is either not motivated or able to evaluate the merits of an advocacy, then he or she may follow a second route to persuasion. Under this peripheral route, it is not assumed that the message recipient will undertake the considerable cognitive effort required to evaluate the merits of the advocated position. Instead, people's attitudes may be affected by positive and negative cues or simple decision rules or heuristics that allow them to evaluate the advocacy quickly (p. 21).

In their work applying ELM theory to advertising, these researchers conclude that the central route is more difficult to activate since the receiver must first be motivated and able to think about the issue or product information provided. It can be argued that political communication including political advertising encounters a similar challenge. By building up political candidates as celebrities, and relying on snappy slogans and repetitive simple messaging, the political professional's purpose is to target and prompt the shallow or peripheral route for mind activity. Put bluntly, the approach is to minimise the likelihood of thinking. Those with high need of cognition may well be dissatisfied with political communication tailored to shallow level thinking or persistent 'dumbing down' of political discourse. These habituated central pathway thinkers are more likely to have formed attitudes that last and influence subsequent behaviour. They are unlikely to be categorised as voters in the middle or as 'swinging voters'. Peripheral pathway thinkers, on the other hand, are less likely to hold onto attitudes making them susceptible to cues and prompts to try something – or someone – new.

What is not yet available in the literature, it seems at this point in time, is evidence of research into the habit-forming potential of what might be termed 'shallow-form politics' with a dumbed down political discourse. How might reception of such political discourse, received persistently, be affected? Might receivers who repetitively use peripheral pathways in cognitive processing – because it is the shallow level of ability and motivation the produced communication persistently demands of them – lose motivation and/or capacity for central pathway thinking? Might the repeated firing of the brain circuitry along peripheral pathways effectively create thinking habits that resist complex argument? Could a shallow-form, dumbed down political discourse nurture a generation of citizens with low need of cognition? What might counter any dumbing down of receiver citizens persistently subjected to a dumbed down political discourse?

Any tendency to alarm raised by these questions is tempered by knowledge that cognitive processing is not the sole source for finding meaning. Stepping away from the cognitive approach to 'inner' sense-making, there is an 'outer' sense-making recognised through language and communication research. To analyse language as communication is to focus on the dynamic connection between human beings' inner and outer worlds. It is like a bridge that is always 'under construction' with one solid pylon in everyday life and the other in the life of the mind. Explaining language use in this way, Chomsky (2000) discusses the notion of 'common, public language' which he finds mysterious and, as ordinary discourse, useless for empirical enquiry. Individuals have, he contends, their own I-language or competency. Yet, in everyday living, consumers relate to one another via I-languages which must be sufficiently alike for their interaction to be meaningful, that is, for their intentions to be understandable by others. Chomsky appears to be out of step here with Volosinov (1973) who addressed the differential concepts of 'I-experience' and 'we-experience' and different kinds of thinking, for oneself and for the public. Addressing verbal interaction as the stream of utterances, Volosinov asserts language is generated always in accompaniment with non-verbal social acts, and there is nothing abstract or individual about it:

Language acquires life and historically evolves from here, in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers (p. 95).

The points of 'alikehood' in language may be found in semantics, a special part of the field of linguistics (Pêcheux, 1982) concerned with meaning and sense in language. Whilst not wanting to be diverted from the literature treating language in a broader sense than linguistics alone permits, the relevant knowledge to be taken from semantics (and here Volosinov agrees) is that words, as utterances and expressions, can have more than a single literal meaning and these multiple meanings are constituted in the use made of words by the people who use them. So how does verbal utterance and expression take on a *particular* meaning? Firstly, it has an orientation towards an addressee, real or presupposed (Volosinov, 1973) such as the notional voter addressed by a political candidate in a broadcast speech:

Orientation of the word toward the addressee has an extremely high significance. In point of fact, *word is a two-sided act*. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and for *whom* it is meant. As word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*. Each and

every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other' [emphases in the original] (p. 86).

So utterance/expression acquires meaning, in part, from (and for) the social situation within which it is formed. But it is not only the immediate situation that determines structure and meaning; the broader situation is also part of the determination. The dialogic setting, immediate and historical, adds meaning to the verbal interaction. Consider this example: a successful prime ministerial candidate makes a post-election announcement introducing measures she had made a pre-election show of promising would not be adopted by a government she led. Her speech carries meaning beyond the fact of the nature, timing and implementation detail of the measures announced. The announcement in the context of the prior commitment conveys meanings of truth in political campaigning, of political integrity, of trustworthiness and future reliability. For some, it is received as a broken promise. Not every receiver of the announcement will interpret it as a breach of trust. Some will take it as clever navigation in an unexpected minority government context. Finding meaning in utterance/expression also depends on the orientation of the addressee/consumer/receiver in the dialogue (Volosinov, 1973):

To understand another person's utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. For each word of the utterance that we are in process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words. The greater their number and weight, the deeper and more substantial our understanding will be (p. 102).

This clue on how to recognise the depth of receiver understanding in verbal interaction is developed by Volosinov in his exposition of reported speech. Since it is in the moment of reception of an utterance that the receiver begins to develop a response, then what is uttered about utterance – 'words reacting on words' (p. 116) – reveals the received meaning. Extending the earlier example: a voter who receives the news from a hostile orientation will understand the announcement as a broken promise and the word 'lie' might well come to mind in framing an immediate response. In commentary, other accusatory utterances received will strike a similar chord; they might well be reported in speaking to others and so a political narrative is created with meaning not intended in the original utterance. On both sides of this illustrative verbal interaction, the meaning is derived from the words, the theme or significance of those words in context, and the expressive intonation of speech that reveals the value judgment speakers place on the utterance. A single wordplay on a name – Julia becomes 'Juliar', for

example – creates a trigger for meaning ‘perpetrator of the broken promise’. No utterance can be put together without value judgment and every utterance has a value (Volosinov, 1973). And so, in this way – speaking, responding to speaking, and speaking about speaking – discourse is constructed with the potential for multiple meanings. In effect, there are multiple discourses or streams of discourse in circulation in any space/time context.

To understand better the meaning of whatever discourse we encounter, social functional linguists (SFL) such as M.A.K. Halliday and his many disciples (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006; Halliday & Webster, 2009) argue for an approach to studying language ‘which will help us understand how meaning materialises in language, and how language works to construe experience and enact social relationships’ (Webster, 2009). A social-semiotic perspective views language as transmissions of meaning in social contexts. When language is treated as a system of meanings evolved from speech encounters, then the context of situation in which speakers and listeners meet to communicate requires investigation:

The investigation of the situation focuses on three main dimensions: (a) field – what is happening? (b) tenor – who is involved? (c) mode – how is it taking place? Likewise when analysing the text/utterance, we pose similar questions: What is happening? Who is involved? How is it taking place? Corresponding to each question is a component of meaning or semantic metafunction: ideational, interpersonal and textual (p. 7).

An understanding of the semogenic (meaning-making) power of language includes understanding how each language event is an instance of cohesion – of tied language, where speaker B uses language that links with the meanings received from Speaker A. Patterns created by instances of cohesion determine the cohesive harmony of a discussion. Language as it used here is more than word language; it is expression involving the whole body through speaking, listening, gaze, gesture and general physical demeanour. SFL theory suggests that events of expression, which include words, utterances, pauses, gestures and other bodily movement relevant to making meaning, constitute a useful unit of analysis for understanding meaning in discourse.

The continuousness of discourses leads communities to develop discursive processes, creating relationships between words and expressions which constitute meaning. This process enables the transformation of language into an instrument of action and power (Bourdieu, 1992) within fields of practice or markets where the discourse, or what Bourdieu calls ‘linguistic product’ circulates:

What circulates on the linguistic market is not ‘language’ as such, but rather discourses that are stylistically marked both in their production, in so far as each speaker fashions an idiolect from the common language, and in their reception, in so far as each recipient helps to *produce* the message which he perceives and appreciates by bringing to it everything that makes up his singular and collective experience [emphasis in the original] (p. 39).

The consumer/receiver has a unique power over the construction of meaning in Bourdieu’s linguistic market:

The linguistic product is only completely realised as a message if it is treated as such, that is to say, if it is decoded, and...the schemes of interpretation used by those receiving the message in their creative appropriation of the product may diverge, to a greater or lesser extent, from those which guided its production (p. 38).

This power to treat and decode is, however, a qualified power. It is qualified, firstly, by the relative power of the encoder to control distinctive moments in what is a complex structure of relations – the moments of production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction (Hall, 1990). This theory of communication holds that coding of a message via message construction, circulation in discursive form and distribution to different consumer audiences are attempts to control reception without making the control visible to the consumer/receiver. Consistent with Bourdieu’s position, Hall places consumption or reception *within* the production process. So there are two sides or players in the production of meaningful discourse, although there is a lack of equivalence between them. The encoding side is ascendant when codes are naturalised and habituation of code recognition leads the decoding side to align its participation in the production process with the encoding power. When the encoders and decoders are fully aligned, this allows for dominant meanings to emerge in fields of discourse; and nowhere is this more significant than in the field of political discourse.

To name political discourse as such is to categorise it. Categorisation gives meaning to what is observed within the field of discourse and to what is assumed (Edelman, 1977). The contest in politics may be seen as a contest of categorisations. The opposing sides are in competition for public acceptance of a particular categorisation of an issue or of a vision of the future. The language used to define political issues is language likely, according to Edelman, to evoke both fear and hope, threat and reassurance. Myths are created in language and some will hold plausible myths as beliefs. For example, people arriving by boat in Australia to seek asylum have been categorised as illegal boat arrivals often enough to create a threat myth that

becomes the basis for giving reassurance using political pledges to stop the boats. Even in the face of evidence that the method for stopping boatloads of asylum seekers is fraught with ambiguity such that citizens become ambivalent or confused about the political remedy, the dominant language sustains the myth (Edelman, 1977):

As people hear the news every day, they fit it into the themes comprising the structural elements of each form of myth. Experiences are likely to reinforce the same meanings and illustrate them rather than change them (p. 18).

The language of political communication commonly uses metaphor to trigger brain activity and convey meaning. Here the inner and outer sense-making processes intersect. Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) posits that thinking is done by metaphor (Cienki, 2008; Lakoff, 2006). Such approaches to metaphor have been used in recent research to understand how political metaphors are used for maximum effect especially at election times (Vertessen & De Landtsheer, 2008). Whilst linguists may yet struggle with letting go of metaphor as a purely linguistic artefact (Carver & Pikalo, 2008), understanding metaphor as connecting language with brain activity may be increasingly important in the field of political communication.

According to conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors are mental structures that are independent of language but can be expressed through language. Going back to inner sense-making for a moment, metaphorical thought moves from simple to complex capability as the human child brain develops into an adult mind. Repeated firing of neural pair connections strengthens neural circuits so that a permanent link is created. As an example, a request for ‘comfort food’ in seeking something familiar and reassuring may create an image of warm custard in one brain but an entirely different image of chicken soup or vegemite¹⁰ on toast in another. The image of what is recognised and acceptable as comfort food will be wired into the brain and will not be easily dislodged by any other option. If the association between feeling comfort and eating warm custard is strong enough, a ‘metaphorical connection’ will be made. After the experience, the eating of warm custard or recall of the memory of doing so will activate specific neural networks such that the feeling of comfort will register. The structure created by the brain’s organisation of connected experiences is now known as a ‘frame’. When the term was used by Goffman (1978) he was trying to ‘isolate some of the basic frameworks of

¹⁰ A uniquely Australian spread made from yeast extract which President Obama described as ‘horrible’
<http://www.smh.com.au/national/gillard-and-obama-talk-afl-vegemite--and-a-little-bit-of-politics-20110307-1blhx.html> .

understanding available in our society for making sense out of events and to analyse the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of references are subject' (p. 10).

Although it was not without criticism for being vague and woolly thinking (Craib, 1978), Goffman's framing analysis has become foundational for political communication research. The conceptualisation of framing as organised structuring occurring naturally in the brain (Lakoff, 2004, 2008) is consistent with Goffman's aim. But how does knowledge about structuring within the brain relate to understanding how an individual's role and experience of 'real world' events are structured? Castells (2013) makes the connection this way:

Narratives define social roles within social contexts. Social roles are based on frames that exist both in the brain and in social practice. Goffman's (1959) analysis of role-playing as the basis of social interaction also relies on the determination of roles that structure organisations in society. Framing results from the set of correspondences between roles organised in narratives, narratives structured in frames, simple frames combined in complex narratives, semantic fields (related words) in the language connected to the conceptual frames, and the mapping of frames in the brain by the action of neural networks constructed on the basis of experience (evolutionary and personal, past and present) (p. 143).

Lakoff has applied this elaborated concept of framing to understanding citizen receiver responses to political events. He invites criticism, perhaps, by expressing his theories in brief and informal language (2006) to motivate his popular readers to think differently and speak differently in reframing public policy from a progressive perspective:

You can't see or hear frames. They are part of what cognitive scientists call the 'cognitive unconscious' – structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by the consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense. We also know frames through language. All words are defined relative to conceptual frames. When you hear a word, its frame (or collection of frames) is activated in your brain. Reframing is changing the way the public sees the world. It is changing what counts as common sense. Because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently (p. xv).

Lakoff theorises that frames in early childhood brains are fixed by experiences of parenting as either strict father or nurturing parent experiences, and that these frames align with postmodern America's Republican (conservative) and Democrat (progressive) ideologies respectively (2004). The strict father model is based on fear, while the nurturing parent (who can be father

or mother) is based on empathy and responsibility. Heavily summarising Lakoff, who differentiates conservative and progressive values according to the parenting model, he contends that the Republicans have been much better at knowing and using the words that draw consumers/receivers to their worldview:

That is what framing is about. Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary – and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas (p. 4).

It is argued that Lakoff's approach has its limits (Clark, 2012). His 'nation as family' metaphor has been robustly challenged (Pinker, 2006) and somewhat disparaged for letting his politics get in the way of his scholarship. It might well be that Lakoff's error is in making what is, for some, a giant leap from what happens deep in the brain during socialisation and what manifests later in life as political affiliation. It is, perhaps, due to drawing a simple connection between moral identity and public identity, between what constitutes our conception of what is good and of ourselves as the kind of person we want to be, with the social and political affiliations forged in pursuit of that self-conceptualised person (Rawls, 1996).

Strategic framing is a feature of political discourse because it has worked effectively and often enough for an inherent affinity between political inputs and outcomes to be recognised (Clark, 2012). It can be said to be doubly successful when the language of the strategic political frame is taken up and repeated, not just by citizen receivers but by elite political opponents who succumb to the agenda-setting frame. This is why Lakoff calls for a new language to combat the success of conservatives in setting the terms of so much political debate. Whilst framing is legitimate, even normative, it can be manipulative. In this guise, strategic framing is authenticated as professional persuasion in democracies (Packard, 1960) and propaganda in totalitarian regimes (Marlin, 2002).

Professional persuasion, commonly termed 'spin', might be legitimate framing of political messages aimed at strengthening communicative power to evoke a desired response. But the consumer public, often encouraged by media journalists and program presenters, widely regard political spin as dealing in something other than truth – whatever their truth may be. The professionals who craft the messages are branded as 'spin *doctors*', doctoring being a metaphor for treating or manipulating truth. Just as the online media phenomenon of 'native advertising' is based on making brand and product promotion look like anything but advertising by embedding it in the genuine news pages, what is political can be disguised or embedded in symbols of everyday, ordinary life. So how is the political to be recognised?

I mean here to explore the political, not in the sense that by living in a *polis* humans are political beings, but to tap into a more functional vein of knowledge. Kenneth Hudson (1978) opens his book on the language of modern politics with a chapter on 'What Politics is About'. Politics wasn't an easy word to use, Hudson writes, because politics means such different things to different people. After citing dictionary definitions about politics as an activity and a science, he comes circuitously to the bottle of sauce, specifically Prime Minister Harold Wilson's bottle of sauce, on the dining table at 10 Downing Street. The bottle of sauce, Hudson called on consumers to recognise, was the language of Labour politics during Wilson's tenure of power when elitism was shunned and the 'People's Tastes' were shared. No words could have made the point as well, according to Hudson, because modern politics was not confined to words. By inference, what the popular imagination might have once imagined as the private dining room in the Prime Ministerial home, needed to be re-imagined and recognised as within the scope of their contemporary political discourse. His life was like their life. But the recognition of the political should not rest there, according to Hudson. Indeed, just as UK politics then was about the sauce bottle, so too it was about 'clothes, eating places, entertainment, literature, films, houses and holidays quite as much as speeches and articles' (p. 19). Without drawing any boundaries, Hudson saw the potential for the political to be everywhere. Despite the offering of Hudson's apparently open and shut case, identifying the political continues to be on the research agenda, motivated by the need to understand what is both a dimension of everyday life and a specific space of social action where engagement with particular institutions and processes is ongoing (Corner, 2011). Corner, however, is cautious about definition of the political before there is an understanding of the reasons for the distance between sites of 'politicality':

There is a tendency in some writing on the issue to privilege the researcher's perception of the 'political' character of particular activities and attitudes and to give reduced attention to the fact these may not be seen as 'political' by those involved (p. 268).

That the political may be in the eye/ear of the viewer/listener is illustrated in this instructive example given by Castells (2013). As a young student opposing Franco's repressive Spanish regime, Manuel Castells campaigned by leaving subversive political pamphlets on empty seats in dark movie theatres. The tactic was planned in the expectation that movie goers would pick up the purple print materials and be mobilised to rebellion by reading the reality of their oppression. It did not happen. Retelling the story decades later as an academic analysing the power of communication, Castells concluded from that very practical lesson that the

message is effective only if the receiver is ready for it and if the messenger is identifiable and reliable. There seems to be something deeply symbolic about the darkened space of the theatre and an audience completely unaware of it as a designated site of their engagement in their nation's turbulent political discourse. Arguably, Castells and his activist friends had an entirely different orientation from that of the movie goers about where, physically and mindfully, politics happens. As a public space designed and operated for entertainment, the audience might be forgiven for not recognising that when they bought their tickets they would be entering a space of political significance. But was not the theatre a space in the public realm where politics was legitimate business? What were they thinking – that it was a private space where politics would, or perhaps should, be off-limits?

What constitutes the public realm and where politics is located has been debated since Aristotle and Plato drew distinctions between the public and the private. For them, politics was distinctly public rather than private business. Discourse about power and the *polis* occurred in the public political domain which was distinct from the arena of household power (Mahajan, 2013). The political could be recognised because of where it was sited and because of those who were present. Only those on whom citizenship was conferred – certainly not slaves or women – constituted the body public that was permitted to debate and deliberate on what was needed for the common good. For those others, politics had no legitimate claim to be in their mind-space since they had no claim to be present in the role or physical spaces reserved for nominated citizens. Arendt draws heavily on the structuring of the Greek *polis* and the household in making her distinction between the public and the private realm (1958). The *polis* was where people were free and equal, while the household presided over by the male head of household was the site of slavery and inequality. Only the head of the household could move freely between the public and private realms. But in the modern world, Arendt found the political and social worlds to be much less distinct. The two realms flow into each other. The necessities of life claim attention in both realms, so that much of what was private is public. Post-modern researchers agree (O'Sullivan, 2013) that making the distinction between private and public realms is increasingly difficult. It is argued (Mahajan, 2013) that some of the ideas associated with the notion of public and private need to be abandoned because 'in a liberal democratic society the private and the public can neither be defined in opposition to one another, nor considered as discrete zones or spheres of activity' (p. 16). This, Mahajan notes, is in contrast to the popular imagination that views the private as a domain sheltered from external scrutiny while the public is an open domain, a state where other citizens are present and the

structures of authority and government prevail. But both the ancients and the popular imagination are challenged by societal changes that have blurred the lines between public and private realms and, as a consequence, have freed up space for politics and public political discourse.

When Bourdieu (2013) mapped the political space he did so by segmenting the public by occupation and positioning them in relation to the French newspaper and magazine titles being the political products of the day. A point to be made is that in this conceptualisation the media serves the role of dominant navigational tool and guide to what is political. It is to the media space that consumers have traditionally turned for information about the issues and the people populating the political space. In the contemporary communication realm, the media remains a site of public connection where life-politics is made visible through reality TV, soap opera story lines and celebrity lifestyle news (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2010). For example, the revelation by film star Angelina Jolie of her preventative double mastectomy was followed by a national poll in the US which found 75 per cent of 2500 sampled had heard Jolie's story although only 3.4 per cent had read her original op-ed article in *The Entertainment Weekly* (Miller, 2013). Most, it was reported, got the news second- or third-hand from other media sources, including newspapers, TV, gossip magazines and the internet. The worldwide coverage of the story and spin-off articles provided health education facts and the need for awareness among high at-risk communities, including black women (a link within Miller's article on the *Daily News* site) and Ashkenazi Jews (Cohen, 2014). Within six months, referrals to cancer genetic clinics in three Australian states had tripled, showing what was described as the 'Angelina effect' (Hagen, 2013). Public health, preventative screening and funding for medical procedures are all part of a discourse around government resource allocation and access to healthcare. What played out around Angelina Jolie's celebrity news fits within what Couldry et al regard, in the broad sense, to be 'the political' – that is, the world of public *deliberation* and public *action*. Was it necessary for consumers to be aware of the news as a political rather than a celebrity story, so they might recognise their response as contributing to an aspect of political discourse? How does an individual go about the complex process of understanding or finding meaning in any narrative she encounters in the course of everyday life?

First, it needs to be said that use of the word 'understanding' here is not meant to imply there is any single truth or reality to be defined without ambiguity in this exploratory exercise. Arendt (1971) takes the view that the boundlessness of progress makes *the* true (her emphasis) unattainable. There are verities, however, 'by which we find our bearings in a world of

appearances' (p. 55). Edelman (1970, 1977) provides a rich resource for exploring the classic – and, he suggests, unresolvable – question of difference between appearance and reality. Indeed, a single set of facts can generate multiple perceptions and so create multiple realities. This capacity for politicians to create and consumers to accept multiple realities is the stuff that politics is made of; and it is language that evokes the political realities people experience. Much of that has to do with the way language is used by politicians and spin doctors to create both fears and hopes, to invite participation or resistance, or to evoke nothing meaningful at all. Long-time columnist for *The Guardian* Simon Hoggart (2004) became fascinated with UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's 'verbless verbiage' and 'meaningless metaphors':

Early on I began to notice the distinctive signs. One was the verbless sentence. 'Hope. Opportunity. For our young people, a brighter future...' If a verb is a 'doing word' as we learned in school, then these sentences contained no promise of action, but a great deal of pious intention. By 1997, and his first speech as Prime Minister, there were 97 sentences without verbs; by the early years of the new century the number routinely climbed to 120-plus (website page).

Hoggart's commentary and diligence in keeping tally of Blair's linguistic adventures could be interpreted as the frustrations of a formalist who loves language as syntax and grammar.

Alternatively, it usefully confirms the functionality of language as a tool for communication. Identification of Blair's adaptive use of language resonates with Butler's preference for Emergent Grammar as a sound basis for analysing the function of language (2009). A functional approach would recognise and analyse Blair's language as performance tailored for an audience in context. De-cluttering speech by omitting verbs – thinning the speech to thicken the meaning – arguably made it easier for the receiver to hear the words that were critical to the producer's intended meaning. But the successful producer/politician adapts language to suit the receiver and reception environment. Analysing media reception of another Blair speech, his address to the European Union Parliament in June 2005, Kjeldsen (2013) found the British PM in full command of language construction and context. His most quoted utterance from that speech, 'I am a passionate European. I always have been', was received with 12.0 seconds of applause which is above the average of 7-8 seconds (Atkinson, 1988). Had Hoggart been critic on that day he would have found subject, verb, object – all present; short sentences with just the one adjective, 'passionate'; use of the personal pronoun claiming authorship of the words and passion; use of the word 'European' to position himself within the

audience – not just today but ‘always’; and the meaning received taken as overwhelmingly positive measured by the length of applause.

Allowing that politicians like Blair develop their own language style for the public sphere, Edelman (1977) draws attention to the distinction between formal and public language. Formal language is characterised as factual, logical, and inviting evaluation against a range of possibilities laid out for examination. In policy formulation, it presents from the perspective of those whose lives are part of the situation in consideration and so invites others to ‘put themselves in the other’s shoes’. Such language might be received and perceived as respectful and polite (Edelman, 1977):

Just as formal language is precise in its statements of fact and of logical relationships, and in distinguishing reasons from conclusions, so it is also explicit in distinguishing affect from meaningful propositions. Public language, by contrast, encourages its user and his audience to confuse reasons with conclusions and affect with meaning (p. 108).

Public language also provides for ‘us’ and ‘them’, allies and enemies. In the context of the nation and its security, this form of language calls for patriotism and loyalty while creating perceptions of threat from outsiders. So when Australian Prime Minister Howard declared that ‘We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’, he was framing the discourse around refugees arriving in boats to seek asylum as a threat to be fought off by an indignant nation doing whatever it takes to protect its own (Howard, 2001). There was nothing in the language to suggest the complexities of sovereign right or Australia’s obligations as a signatory to any international charter of human rights. A decade later, Prime Minister Abbott, again addressing the asylum seeking situation, framed a significant element of his 2010 election campaign messaging with the pledge to ‘stop the boats’. There was no explanation of how this might be done, under what authority or at what cost. Fulfilling Edelman’s characterisation of public language, it assumed acceptance of illegality and threat from outsiders who must be stopped. In this form of threatening public language:

Sentences become less and less complete and qualifiers more blatantly omitted as more and more is taken for granted, premises are more often left unquestioned, group ties grow stronger, and outside groups are perceived as more dangerous (p. 112).

Treating the unplanned arrival of asylum seekers with threatening public language politicised the issue when it might otherwise have been treated as a non-partisan issue of national

compassion and international justice. It invited opposition and resistance and a battle waged with words, and words on words. Negative somatic markers were triggered to generate response. In time, not only were the sentences less complete and qualifiers omitted, secrecy was invoked so that the ‘stop the boats’ policy was implemented using what might be described as an extreme public language of official silence.

When tough public language use is replicated across multiple issues, patterns and trends appear in political discourse. When the discourse is persistently conducted in public language that hides facts, denies participation in policy making and invites antagonistic behaviour between allies and enemies, those outside the politically powerful and their sympathisers are bound to resist. However, the language of resistance tends to be formal rather than public, relying on logic and qualified argumentation – a more complex language than the simple public language increasingly practised in support of conservative political power (Brock, 2002; Lakoff, 2004, 2008). When those in power set the agenda and choose the language used to prosecute that agenda, then the political discourse inevitably reflects the situational language and dictates meaning. It is intended to make *finding* meaning unnecessary.

Finding meaning is processing for sense. Throughout this and earlier chapters, the term ‘sense-making’ has been used with intent. The attraction of the term is its work as a verb borrowed from Dervin (2011; 2003) because it fits well with the conceptualisation of democracy and discourse as never fixed and always in the process of being made or under construction:

What is involved is individual and collective sense-making, and sense-making demands not only observings, but thinkings, feelings, rememberings, self-understandings, musings, comparings, illustratings, abstractings, disagreeings, contestings. What is involved is a matter of developing new ways, in the globalised electronic context, of helping people hear themselves and each other and express themselves in ways that make hearing possible (p. 345).

Dervin insists on communication as a dynamic process and, coming from the field of information management, asserts the relevance of helping people hear themselves and each other to the democratisation of communication. In the networked society, as audiences test out their hybrid power as receivers/producers, these concepts of democratising communication and helping people hear themselves and each other are ripe for further development.

Summary – Part A

This first section of the thesis has introduced the problem and defined key concepts surrounding reception and democratic engagement. It has sought out the enduring themes in making democracy through the ages and described the context for making democracy today in a mediatised, consumerised and globalised environment. A case study of Australian democratic discourse has been presented. Finally, the literature has been mined for a basic understanding of how citizens find meaning and make sense of communication through inner and outer processing – through mind and language.

The chapters in Part B begin with a detailed report on how an innovative and, within the possibilities, democratising methodology was designed, developed and implemented. It is followed by a lengthy chapter given over in large part to the voices of the project participants. Through framing and language analysis, meanings received from the contemporary political discourse are revealed. The analysed findings are discussed in the light of knowledge and issues raised in Part A. There is a concluding chapter, and an afterword that briefly updates context and returns to the point of ‘difficult distance’ from which this project began.

Part B: HEARING VOICES

Chapter 5

What do ordinary Australians have to say when you engage them in a conversation about politics and give them plenty of time and a willing ear?

Judith Brett & Anthony Moran
Ordinary People's Politics

Turning up the volume: a methodology for hearing ordinary voices

The work covered in Part A throws up a number of ideas that excite for their potential in testing alternative approaches in research implementation. It is clear by now that this project is interested in ordinary people for their sense-making. Where does a researcher find ordinary people willing to participate? What methods have been used in the past to recruit and then draw out the views of ordinary people? Focus groups are well accepted in the academic realm, although they do invite criticism in the wider community sceptical about political party market research and polling (Gittens, 2015). Is there a way of drawing on the established method whilst anticipating scepticism and avoiding what might be grounds for criticism? The research question is concerned with democracy, democratic discourse, and democratisation; can the researching method itself be democratic and democratising in implementation? Sense-making discussed in the previous chapter has already thrown out the challenge to look for alternative approaches to hearing and observing in researching communicating. This project wants and needs to listen well to its participants. It is conceptualised, therefore, as an opportunity for enhanced listening to ordinary voices *on their terms*, for democratising research insofar as such possibilities exist, and shaping an appropriate response to these aims through the research method.

This chapter reviews qualitative methods favoured in political communications research and presents the rationale for opting for variations to traditional approaches in participant recruitment, data gathering and analysis for this particular project. It introduces what is termed here as Polling Booth Participant Recruitment (PBPR), same-day data gathering (SDDG) and wide-scope discussion groups as an alternative to the focus group and an adaptation of the group interview method. Units of analysis are at the micro-analytic level and are identified as 'events of expression' in speech being closer to thought unit than utterance. The rationale is given for adopting a combination of framing and language analysis as the research approach. There is a discussion of strategic and tactical considerations in developing the methodological approach and, in conclusion, a critical assessment of the innovations in method.

Ordinary People's Politics (Brett & Moran, 2006) stands out as an exemplar for a research approach that listens to Australians talking about politics within the context of their ordinary lives. It strongly points to qualitative method over quantitative for hearing voices:

Quantitative methods, even as they stream and sort, also homogenise. Voices are turned into numbers, and the reasoning, the hesitations, the moral inflection, the emotional colour all disappear into tables of figures. The aim of our approach is not to discover the faces behind the views in order to present a montage vox pop, but to reveal aspects of people's political outlooks that are barely visible to quantitative measures by showing people thinking about the society they live in with the resources they have available (p. 4).

Brett and Moran and others in their project team conducted face-to-face interviews over two periods spanning several years. They interviewed some participants a second time and conducted one focus group and a panel workshop: 'We believe the panel workshop is a useful method in qualitative research which relies heavily on interpretive skill. It provides some sort of check on the biases of subjectivity' (p. 329). Their interviewees were geographically spread since their project interest was in diversity of views and variations within a political culture encompassing metropolitan and regional constituencies. Brett and Moran report that this mixed method proved successful for them and for all the people their report profiled. 'They were sent copies of their respective chapters prior to publication' (p. 330).

Brett and Moran (2006) contend that in a democracy the views of ordinary people will always be of interest and their approach is picked up in this project with its attention to how ordinary people find meaning. Helpfully, in their work, they gave 'ordinary' a value beyond the meanings political commentators attribute to it:

[T]he term 'ordinary' comes up again and again when Australians talk about their social world and their place in it, as do its synonyms, 'average', 'normal' and 'everyday' ... They are not famous, and although some are engaged with politics, as party members or community activists, *they are not at the centre of political power* [emphasis added] (pp. 2-3).

Representativeness is always an issue for researchers. It explains why research projects are based often on randomised demographic sampling. Brett and Moran, however, demonstrate that ordinariness makes research participants recognisable to the majority who, like them, are outside the centre of political power. Their work establishes ordinariness is an equally valid criterion for representativeness without risking authenticity in qualitative research. Indeed, the

Brett-Moran model encourages preference for an ‘ordinariness-as-representative’ approach to participant selection in research projects such as this one rather than recruitment of a carefully balanced demographic sample.

There are diverse qualitative methods available to political communications researchers. Traditionally these are survey and experimental research and content analysis (Holbert & Bucy, 2011, 2013). There is a vast amount of regular political surveying of the Australian community and much of this – the weekly or fortnightly Essential Report (EMC, 2013) provides an example – is publicly available. Such surveys, even when they ask for a scaled choice, are inadequate to the purpose of revealing how consumer citizens reach their views or why a notional choice might be made in a survey response. The core research question in this project calls for revealed insights into *how* ordinary people receive messaging, *what* meanings they find in the messaging, and *what effects* this might have on them as citizens. A questionnaire or survey is inadequate for answering that suite of questions. In recent decades, political communications researchers have adopted the use of focus groups, the method favoured by market researchers and political campaigners to test and hone campaign messages (Jarvis, 2011; Luntz, 2007). World Wide Web technology is being used to track online communications so that networks of political influence can be mapped and analysed. A critical consideration for the researcher is to identify the methodology that best fits the concepts and contexts from which the research question emerged. Maintaining regard to the nature of research questions points to the right tools for the job (Kosicki, McLeod, & McLeod, 2013).

The interview method used by Brett and Moran is widely and successfully used by qualitative researchers, especially in the field of oral history (Andrews, 2007; Yow, 2005). What the individual interview method lacks, however, and it is the case with other methods such as surveys, questionnaires and certain experiments, is the potential inherent in group dynamism to produce surprise findings generated by the interaction between project participants. Jarvis (2011), while acknowledging limitations in the method, makes a compelling case for focus groups as being democratic conversations that can give participants power and voice. More than that, Jarvis contends, they are *group interviews* which are closer in context to real life where opinions are formed, not in isolation, but in social interaction. The group interview allows participants to be audience, their familiar role in political discourse, but also to be speaker and maker of the argument. They can ask questions of each other and influence the discussion agenda.

The self-declared 'committed disciple of focus groups' (Luntz, 2007) favoured them over surveys which could measure thoughts and opinions; but it was in focus groups that people could explain how they felt, giving a deeper understanding of the mind and heart: '[A] well-run focus group is the most honest of all research techniques because it involves the most candid commentary and all of the uncensored intensity that real people can muster' (p. 75). As a political consultant and professional wordsmith focused on fine tuning products and marketing messages, Luntz's context for promoting focus groups was the marketability of 'words that work' for political insiders. Luntz advocated the benefits of focus groups well before they came to be valued by academic researchers.

In her examination following the adoption of focus groups in political communication research, Jarvis (2011) agreed with Luntz: 'Indeed, focus groups provide insight into how individuals make sense of messages and form social opinions in the contemporary over-communicated environment' (p. 283). In describing focus groups as a unique methodology, Jarvis summarises their distinct characteristics as being truly group interviews, contextual, relational, dialogic, tied to meaning, heuristic, revelatory and democratic. Other researchers find downsides to focus groups. Briggs (1986) warns that there are plenty of communicative blunders to be made in group interviewing, but finds these can be overcome by methodological sophistication in the conduct and analysis of interviews. When Morgan (1997) makes a comparison of focus groups, participant observation and individual interviews, he argues that focus groups are in some sense unnatural settings because of the fact that the researcher creates and directs the groups. In any qualitative research, the interests of the researcher will intrude on the participant contribution. These will arise well before a researcher walks into the room for an interview or takes up a position in an observational setting. There are ethical obligations on all researchers to ensure participants are well informed about the research interests and the scope of the project at the point of study recruitment. This represents a necessary intrusion, but an intrusion nonetheless. The requirement that participants give informed consent accepts that they will have prior knowledge and some expectation of what is to occur in the data collection setting. The time lapse between recruitment of participants and the actual conduct of a focus group or individual interview gives the participant time to think over the topic, to speculate on or anticipate what might arise, or even plan to have their say about a matter of special interest. Many researchers will utilise 'intrusion' as a focusing. For Morgan, however, this makes focus groups distinctly less naturalistic than participant observation so there is always some residual uncertainty about the accuracy of what the participants say. He concedes, however, that this

control is less than can be exerted in an individual interview. Nevertheless, Morgan allows that the ability to turn the interaction in the group interview over to the participants themselves provides focus groups with a particular strength. This is consistent with the democratic and dialogic characteristics of focus groups as defined by Jarvis. In assessing the relative strengths of individual and group interviews, Morgan acknowledges that issues of depth can sometimes favour focus groups because it cannot be assumed that a participant in fact has more to say than would be said by her in the group interview. On balance, he resolves that focus groups offer something of a compromise between the strengths of participant observation and individual interviewing.

There is an issue not widely discussed in relation to focus groups and Morgan (1997) stopped short of it when discussing researcher control. The concern relates to the role for prompts and stimuli in focus groups. Is there not a deliberate ‘fencing’ influence on proceedings, a ruling in and ruling out of what is open for attention, when materials are introduced to prompt responses? The use of stimuli arguably defines topic boundaries, narrowing the focus and scope of discussion. In political market research, it is common for focus groups to be shown materials, mock-ups of political advertisements, for example, or clips of candidates making campaign speeches. The group members, having been directed to focus on a particular subject, are then asked for their reaction to the political stimuli. Some prompts will serve to trigger recall or, having never encountered the material before, focus group participants’ opinions may be valued for their freshness and authenticity as a first response. There is, arguably, something deliberately unnatural or artificial about the injection of stimuli – admittedly a useful mechanism for maintaining focus on the researcher’s terms – if the researcher is intent on hearing participant voices on *their* terms in what is conceptualised as democratising research. Of course, discussion across the broadest of topics is bounded at some point, including the finite passage of time for discussion. Investigative settings are not totally without boundaries, but pushing out the boundaries in discursive research settings suggests there are benefits to be had.

To reduce the risk of the researcher exerting a controlling influence during interviews calls for something more than doing away with stimuli, clarifying the role and function of the interviewer/facilitator or honing skills to be an astute or clever questioner. In her narratives of political change, social historian Molly Andrews (2007) reframes the researcher/interviewer as listener and audience to story-telling:

I was the person – and in most cases the only person – who was present when interviewees recounted to me stories about their lives. The contact between us was direct, often intense, and sometimes prolonged. I was clearly accountable to them, and this sense of personal responsibility stayed with me throughout the life of each project and beyond. I felt that I had made, in a sense, a personal promise to take care, to tread cautiously with the material of other people's lives. Does this same level of ethical accountability pertain to the use of data in the public domain? Was I part of an imagined audience...? (p. 16).

This reflection on researcher as interviewer suggests there is potential for the researcher as discussion facilitator to avoid being received as an intruder upon individual or group interviews. By being an attentive listener, the facilitator's questions are more likely to be directed at drawing greater depth from what is being said, to encourage the interviewee to elaborate further rather than to direct the discussion. In a group setting, the facilitator/listener joins up with the other listeners in the room. This contributes to the democracy of the group. When this is effective, the 'right' to ask questions shifts away from the researcher as interviewer and is transferred to the group. There is no imposed barrier to either asking or answering. This and the openness to *their* terms contributes to the democratisation of research activity without ignoring the fact that the researcher will always have a privileged position; it is a question of how much privilege.

This present project is drawn to the development of a research method that would widen the scope of group discussion by avoiding the use of artificial stimuli to direct focus, relying on participants to draw on their own experience and taking a wide-scope view of evidence presented in the participants' own language. No method can claim to be pure and natural, but some methods may be less managed than others and so be more democratising than others.

Options for analysing and measuring group deliberation each have their benefits and limitations (Black, Burkhalter, Gastil, & Stromer-Galley, 2013). In-depth participant interviews, for example, offer the benefit of learning about deliberation in participants' own language but are limited by the difficulty in comparing experiences across individuals and groups. Similarly, discussion analysis limits generalisability although it benefits from close attention to interaction and observable patterns relevant to the group. It enables the researcher to view each session of data-gathering as a discrete whole or the combination of discussions as evidence in entirety. Observation analysis views aspects of participant behaviour and demeanour as important contextual information. A caution attributed to ethologist Niko

Tinbergen (Stewart, Salter, & Mehu, 2011, 2013) warns that contempt for simple observation is a lethal trait in any science. Valuing observation follows the methodological approach encouraged by sociolinguist Charles Briggs (1986): ‘It is...crucial to design a methodological plan in such a way that interview data are systematically supplemented with other types of information whenever possible’ (p. 98). He goes on to contend that the communicative structure of an entire interview affects the meaning of each utterance, therefore ‘the interview must be analysed as a whole before any of its component utterances are interpreted’ (p. 104).

Foucault (1972) addresses the analysis of discourse from several perspectives: what is said, what is already said, what is not said and, also, what is never said. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he is interested in the unities and discontinuities of discourse. A method of analysis may follow an historical theme, and just as legitimately it may be the ‘interpretation of hearing’ what is manifest and at the same time what is secretly present or ‘not-said’; but above all the analyst must be ready to receive and treat every moment of discourse as and when it occurs (p. 25). A Foucauldian approach permits valuing a text in its raw state as ‘a population of events in the space of discourse in general. One is led therefore to the project of a *pure description of discursive events* as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it’ (p. 27, emphasis in the original). From Foucault, it is possible to approach a field of discourse by first acknowledging the background against which discursive events stand out and defining the field as the ‘totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them’ (p. 27). The effective statements of the text under analysis in this project are identified as events – or more specifically ‘events of expression’ – and are described to make clear that it is these particular statements *and not others* that constitute this occurrence of discourse. This allows an exploration of sense-making by virtue of what is being said, and the grouping of effective statements by theme and tone.

Understanding what is being said in what is said is a Foucauldian conundrum. Questions framed around what is being said suggest answers can be found in words, phrases and sentences. Qualitative research that produces data as speech or language strongly suggests a method of language analysis. This is not to presume a formal linguistic approach where words and sentences are analysed for their structural features. Taking a view of the text as ‘language in the round’ (Halliday, 1977) allows for analysis of language units that extend beyond the structural norm in traditional linguistics. This approach, which is different from but not incompatible with Foucault’s, fits with finding meaning within ‘events of expression’ being akin to thought units as language constituted by many words, sentences, utterances, hesitations,

non-verbal language and occasional interruptions. This is consistent with Volosinov's (1973) view that receivers don't hear words; they hear what is important or unimportant, what is pleasant or unpleasant, what is true or false.

Since Goffman's seminal work, framing analysis has become foundational for political communication research (Craib, 1978; Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Gerhards & Rucht, 1992; Goffman, 1986; Pan & Kosicki, 2001; Tannen, 1993). For sociologists Dennis Chong and James Druckman (2013):

The major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from multiple perspectives and evaluated on different bases, not all of which will yield the same attitude toward the issue. Framing refers to a process by which citizens learn to construe and evaluate an issue by focusing on certain 'frames' – i.e., certain features and implications of the issue – rather than others (p. 239).

In the field of political communications, much of the research using framing theory has been interested in media framing of the news (Scheufele, 1999). Frames are important in the communications produced by elites since they can, and are crafted to, affect the attitudes and behaviours of their audiences (Chong & Druckman, 2013), although not in every context (Druckman, 2003):

[F]raming effects do *not* occur in many political settings. Elite competition and citizens' interpersonal conversations often vitiate and eliminate framing effects. However, I also find that when framing effects persist, they can be even more pernicious than often thought – not only do they suggest incoherent preferences but they also stimulate increased confidence in those preferences (Abstract p. 1).

How long might framing effects persist? Lakoff's work on the effects of strict and nurturing parenting would suggest they last a lifetime, are maintained by language and have a lot to do with the consistency with which people think and behave politically (2004, 2008). A combination of language and framing analysis suggests a highly suitable method for building knowledge of how ordinary people, in discussion, find meaning in political discourse.

Based on these considerations, the methodology applied in this project is framing and language analysis of group discussions involving ordinary Australians voting in the 2013 federal election, where the research setting is as natural and the process as democratising as is possible.

Method

The political nature of the research problem under investigation required that participants be people eligible to participate in Australia's democratic life. In political science research, especially projects using surveys, voting is an accepted shorthand or proxy for an individual's engagement with democracy. For the purposes of this project, conducted in an ecology of compulsory voting, voting in and of itself is an inadequate definition of democratic engagement. But in the research design, eligibility to vote serves as a straightforward qualifier for identifying a pool of prospective participants willing to talk about their views as citizens in a democracy. So, as minimum essentials for participation, those recruited would be ordinary citizens eligible to vote in Australia's next election. Favouring a qualitative method, the project did not necessarily demand recruitment of a large, statistically diverse demographic sample; nevertheless, some basis for representativeness or typicality was required for generalizability. Seeking to recruit a cohort of ordinary Australians meant, theoretically, there were millions of possible recruits. The field had to be narrowed.

An exploratory search of the most recent census data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) suggested a viable basis for narrowing the field of prospects. A former ABS analyst and blogger had mined the 2011 census data looking for Australia's most typical town before turning his attention to identifying the most typical suburb in Australia (Glenn, 2013). His approach can be quoted in full (including his dramatic build-up towards announcement):

The challenge of defining Australia's most typical suburb is a bit daunting. Our suburbs are very diverse places, all built at different times, of vastly different population sizes, character and distance from the city. I've come up with some similar characteristics to the towns, to have a look at, but with a key difference. These are compared to the capital city averages. For this exercise, I'm also excluding suburbs of non-capital city centres (e.g. Geelong, Gold Coast).

1. Population – not as important as for towns, since suburbs are usually contiguous urban areas – I've limited it to suburbs in our state capitals which have more than 500 people, which gives a reasonable population size for the analysis.
2. Median age – National average is 37 years, so all suburbs are compared to this.
3. Average household size – Capital cities average is 2.61 people per household.
4. Couples with children – Capital cities average is 32.5 per cent (per cent of all households).

5. Households with a mortgage – Capital cities average is 35.0 per cent (of all households).
6. Qualifications – Percentage of people over 15 who have a bachelor degree or higher qualification – 22.1 per cent for the capital cities average.
7. Born overseas – 30.7 per cent for the capital cities average.
8. SEIFA Index of Advantage/Disadvantage. The national average is about 1,003.

The choice of these indicators is arbitrary but they give a good spread of the major Census characteristics, and many of them vary markedly across our suburbs. In particular, overseas born populations are concentrated in particular parts of our capitals, and qualifications – university degrees – are concentrated in the inner suburbs and trade qualifications in the outer suburbs.

Unlike the town blog, I haven't weighted the criteria. Since it's based on capital city averages, there is no need to skew it in any way.

So I have simply used the average absolute deviation from the capital cities average for each of those seven parameters.

And without further ado – the winner of the most average suburb in Australia is..... ****DRUM ROLL****

Oak Park, Victoria

About 12km north-west of Melbourne (in the **City of Moreland**) – with an average deviation of just 3.4 per cent from these characteristics – is the most average place in Australia! **Oak Park** had a population of 5,771 in the 2011 Census (also about average for suburbs of our capital cities). Median age of 36, average household size of 2.54. Couples without children, mortgages and qualifications almost identical to the Australian average. 29.4 per cent of the population were born overseas – mainly an older Italian population, and new Chinese and Indian immigrants.

Just missing out on being the most average –

West Croydon, South Australia
Moorabbin, Victoria
Darlington, South Australia
Oakden, South Australia
Nunawading, Victoria
Cheltenham, Victoria

So it would seem that the suburbs of Melbourne and Adelaide dominate the ‘most average’ suburbs in Australia list!

For the record, the LEAST average of those 2,494 suburbs which met the population criterion, is The Ponds, a new growth area north of Blacktown in western Sydney. In the Ponds, almost 100 per cent of households have a mortgage, 60 per cent are couples with children and 43 per cent were born overseas (website page).

This analysis generated the notion that the most average Australian suburban environment was a highly suitable location for the recruitment of ‘ordinary’ people who would be representative because of their recognisability as being non-elite and away from the centre of political power. But would the citizens of Oak Park be open to an approach to participate? Three decades earlier, their not too distant neighbours in Richmond framed as ‘Struggletown’ (McCalman, 1984) had given a ‘sobering lesson in how little politics matter to most people’. Allowing that might again be the case, this research would benefit by capturing any such views. Recruitment of the participant pool, therefore, was approached as an inclusive process taking care not to exclude *a priori* anyone for whom politics might not be all that interesting. The devised method utilizing same day recruitment and same day data-gathering is regarded as innovative and therefore is described in some detail.

Approaching participants at random in small local shopping areas was tested and quickly abandoned as too time/resource intensive. In the quiet areas there were few people during daytime hours or stay-at-home mums or retirees appeared to be over-represented. For various reasons it was not deemed sensible to linger at the train station or bus stops in the hope of recruiting workers on their way home from work. Then it was recognised that the upcoming Election Day provided a strategic opportunity for direct contact with a large cross-section of Oak Park residents when they turned out to vote. With a well-planned and concerted effort, a pool of prospects could be identified and participants recruited in a single day. By targeting people arriving at their local polling station, the researcher could be confident that recruits would satisfy the threshold requirement that participants be both eligible to vote in the 2013 federal election and local to the Oak Park area.

Stringent regulations cover the conduct of non-authorised individuals in polling precincts (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). It was deemed wise to plan ahead to avoid any challenge on the day with the potential to derail the recruitment process. In the week prior to polling day, the researcher visited the local Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) office in the electorate of Wills which includes the suburb of Oak Park. The senior officer was advised of the project

and provided with copies of the university-approved Project Information for Participants and the questionnaire that people would be asked to complete. The AEC officer's response was positive and the booth at the local primary school was recommended as the most suitable point for recruitment. The only obligation on the researcher, who planned to do the recruiting personally, was that she make herself known to the Officer in Charge on arrival at the polling booth on Election Day to confirm her presence. With the aim of creating 'no surprises' to political party booth workers who might otherwise question or object to the planned recruitment process, the office of the sitting Member of Parliament was advised in advance about the Election Day recruitment activity.

For this method to be effective, factors totally beyond the control of the researcher needed to be taken into consideration. A forecast change in the weather suggested an early effort would be required to have questionnaires completed by the notional target of 50-60 willing participants before the rain arrived. The target number provided for an estimated 30-50 per cent drop-out in the four weeks between first contact and the scheduled day for conduct of the discussion group activities. As expected, the main entry gate to the suburban school designated as the polling station was staked out by political party workers handing out how-to-vote cards. A second internal gateway, away from the arrival activity and still well outside the regulated six metre 'exclusion zone' around entrances to polling places, presented as an ideal position for the researcher who wanted to be easily recognised as separate and independent of any party political activity. On arrival soon after the polling booth opened, the researcher established contact with the AEC's Officer in Charge. He had been briefed to expect the research project presence at his site and was ready to accommodate the plan to approach voters although no further support was required nor requested. Taking up position, the researcher set out to engage the interest of people at random whilst being mindful to approach a diverse range based on apparent age, ethnicity or cultural background. In making her initial approach, the researcher highlighted the academic nature of the research and invited their interest. It was emphasised that this was not an exit survey of how people voted. She gave a brief statement of her area of investigation and requested those interested to complete a brief questionnaire (see Appendix I). The questionnaire form was deliberately prepared as a single page with fewer than a dozen questions so as not to appear time consuming and act as a likely deterrent to prospective participants wishing not to be delayed too long from moving on after voting to their planned activities. People were asked for basic information about themselves, any community involvement they had, and about their use of media. They were not asked for detailed information such as occupation, self-described

ethnicity, political affiliation or allegiances since the project did not intend to draw comparisons along these lines nor further disaggregate the study participants from the Oak Park population which was already accepted as, statistically speaking, satisfying the desirable criteria of being comprised of ‘ordinary’ or ‘average’ Australians. This limited information was anticipated to inform any filtering required in the event that more than 30 prospects were converted to participants. A maximum of 10 people in each of three discussion groups was considered the optimum outcome. (In the event, no filtering was required.) It was explained that the project required a willingness to participate in a discussion group in one month’s time at a local venue. Those attending would be provided with \$50 to compensate them for any inconvenience related to their attendance. A hard copy of the approved Information for Participants (see Appendix II) was provided to each person expressing interest. Those who completed the questionnaire were advised more information about the discussion group activity would be sent to them two weeks later. Questionnaires were completed by 42 people in a six hour period before a mid-afternoon change in the weather sent people hurrying and made it unrealistic to continue the recruitment activity. A brief stop at the alternative Oak Park polling booth yielded one further recruit. With the two people who had been recruited in the earlier scoping visit (and who were recognised at the polling booth on the day, confirming their eligibility status), the recruitment activity conducted by a single researcher yielded a prospective pool of 45 participants.

In the following weeks the information provided in questionnaires was collated; all but two had provided email addresses, giving a preference for telephone contact. One of these two subsequently provided an email address; the other withdrew. Two weeks prior to the scheduled discussion groups, the first follow-up contact by email or telephone was made with all prospective participants inviting them to confirm their willingness to join one of three discussion groups all to be held on the same day. Morning, afternoon and evening options were provided and respondents were asked to nominate times in order of preference. Included in this message as a reminder of what they were being asked to do was a soft copy of the Information to Participants. To avoid any surprise, also attached was a soft copy of the approved Consent Form along with advice that they would be given a Form when they arrived at the discussion group venue and would be asked to complete and sign it prior to the session commencement. Asking prospects to respond by nominating their preferred time of involvement was a tactic to get people to commit, a step towards conversion of as many of the 45 as possible from prospect to participant. Twenty-four people responded, fewer than the notional maximum but well within target for three viable groups. It is not possible to say why the 21 did not respond as there

was no further contact. This had no relevance to the continuation or integrity of the project. A subsequent message allocating each participant to a session aimed at building reliability. On the eve of the discussion group activity, each of the confirmed participants was sent a reminder message of their appointment the following day. All of these communications were individual and personalised. As expected, there were some inevitable withdrawals and there were two ‘no-shows’ on the day. One intending participant gave notice that she was ill and apologised for her inability to attend; the other did not arrive and there was no further contact. Nevertheless, three discussion groups were formed comprising a total of 18 participants.

The questionnaire information collected provides a snapshot profile of the total participant group of 18. At the extremes, none were members of a political party but all were internet users.

Table 5.1: Total group profile, Oak Park participants, 2013

Category	Percentage of total
Participants aged 18-30 (Gen X)	33
Participants aged 31-50 (Gen Y)	22
Participants aged 51-80 (Baby Boomer)	44
Participants with secondary level education	39
Participants with post-secondary level education	61
Participants who are members of a political party	0
Participants who are members of a local group or association	39
Participants who are engaged in volunteer activity	61
Participants who watch TV news at least once a week	89
Participants who read a newspaper at least once a week	89
Participants who use the internet at least once a week	100
Participants who use social media at least once a week	61

There were three groups of seven, four and seven participants.

- In Group 1 the participants were largely but not exclusively Baby Boomers (aged 50 years and over) with secondary level education. They had no active community involvements, were regular consumers of heritage media and the internet, but not users of social media.
- Group 2, the smallest and perhaps most cohesive group, was 50/50 male and female, all of whom had post-secondary level education. Most of the group were active in the community. Most watched TV news and read newspapers and all used the internet. Half of them used social media.
- As circumstances determined, all but one of the Group 3 participants were female. There was a spread across education levels and age groups although the pre-Baby

Boomers were dominant. Almost half had a community involvement. All were users of heritage media and the internet, and most used social media.

The group discussions were held on a Wednesday at hired premises of a professional market research company in suburban Coburg close to Oak Park. (A weekday was selected on advice from market research professionals who reported their practice of avoiding weekends on the basis of proven difficulty trying to recruit reliable study participants on days which are widely viewed as dedicated to family and personal recreation.) The facilities were homely – lounge chairs and couches around a large coffee table laid with simple refreshments. On arrival, all individuals completed and signed a Consent Form. Each person was asked to write their first name on a large card which was then placed on the table in front of her/him. Professional standard audio and video recording equipment was discretely mounted in the room. The researcher also placed a small sound recorder (as back-up in the event of a system failure) on the table. Sound and vision of the proceedings was streamed to an adjacent room making it possible for an observer to make observational notes in real time. The facts of the recording and observation were made known to participants at the start of each session. In the groups, no artificial stimuli representing political news, advertising or commentary was used. At the close of each 80-90 minute session, participants received an envelope containing \$50 and a receipt which they each signed and returned to the researcher. Subsequently, the three discussions were transcribed in full by the researcher using both audio and video recordings of the proceedings. Transcription conventions (see Appendix III) responded to four key points of advice for transcribing group sessions (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Jarvis, 2011). 1) Every effort should be made to transcribe *all* reported speech, including brief extracts of speech such as agreement with the main speaker in forms such as ‘mm’ or ‘yeah’. 2) Speech should be transcribed as it occurred and not tidied up. 3) In addition to the speech, other oral communication such as laughter and body language should be noted. 4) Each speaker should be identified. Observational notes were made in real time, checked against the video records and included where significant to the reading of the transcript.

The transcripts as data were subjected first of all to the obvious question: What did the participants talk about during the discussions? Utterances were examined for their subject matter which was designated a topic (of discussion). There were noticeable similarities among the topics of discussion and these, being broadly assessed, were grouped together thematically, first at the level of sub-theme and then at the level of theme.

Discussing methodology and method

Framing, tone and language analysis are used in listening to how the voices respond when invited to have their say about the political discourse as they receive it. Units of expression are examined in seeking to identify recurring themes in their discussion. Themes are interpreted as signs of citizens ordering their thoughts or making sense of what they receive from the discourse. The tone used when participants have their say cannot be ignored; tone is examined as affective meaning-making. Language is examined as a vehicle of content and meaning. The analysis looks for coherence and difference among the combined participant voices as an exemplar of a shared sense drawn from the political discourse by a group of ordinary Australians, without claiming it is *the* sense made of the discourse by Australians generally.

The concepts for polling day participant recruitment (PDPR), same-day data gathering (SDDG) and wide-scope discussion groups emerged from a commitment to conduct research in which the participants might recognise themselves as contributing partners rather than subjects for study. For the limited time of their involvement, the processes involving them were as transparent as possible. All had the same experience of being directly recruited by the researcher. They were all made aware that they and others in the study cohort were participating on the same day in the same setting. There were no artificial prompts for discussion to test a marketing idea or response. They were told that the breadth of their views was what was of interest – hence the use of the term ‘wide-scope’ rather than ‘focus’ to name the style of group and its range of discussion. The message being communicated implicitly by this approach was that their personal experience of political discourse, whatever it was, was valued and worthy of academic study. Explicitly, as the preamble to commencing discussion, the researcher/facilitator made the following or similar introductory remark to each group:

The value of the conversation today is that we get behind our views and what we think about, why we hold our views. They’re the sorts of things I’m interested in. So there are no right or wrong answers today. I have no expectation that you will all be deeply involved or interested in politics or in democracy or the sorts of things of being a citizen that we might talk about. So every view is important. And if you can just keep in mind that we’d like you to give others in the conversation room to be able to have something to say during the day, that would be really helpful.

There are practical benefits in PDPR and SDDG. Setting a day aside for recruitment at a designated location in the certain knowledge that a large pool of eligible and suitable recruits is guaranteed to turn up is a highly efficient use of time. The same can be said of conducting

the data gathering in a single day. Both days of intensive activity, however, will be productive only if there is careful preparation and logistical planning with nothing left to chance. In this case, none of these responsibilities was delegated although it is feasible that a group of researchers planning and working in close collaboration could employ these methods successfully and with a larger cohort of participants. With SDDG there is a validation benefit in that all participants have had natural exposure to the same environment (in this case, the discourse environment) with a margin of difference of no more than 9-10 hours being the likely time lapse between the commencement of the first and last data gathering events. It gives a natural authenticity to research into mass audience behaviours/attitudes, for example, without the contrivance of stimuli to prompt responses.

The method is not without risk, especially for a project like this one concerned with democratic engagement. Engagement has been defined as interest. To what extent might the method have carried a bias towards recruitment of the more politically engaged? Did the method have an inherent filtering effect so that only those with an interest in politics generally or political discourse more specifically were most likely to agree to become participants? Did those who were not interested simply filter themselves out in the process?

There is no way of knowing if those who rushed past the researcher/recruiter were interested or disinterested in politics or political discourse – they were simply passing too quickly to be approached. Also, there were many who avoided eye contact and the signals suggesting an approach from a stranger. Finally, there were some who listened but politely declined the initial invitation to participate in the research project. It may be that some or even many of these were politically disengaged. Those approached may just as easily have been sceptical of academic research projects or not motivated by the summary explanation given for this particular project.

Some who initially agreed to a follow-up approach did not migrate to become actual participants. The success rate was 39 per cent. To further entertain the potential criticism, it is reasonable to question whether those who ultimately did participate were inclined to be more politically engaged. The evidence, in their own words, suggests otherwise. In discussion varying levels of political interest were claimed by the participants. None claimed a formal engagement through political party memberships which may be regarded as a proxy for a higher than average level of political engagement. Among the cohort of participants, three had handed out how-to-vote cards for candidates. Some, being older, had had longer exposure to and were more familiar with politics and political talk. Some participants expressly reported a waning

interest in politics generally and voting specifically. So, the evidence is that there were varying levels of engagement within the participant cohort.

This hypothesised criticism might be viewed from another perspective. The research question, in part, is concerned with effects on engagement. Indeed, the fundamental question of enquiry presumes democratic engagement is present in order that any effect on engagement from making sense of political discourse can be investigated. On this basis, the notional criticism of an inherent bias in the method can be put aside. What is helpfully clarified by the consideration of bias in the recruitment method, however, is that some level of engagement with democracy was assumed for all participants. All were voters who turned out on Election Day to satisfy an obligation. Citing the fact holds no presumption of enthusiasm; some, many or all might well have agreed with the sentiment that voting is the next to last refuge of the impotent (Postman, 2005 [1985]).¹¹ Neither does it presume a commitment to civic duty. In the Australian context, it may simply demonstrate an unwillingness to incur a fine for non-attendance. Rather, the fact of attendance at the polling booth – participants had to know where to attend, they had to arrange their activities and take the necessary actions to get themselves there – represents a base level of democratic engagement. The qualitative methodology allowed for individual participants to reveal the extent to which they considered themselves to be democratically engaged during the group discussion. But whether individuals were more or less engaged than others in the group is not the point. The point of focus is whether the methodology was successful in discovering if any or many of them were aware of being more or less democratically engaged than they had been at a prior time in their lives and whether this was related to their sense-making of the prevailing political discourse.

In considering methodology, particular attention should be given to the role of the researcher/facilitator (RF) when innovating with wide-scope group discussion. It is a given that the researcher has a vested interest in the success of the project. For the project to be successful, the data-gathering events obviously need to address the research question. Yet there is a risk with the wide-scope discussion approach that groups could roam aimlessly if left without any structuring influence. It is an appropriate role for the researcher/facilitator to structure the opportunity for the question to be addressed. But would it be valid for the researcher/facilitator

¹¹ The last being, according to Postman, ‘giving your opinion to a pollster, who will get a version of it through a desiccated question, and then will submerge it in a Niagara of similar opinions, and convert them into – what else? – another piece of news...about which you can do nothing’ (p. 69).

to *insist*? If any participants in wide-focus groups decline the opportunity structured to address the question, is that not saying something significant to the project outcome?

It may be difficult for researchers to put aside carefully formulated questions like those favoured for surveys and focus groups. Yet a conversational approach to questioning works as effectively for data-gathering when the researcher/facilitator is focused on listening to what is being said (and what is not being said) then asking the next naturally occurring question. Part of the ‘art’ of this open listening/questioning approach is, according to political narrative historian Andrews (2007), to trust the personal interest that drives the project:

Most often the questions which guide our research originate from deep within ourselves. We care about the topics we explore – indeed we care very much. While our projects may be presented with an appearance of professional detachment, most of us most of the time are personally invested in the research we undertake. Our chosen areas of expertise mean something to us; there is a reason we examine the questions we do. Sometime we might even feel that our questions choose us; they occur to us (sometimes, arriving almost imperceptibly, other times like a thunderbolt) but then will not go away (p. 27).

A significant benefit of this approach is that it encourages participants to do the same. In this data gathering process participants often asked questions of each other. In doing so, they can be said to have made a unique contribution to data-gathering and the data itself. Other researchers may well take issue with this inclusive approach in the wide-scope group methodology. It may lack the controlled definition and constraint that is attached to quantitative research focused, for example, on knowing how many people have heard a specific political message or hold a particular view in relation to that message. Open-ended questioning may not appear to be systematic or objective enough for some, although the apparent safety of systematic enquiry has its own drawbacks if, for example, concepts are poorly defined or measured (Kosicki et al., 2013). The point Kosicki et al make is that, with social and technological change, and the need to keep political communication research relevant, researchers must continually strive toward theoretical and methodological advances. The methodology used in this project seeks to advance political communication research by demonstrating that ordinary people approached and treated as project partners, rather than subjects to be mined for information, will make a significant contribution and are a unique resource to research in the field.

The key analytical concept and approach to handling the data can be summarised. The concept of framing was formulated by Goffman (1986) and developed as an analytical tool that is now well established in communication studies. Before it became popular in scrutinising how journalists and politicians use framing to select some features of news or highlight certain campaign messages while ignoring or omitting others, Goffman theorised that individuals going about their daily lives use framing to order their thinking about events, conversations and experiences. It is how people routinely make sense of their world. Expectations are constructed out of prior experiences of situations and received messages. Individuals become practised at framing to the extent that they may be unaware of their own meaning-making (Baran, Davis, & Striby, 2014). This project uses framing analysis to focus on the data as the participants' selection, emphasis and presentation of what matters to them. Selection involves omission – what is left out – and emphasis contributes to prioritisation of what is included. In presentation, similarities cohere and are identified here as themes and sub-themes. In the oral communication of what matters, language and tone are in play. Language analysis and an analysis of the tones – positive, negative, neutral – heard in oral communication are used as additional tools in the analytic process. The term 'tones of evaluation' is used to describe the value added by tone to language in conveying meaning. It is affective meaning-making. The unit under analysis is the 'event of expression'. This is based on the view that thoughts and ideas, while they *can* be communicated in a single word or sentence or even by a shrug of the shoulders, in this data are most often expressed in multiple sentences, not always fully formed and sometimes supported by a physical gesture. The event of expression captures these possibilities. It is not equivalent to a "turn" in conversation as used in conversation analysis. In this data, turns are regularly interrupted by others in the discussion without the idea or thought being fully expressed. This situation is accommodated by using as the unit of analysis the whole 'event of expression' as a unit of meaning intended to be expressed and understood.

Chapter 6

‘It’s just another game, isn’t it?’

Project participant, Mavis, 2013

Having a say: citizens diagnose the problems of received discourse

Citizens struggle to have their voices heard in political discourse despite the 24/7 news cycle and an abundance of media. This chapter is largely given over to the participant voices in this project and begins by recognising them individually. Framing, tone and language analysis are used in listening to how the voices respond when invited to have their say about the political discourse as they receive it. Units of expression are examined in seeking to identify recurring themes in their discussion. Themes are interpreted as signs of citizens ordering their thoughts or making sense of what they receive from the discourse. The tone used when participants have their say cannot be ignored; tone is examined as affective meaning-making. Language is examined as a vehicle of content and meaning. The analysis looks for coherence and difference among the combined participant voices as an exemplar of a shared sense drawn from the political discourse by a group of ordinary Australians, without claiming it is *the* sense made of the discourse by Australians generally. The chapter draws out findings to set up a discussion in a wider context in the chapter following, however, it begins with a brief introduction to each of the discussion participants.

The participants

Knowing something about the project participants before listening to their voices is appropriate for the qualitative approach to the data analysis. On the day of their recruitment, a short survey of prospective participants gathered contact details and some basic demographic data (See Appendix I). Much more became known about participants from the same day data gathering through observation and, significantly, through what participants revealed about themselves as relevant to others in order for their contribution to be understood. A profile was built of each of the 18 participants¹² based on observation, information supplied and personal information revealed during discussion.

Charles is tertiary educated and aged in the 31-50 group. He has neither political nor community association memberships, nor is he a volunteer. He regularly uses traditional

¹² Names have been changed although, where relationships existed between participants, these have been noted since to do otherwise would change context relevant to individual sense-making.

(newspapers and television) and new media (social media and internet news sites). He gets 'a whole spectrum of views' by reading both national newspapers and watching national ABC and SBS television. His late night viewing includes BBC and Al Jazeera news programs. He is alert to media bias. Charles' family background is Malaysian and he takes a keen interest in Malaysian politics. Using the internet to watch speeches and local get-togethers allows him to be 'very plugged in to what's going on over there'. He attended 'some of the political rallies and so on' during a recent holiday there. Charles is aware of the new people coming into his suburb, mostly Indians, and likes the friendliness of people when compared with other suburbs.

Don has come to the discussion with his wife, Mavis. They are in the senior 51-80 year old age group and are long-time residents of Oak Park. Don reached Year 10 in his schooling. He watches TV news and reads a newspaper at least once a week. Don uses social media and the internet. He doesn't volunteer, have memberships of associations or a political party. He speaks calmly and thoughtfully in the philosophical tone of a wise elder used to reflecting on his life experience.

Elise is a mother of two and she arrives with her youngest daughter, Evie, who has also agreed to be a participant. Elise is over 50, she completed schooling to Year 12, watches TV news and reads a newspaper at least once a week and uses the internet. She is not a regular user of social media and has no voluntary associations or political party memberships. Elise uses her hands and fingers expressively when she speaks. She talks about her life in terms of events that happen in the street where she lives – the helicopter circling overhead, the cars that park in her street and the nearby construction involving 'truck after truck after truck'. She uses resigned language, with words such as 'anyway', and questions her ability to articulate her thoughts with sentences that end in an interrogative rising pitch, or a phrase such as 'what's the word I'm looking for?'

Evie is a young participant (18 – 30 age bracket) and a little unsure about whether she voted in an election prior to the recent poll because she 'just got back. I've only been here four years'. She has an accent (northern European, perhaps) and speaks behind her hand held to her mouth. Evie completed schooling to Year 10 and is now studying at TAFE. She has been a volunteer, undertaking work experience at the local school. She reads a newspaper and watches TV news at least once a week, uses the internet and regularly uses social media. She looks to her mother, Elise, to support her in conversation and tells a detailed story about problems with public transport ticketing. She is not involved in a political party and doesn't talk about politics at all with her friends.

Fiona (lower end of the 18-30 age group and only recently eligible to vote) comes to the discussion with her mother, Rita. Fiona has completed Year 12 and recently began undergraduate study. She is not engaged in volunteering or as a member in a community association or political party. She regularly watches TV news, reads a newspaper, uses the internet and is active on social media. Fiona says little unless a question is directed to her. She reports she has ‘no interest in politics at all. Um, I go based on mum a lot’.

Geraldine is in the over 50s group, is a member of a local group/association and regularly watches TV news, reads a newspaper and uses the internet. She is not a volunteer or member of a political party and neither is she active on social media. Her formal education included unspecified time at university. Her language and speech patterns are of the informal workplace. She draws on her experiences at work and in the community in story-telling about her politics. Some stories are told at her own expense, inviting listeners to recognise her gullibility and lack of intellectual sophistication. Geraldine asks questions to engage with others in the group. She holds views and challenges other people’s views – but checks later to be sure no offence was taken. Geraldine has been a single parent, a union shop steward in the hotel industry and an opponent on planning issues to do with the local airport. She is used to challenging political and corporate power. In Australian political stereotyping, Geraldine might well be regarded as ‘a battler’.

Hamish tall and fair, aged 18-30, a gently spoken university graduate doing further studies. He is not a member of a political party but handed out how-to-vote cards at the recent election. Political awareness is connected to his family life. He is a regular volunteer and a member of a local group or association. He does not bother with television. Hamish keeps bees; he is a person aware of his environmental footprint. He is a regular newspaper reader (then uses the paper for compost), an internet user, and is active on social media. In the discussion, Hamish sits quite fixedly and listens to all points of view, nodding assent to confirm his engagement with the discussion. He does not intervene often but when he speaks – it is a little awkwardly at times – his sincere manner attracts attention.

Jacqui is 31-50 years of age. She completed 10 years of formal schooling. She is a volunteer and member of a local association. She doesn’t hold political party membership but, in discussion, reveals she is engaged with the political network around the local Federal member. She also hands out his how-to-vote cards. Jacqui reads a newspaper and watches TV news regularly, she uses the internet but is not a regular user of social media. In discussion, Jacqui offers plain-language commentary on political events from her perspective and seeks to amuse

with rhetorical asides. She summarises what others say, acknowledges others' stories and offers encouragement. Jacqui assumes an informal responsibility for creating a cohesiveness within the group.

Keith, smartly dressed in a sports coat, arrives comfortably before the appointed time, apparently keen to participate. The information he provided at the point of recruitment says he is an over 50s male with a graduate degree. He is not involved in any association or volunteering activity and is not a member of a political party. He uses the internet but is not active in social media. He regularly reads a newspaper and watches TV news. During discussion, Keith reveals that he works in the TAFE (Technical and Further Education) post-secondary sector. He is a father and confident that his 'kids are on the same side as us'. He takes a leading role and exerts authority in the group. He does this early in the discussion by asserting the principles underlying the selection of news. He explains the correct political routes to get to decision-makers and avoid the bureaucracy. He uses instructive language. His influence affects some in the group who repeat his words in constructing some of their own arguments. Keith makes statements unequivocally, uses gestures of finger pointing or wagging and takes the lead in ironic laughter.

Lesley is a graduate in the 31-50 age group. She is not a political party member but is a member of a local group and a regular volunteer. Lesley uses the internet and social media; she is not a regular watcher of TV news or a reader of newspapers. She appears hesitant on arrival, making herself busy with her mobile phone until the whole group is settled. She does not put the phone away but keeps it on her knee until she finds herself engaged by the discussion. Lesley reveals that she is a busy mum focused on her school-aged kids. She is the grandchild of post-war European immigrants and stays true to their anti-communism. She is not comfortable living in a safe Labor electorate and wishes for a closer political contest and a choice about voting. When she expresses herself, Lesley repeatedly uses the phrase 'D'you know what I mean?' suggesting uncertainty in her views. She confirms this with her statement that when she wants to know what is going on she will 'go and get someone else's opinion'. Lesley leaves in a hurry at the end of the discussion.

Maureen puts herself in the over-50s age bracket. She has post-graduate qualifications, regularly watches TV news, does not read newspapers but uses the internet and is active on social media. Maureen is not a member of associations or a volunteer, and whilst she is not a member of a political party she did give out how-to-vote cards for a candidate at the recent election. She recently returned from an overseas trip during which she kept in touch with political news through her friends' social media postings. She speaks confidently, and calmly

but firmly challenges the overtly authoritative participant with repeat questions: ‘You think so?’ ‘Mmm’. ‘You think so?’ ‘Oh. I think so’. Maureen is also in subtle disagreement with the concept of parents and children in a family being on the ‘same side’ when she recalls that, for her generation, ‘you went the opposite to your parents’.

Mavis is a senior in the 51-80 year old age group and married to Don. She is a long-time resident of Oak Park; she chooses not to be involved in local associations. She left school after completing Year 10. Mavis watches TV news and reads a daily newspaper although she is disappointed with the newspaper and wonders why she keeps getting it – ‘mainly for the crossword’. Mavis would like the world to be otherwise but is realistic. She does not have her own email address; she shares Don’s.

Nina is a Gen-Y (under 30) participant without local community or political party memberships or volunteer commitments. On the prospective participant questionnaire she responded in the negative to enquiries about any volunteer, association or political party involvements and in the affirmative to questions about regular television news viewing, newspaper readership, use of the internet and social media. She sits quietly for long periods without intervening in the discussion. When she does, she reveals her concern is focused on the issue of same sex marriage and she has attended rallies in support of a policy change in favour of marriage equality. Nina is the daughter of Keith who participated in a separate discussion group.

Rita (51-80 age group) graduated with a Diploma in Graphic Design and now works for a newspaper – but is quick to add ‘not as a journo’. She regularly watches TV news, reads a newspaper, uses the internet but is not a regular user of social media. She is a member of a local association. Rita says she relies on family interests and instinct in making sense of politics. She struggles with the concept of being a citizen when it is introduced to the discussion. She is not as eager as others to have her say, but thinks about points raised and revisits them to give her view even though the discussion may have moved on.

Robert is a senior (51-80 age bracket) who grew up in the area, moved away while his children grew up and then returned to a town house with two priorities – ‘one to be on a tramline and the second to have a lock-up garage’. He found the suburb ‘totally different’. Robert is a university graduate involved as a volunteer and association member. He is not a political party member. He watches television, reads a newspaper and uses the internet regularly but is not a regular in the social media space. Robert reveals himself to be widely read in public affairs. He uses multiple online media sources. He feels disenfranchised and cast a protest vote at the recent

election. He ‘wouldn’t even bother voting if it wasn’t compulsory in the last few elections’. His diagnostic arguments about policy failures are entwined with expressions of practical prognosis, with suggestions about giving other models of self-government a try. He votes in online opinion polls and often signs online petitions.

Sonya is tertiary-educated, between 31 and 50 years old, and reveals in discussion that she speaks several eastern European languages including her native Russian. Her regular internet use includes visits to overseas hosted news websites where she follows reports prepared for international audiences about Australian politics. She regularly watches national television news bulletins, reads a newspaper and is active on social media. She acts within the group as an advocate for searching for information nationally and internationally and suggests possible sites. Sonya does not volunteer or hold local community or political memberships. She is married to Charles, a participant in a separate discussion group.

Sylvie is also of Gen Y. She is a member of a local association but has no volunteer commitments or political party memberships. She regularly watches TV news, reads a newspaper, uses the internet and social media. Sylvie is a public servant and her contributions in the discussion reveal she knows her way around government information websites. She looks for what the media does not report: the facts and figures in publicly available documents and government-issued media releases. In story-telling, Sylvie presents herself as a person of resolve and persistence in keeping her local government representative accountable on a campaign promise. Her politics are local: ‘The fact that they’re gonna implement a hundred million dollar program in Western Sydney, what does that mean for me?’

Tom is aged 18-30 and completed his formal education in Year 12. He is not involved in community groups or political parties and is not a regular volunteer. According to his prospective participant questionnaire responses, he watches TV news, reads a newspaper, uses the internet and social media at least once a week. In fact, Tom tells the group that he listens to talk radio throughout the working day. He says he thinks the ABC is ‘a bit left’ so he tries to ‘balance myself out by watching, um, the *Bolt Report* on Channel 10’. During the campaign he followed the Twitter feeds of his local election candidates and followed up on their Facebook postings and regularly checked their activity program via candidate websites. He reads his local (suburban) paper. Tom tells a story about an unplanned sighting of a candidate as he was driving home from work and surprising himself by stopping and chatting, ‘posing all my concerns...and I just got the party speak’. Tom self-reports as being deeply engaged with Australia’s political discourse.

The researcher/facilitator, whilst not a study participant in the same way as those recruited for the study, was a contributor nevertheless to each discussion so, for completeness, is included in the participant profiles.

RF is a baby-boomer with a career background in political journalism, strategic communications involving media and politics, and as a public affairs analyst/commentator (previously described as a ‘spin doctor’).

She is an experienced interviewer and group facilitator. RF seeks to understand political events through daily use of a diverse range of media. She is a keen user of the internet but a tentative user of social media.

Participant groupings

In the early observation analysis, notional groupings emerged. A high level scan of the data gathered from the discussion groups suggested three categories of receivers in political discourse:

- Accidental citizen receivers
- Curious citizen receivers
- Purposeful citizen receiver/producers

In the first grouping, what they received was almost accidental. Political information was heard on the car radio on the way to pick up the kids from school, or it was just there in the newspaper pages turned over on the way to looking at the comics or looking for the crossword. However the discourse was received by this grouping, it was not due to any deliberate effort to find out what was going on in the political arena. These were consumers of political discourse because it inserted itself in their lives. The second grouping was more curious. They were information seekers. They sometimes went to great lengths to explore what was happening, even to the point of going to international websites to get an outsider (perceived as being more objective) view of what was happening in Australian politics. In this networked group, there could be quite a high investment made in knowing what was going on, but nothing requiring much effort was done with the information received. The third grouping was both curious and purposeful. In this grouping, they invested in information gathering and in action related to that information. These were networked citizens who followed politics and followed up on their representative politicians. They went along to community meetings or wrote letters to elected

representatives or became active in their own version of political action. They expected policies and political promises to be delivered and they actively checked on, or even demanded, political performance accountability. They contributed to the political discourse through discussion with family, friends and workplace colleagues.

The participants can be recognised as falling into categories according to levels of citizen engagement and democratic participation. The term ‘engagement’ has been defined previously as an investment of interest in politics that disproves passivity but may fall short of demonstrable public activity. In this sense, interest can be understood as a privately held emotional connection with the political processes, broadly understood, in Australia. ‘Participation’ as it is used here, whilst not excluding voting, should be treated cautiously when considering the value placed on voting as a proxy for democratic participation. This nuancing is required in analysing Australian politics since voting is compulsory and (as already noted) close to 95 per cent of eligible citizens do turn out to vote in elections. In that context, then, democratic participation is defined here as an activity in the twenty-first century public realm – the contemporary realm being both virtual and spatial – which is motivated by citizen engagement. Dis-engagement is treated narrowly as an absence of political interest. Non-participation is treated as ambivalence yet may include voting for reasons of legal compliance or penalty avoidance.

The research project participants enter the discussion from a personal perspective or footing (Goffman, 1986). The extent to which perspective or footing may be shared with others emerges from a group analysis. To begin with a specific example, we can identify a group whose members were both lacking interest in (dis-engaged from) political processes and not active participants in them. This group included Elise, her daughter Evie, and Lesley. They had inherited a sense of politics from the past – Lesley spoke of her Ukrainian grandparents and the logic of being anti-Communist, which she took as a natural state of affairs. The unspoken meaning is that anything that happens in the contemporary political realm is irrelevant against this past; there is no need to change the footing. To this group we can add Fiona, and possibly Rita, who sat back for most of the discussion period: she represented a group of people rarely invited or prompted to participate in political discussion. Members of this group profess neutrality, but are actually conservative, even reactionary. They lack confidence in effecting political change. They are complainers with little evidence of resilience or the capacity to try again. For them, any interest in politics is triggered by very local concerns, such as the condition

of the new but faulty ticketing machine at the local railway station, the garbage bins being too close to the roadside, or the cars parked across their gateway during school hours.

As they relate their stories of everyday injustice, their voices rise in pitch and they become more animated in their gesticulations. In Ongian terms (Ong, 2002), they are operating in an oral paradigm, and are not familiar with printed sources of information. Following Ong, they told their stories in an additive fashion: this happened and then that happened. Mother and daughter, Elise and Evie, shared story-telling of their experience of making a complaint to the Council about the parking. (Keith tried at least twice to explain that the ‘correct’ political route was through the Councillors rather than through the bureaucracy, but neither Elise nor Evie acknowledged the advice; they had long since given up hope of effecting change on that issue.) The narratives were aggregative, adding up to a total picture of political problems with no easy solutions in sight. *Talking* about these problems of society was the point of engagement, to the extent that the stories became filled with copious, even unnecessary, detail with no attempt at summary or purposeful analysis. The stories had been told many times and their internal structures as narratives were very stable. They were told as human stories, with which the listeners were expected to relate closely. There was an agonistic quality to the stories – conflict with other residents was an important part of the narrative. In this regard there was no empathy with the third party – it was about establishing a connection between the teller and the told. Evie traced with her hands the parking of the others’ cars and the triangular shape of the block, and so made the story of the parking quite present-centred. She drew her listeners into the story.

Historicity is irrelevant to this kind of story-telling. Lesley wanted her listeners to understand that her grandparents were from the Ukraine and that therefore ‘we’ have always hated Communism, or even Labor. (To sustain the flow of her story, she had to ignore the observation from Robert that it was the 1940s Labor Government of Curtin/Chifley that made it possible for her grandparents to choose to settle in Australia.)

As receivers of political communication this group trusts talkback radio, because it resonates with their way of telling political stories. Within this group it is easy to profess ‘loving’ a particular radio presenter such as Tom Elliott – even while struggling to recall his name – and without any apparent awareness of his conservative political heritage from both parents with very public roles in party politics. It escapes interest that such political heritage might raise issues of trust or balance in his media commentary. Indeed, this grouping appreciates a single authoritative source of political information. Social media as a tool for collective action is still foreign territory for these people. They are not active seekers of new or

diverse political information. Receiving political communication remains a non-essential part of their lives; if it happens, it happens in the car or by some other happenstance. It does not unsettle their view of the world. Those in this group have little need for detailed or complex argument.

Researchers in psychology (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996) with an interest in information processing use the term 'need for cognition' which may be useful here in understanding differences among participants based on what they reveal about their personal approaches to seeking and using information:

In the elaboration likelihood model (Cacioppo et al., 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), those with low need for cognition are positioned towards the end of the spectrum that favours peripheral pathways in processing information. Having little interest and little motivation to spend effort on decoding political discourse, they relate to messages framed as entertainment, celebrity stories and simple slogans. On reflection, it is not surprising that this first group (apart from Evie who is typical of her generation who grew up with online communication) are not yet adopters of social media. They are happy to take their political information from sources close at hand. They are accidental, passive receivers of political discourse.

Those in a quite separate grouping coalesce around a shared perspective of the internet as a site of political discourse. Sonya, Charles, Maureen, Dave and Sylvie are all active users of social media. They are demonstrably engaged in seeking out information. They participate in political activity: Maureen hands out how-to-vote cards; Charles participates in online petitions and attended a political rally out of interest when back in Malaysia on holidays. When she was overseas, Maureen kept in touch with the 2013 election campaign via Facebook. Dave followed the candidates via Twitter feeds and their Facebook pages. Sylvie chases up government media releases and departmental websites for the information the media leaves out

of its reporting. These people are not members of organised associations yet all are active information seekers and sometimes surprise themselves with their random involvements.

Continuity of involvement in political action marks out another set among the participants. Geraldine has been a workplace union representative and is an activist in the local Essendon airport development issue. She understands when others distance themselves from her when in her activist role. Sylvie wrote letters and made phone calls to keep the successful mayoral candidate true to his promise. She stands out as resilient and remains quietly determined in pursuing her democratic entitlement to accountability from elected representatives. Jacqui is an insider to local area politics, uninhibited by her lack of formal party membership. Her engagement and participation gives her a familiarity with the dramas surrounding the political elite. She reports political events as a shadow tactician.

Some footings are held by just one or two participants. Robert, certainly, and, perhaps, Keith feel disenfranchised. They are both engaged but feel cut off from positive participation in contemporary political processes. Robert, especially, presents as a central pathways processor on the ELM spectrum, with high need for cognition who expects to deal with details and complex arguments in political discourse. This need pushes him to prognosticate on alternative forms of democratic government to address the dilemmas he has diagnosed as flaws in Australia's current political situation. Disenfranchisement without disengagement has made Robert a passive philosopher limited to reflecting on the past and imagining how things might be different and better. In that footing, Robert can be aligned with Mavis and Don who also would like government to do things differently, yet they struggle to come up with alternative policy approaches that might be more effective. These people are engaged, but not to the point of being participants in political action. Indeed, Robert's position is deliberate inaction; a withdrawal in protest from his long-loved commitment to voting. Sonya, who is adept at social media and enjoys looking at Australia from a global footing, is less a philosopher than a *flaneur*, an engaged watcher. She folds her arms at the start and again at the end of the discussion in apparent satisfaction with her self-explanation and helpful guidance to others on how to join her globalised perspective for receiving information about what is really happening in Australian politics. Nina has little to say in her group but attends rallies for marriage equality when invited by friends; she keeps up with the issue and events via Facebook. Friends are her political participation compass points. She makes no mention of being 'on the same side' politically as her dad, Robert, who had made the claim on behalf of his family in a separate discussion group.

Family is a reference site for development of political dispositions and a source of political information across all the groups. As examples, Hamish defines himself vis-a-vis his conservative family; Keith is confident he and his children are on the same side; Lesley remains true to the political convictions of her grandparents; Geraldine finds family political debates troublesome now, and conveys some regret for having nurtured awareness of mediated political discourse in her children when they were young. Both young women, Evie and Fiona, looked to their mothers for political guidance, if not absolute direction. Maureen remembers that her generation tended to lean in an opposite direction to that of their parents.

It is from these individual and social footings that the project participants approach their sense-making of Australian contemporary discourse.

Topics, themes and sub-themes

The initial treatment of the three transcripts of group discussions produced a list of the topic flow through each (See Appendix IV). At an early point in analysis, consideration was given to categorising these topics emerging in the discussions according to the six dimensions of politics established by Strombeck (2010):

1. Power allocation dimension
2. Policy dimension
3. Partisan dimension
4. Deliberation dimension
5. Implementation dimension
6. Accountability dimension

Interpreting qualitative data according to established criteria in political communication research initially seemed attractive. However, coding the data by political dimension was rejected on several grounds. The first was a reluctance to ignore the legitimacy of the participant voices by ‘hearing’ them within a separately established, albeit legitimate, dimensional framework. A further consideration was the lack of a truly neat fit between Strombeck’s six political dimensions and the eight themes which were emerging from the data. It would be an additional interpretive, and perhaps false, step to ‘shoehorn’ eight themes of concern into six dimensions, however valid.

The themes for categorising data emerged from the initial treatment of the transcripts in response to the simple question: in summary, what did participants talk about? Each theme was given a numerical identifier; the numbering is not intended to convey any priority or hierarchical ranking of themes (see Appendix V). Participants talked about:

1. Media performance
2. Media use
3. Power and influence
4. Discourse content
5. Political process
6. Engagement and participation
7. Personal political influences
8. Change over time

From the themed data, a total of 38 sub-themes were identified and coded alphabetically. When the discussion theme was **media performance**, the participants talked in terms of general media quality, agenda setting, bias and accountability. In talking about their own **media use**, the participants had things to say about traditional media, both press and radio/television, about online news sites and websites, social media and some other sources from which they sought information and connected with the political discourse. **Power and influence** was discussed in terms of who has it – traditional media owners, new media, corporates, and political elites – and the relative power of citizens to influence and have themselves heard in the political sphere. Their talk about **discourse content** turned to issues of substance, policy, personality and celebrity, and truth and trust. Representative system issues, performance of elected representatives – federal and local – and political parties, and the issue of accountability were the sub-themes of discussion about **political process**. **Personal political influences** were revealed in references to family and friends, work environment, personal values and significant events. Grouped under the theme of **engagement and participation** are sub-themes of political interest, capability, demands on time and effort, deliberation and choice, personal action, social action, voting and citizenship responsibility. Finally, some participants talked about **change over time**, the way things used to be and the way they experience or observe politics and political discourse now.

From these themes, it begins to emerge what matters to the participants at this point in time. It is from certain positions that they view their political environment and these positions – not others among the many available to them – allow them perspectives on which to make their evaluations.

Framing analysis

Framing analysis reveals attitudes, opinions and, on occasion, behaviours. When applied to an individual's speech act prefaced verbally or non-verbally with the words 'I think', it is self-revealing. As such, in this project, it informs the researcher about what becomes meaningful in the moment of reception of discourse. It suggests explanation for the fundamental question of enquiry: why is it so? or for the related question: how does it become so? Used here, framing analysis is looking for what participants reveal about how they make sense of what they hear in the political discourse. So it begins by identifying, among the myriad topics touched upon in the course of the nation's talking about politics, which ones resonate more strongly than others for this group of ordinary Australians living in the nation's most average suburb.

The topics touched upon in the discussions transcribed fell into themes of media performance, media use, media power and influence, political discourse content, political process, personal political influences, engagement and participation, and temporality as changes over time. These themes, determined by the participants in the flow of their discussions, were adopted as the structure for analysis. The themes can be analysed as separate layers of meaning and then as an accumulation of layered and connected meanings.

Framing media performance

The media were the first to be blamed in diagnostic framing of political discourse in response to the researcher's opening question in each of the three discussions.¹³ Participants began with unequivocal utterances about the general quality of media performance as failing their expectations and by naming the media as culprit. .

Discussion A

RF Would anyone like to start on what you actually think in broad terms about the political talk that goes on in Australia?

¹³ It is not the intention to make distinctions between the three discussions persistently throughout this analysis. It is appropriate to do so here to reflect the cohesiveness of diagnosis and priority given to the role of the media by the separate participant groups early in their discussion.

Maureen Now, or in the past?

RF It's up to you, you can start now and go to the past if you'd like.

Maureen Because it's, you know, it has gone down to the – into the dregs at the moment. In the past you could actually, you know – there was political talk. Now it's just – I don't know what you'd call it (glancing around at others)? – just slinging of mud.

Don Yes

Hamish (Nodding)

Maureen There's no – you know – you can't just, you know, talk about policies and that kind of thing because they just don't exist anymore.

Hamish Yeah. Except coverage, getting their sound bites out (makes dispersal hand gestures) there's not much policy discussion really, except...

Maureen Any policy that takes more than three words to describe just doesn't exist.

Hamish Yeah. It doesn't get traction in the media.

Mavis That's right.

Keith Yeah, the media's definitely got worse, I think.

Discussion B

RF What do think about the political debate that goes on around you?

Geraldine Atrocious. Oh, around us. Our friends? Or the media?

RF Oh well. Wherever. Atrocious in the media?

Geraldine The media are atrocious.

Discussion C

RF What do you think about the political debate that happens in Australia?

Jacqui Bias by the media... we've got to listen to what they've got to say but we don't get all the information and the information that perhaps comes from the political people...

Sylvie Yeah. I feel the same that you don't often see the entire story so something happens in politics in Parliament and you might get a 15 second media grab, um, and you don't get the rest of it so you don't know what else happened, whether there was any objection, what the rest of the conversation was, you get what the media wants you to see.

Agenda-setting, bias and accountability (or lack of it) along with quality of performance were all negative sub-themes in these first diagnostic frames. In this extended event of expression, Keith takes the earliest opportunity available to establish his authoritative voice with this extended diagnostic framing in which he references what a reliable diagnosis needs – a second opinion – before taking ownership with self-referencing and emphatic statements:

Keith Yeah, the media definitely got worse, I think. I did like one guy who – I won't go through all the discussion he was having – but he made the statement and said the media has now got so bad that they, the only news items – there's two criteria to make a news item. One, it has to be dramatic, then he said the second part is just as important; they've gotta find someone to blame. If they can get that two criteria, that is the number one news item, headline every time. And you talk a lot, you know this thing that's going on at the moment about the entitlements, there's a good one. Now, definitely dramatic because we all hate politicians getting lots of money and someone to blame. Climate change, classic. Human beings, someone – dramatic – someone to blame – human race, you can't get any better than that. And so on. So you look at all news items now, you'll see that that's the criteria. They're always trying to find someone to blame as well.

RF When you say 'they' are always trying to find someone to blame...

Keith The media

RF ...who do you have in mind? The media?

Keith Oh, all media. I don't care who they are. Certain media is one side of the fence and other media is the other side of the fence and all that sort of stuff, we all know who they all are; but, their common theme – dramatic, someone to blame. And that's why we just don't get the facts anymore. We DO NOT get the facts. I'll say one more thing, (waving his finger) because I don't want to take up too much of it – one fact that I think was really quite glaring. They came out with the – the government was going to cut TAFEs by 300 million dollars. That's all it said. Now, that's dramatic and someone to blame – the government, of course. But they didn't tell us it was going to be cut from fifteen billion down to sixteen point three

billion (sic) they didn't tell any of that, or maybe it was two billion down to two point three billion (sic). They didn't tell us that. It was gonna CUT by three billion. THAT'S dramatic! And they do that ALL THE TIME. They will not actually push the facts to us, so we've got no idea whether it's true or false. You get to a point where you just do not believe them anymore. (Hamish is nodding agreement) And seriously, I DO NOT believe a lot of what the media says anymore.

Mavis enters the discussion by aligning her views with those expressed by Maureen. This framing effectively proposes that the diagnostic task and the diagnosis offered shift from individual to group ownership. Hamish and Maureen signal their concurrence with nods of agreement:

Mavis Oh, I think I agree with Maureen. You just get rubbish in the paper. You don't get policies because I don't know if they can make any; it's too hard. And um, but you just get all this nonsense, you don't get what we've done. Like the government's in and they'd say this is what we've done and this is our record. They have to – to slag the other (Mavis uses both hands waving in opposing directions, and Hamish is nodding in agreement) – you know, there's just all this personality, celebrity infighting, and glamorous daughters or whatever. It's all rubbish. And, um, I just think that's what it's like, it's just, it's just another game isn't it? (Looks to Maureen who nods agreement)...

Mavis comes to a conclusion for which she seeks confirmation from others with her question: 'It's just another game, isn't it?' The metaphor of the game, with its connotations of selected players lining up on opposing sides and a set of rules broken during play, is consistent with the framing of media behaviour as performance watched by spectators. Consistent with awareness of the global reach of media, the performance is watched around the world and audiences, local and international, cast a verdict:

Elise ... there always has to be something every single day that they try to find fault in or manipulate, manipulate in other people. I find it shocking, absolutely shocking. And anyway. That's just the way it is.

- Maureen It was really evident just before the election, too, in the things that were in the Murdoch papers. Just, quite disgusting really. I mean, even around the world people were saying how disgusting it was. (...)
- Keith Yes. You can see why people want to get hold of the media 'cos they have a lot of influence, a huge amount of influence. So we've certainly got two sides, left and right in the media. (Hamish nods agreement). That's what it really comes down....
- Maureen Oh come on. It's ninety per cent right and the ABC tries to balance. And that's all. And the ABC's the only one that actually even considers that there's such a thing as balance. The commercial papers know no balance. What's balance?
- Keith I probably disagree with that point. There's certainly one right and there's certainly one left.

This framing of media power and bias reduces the politicians to bit players. They are there to be talked about by the media in ways the media determines in the interests of what works for the media:

- Don (Looking at Maureen) I think what you said – that word commercial. I think that's what's driving it. It's – these things sell papers. They get people – they get the advertisers in to um give their support, they give money into the programs. So that, that's what's driving it, but it's – and celebrity, it doesn't matter in what form, whether they're celebrity because they've been the worst mass murderer or whether they're a film star or they're a politician, whatever, that's what's selling the newspaper, the news programs, you know, they're influenced through Facebook and Twitter and all those social media things as well, and various political parties want to control that for their own interests but I think that, my personal thoughts are that the thing that's driving it is the profits and the power for whether they're the media moguls or the people that control it.
- Keith They have an agenda. Definitely.

In this expression event Don offers another diagnosis which is firmly rooted in his perspective as a consumer of traditional media. Nevertheless, as a spectator rather than user of social media,

Don is aware of its potential for influence and the consequent desire of elites to control social media for their own interests.

This section of analysis usefully reveals that the media is seen as the dominant player in the making of political discourse. This surprises; why are political leaders not first to mind when ordinary Australians order their thoughts about the political discourse? It may be that the media would be satisfied with a perspective that sets them above the rest, but the opinions formed by ordinary Australians are not satisfying to them. The performance attributed to the media by this cohort of citizens is inconsistent with the lofty notion of The Fourth Estate as guardian of the public interest holding the political elite to account. What is received from the discourse is that the media players have an agenda that is separate from, and inconsistent with, these receivers' interests.

Framing Media Use

Footings in use of old and new media are recognizable in the discussion involving Robert and Charles which draws out memories of overseas correspondents and classified advertising as 'rivers of gold'. These are framed with past tense language; talk of the new media is framed with present tense verbs:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Charles | They don't make any money anymore. That's the problem. |
| Robert | Well, you only have to look – <i>The Age</i> mainly relied on their – |
| Charles | Classifieds |
| Robert | – classifieds. And you compare the classifieds today compared to what they were 20 years ago. I used to deliver newspapers when I was a kid and although most or more people bought <i>The Age</i> and in them days <i>The Argus</i> as well, but <i>The Age</i> was a good paper and on Saturday and Wednesday – |
| Charles | One very interesting statistic, um you're right, it was all dependent on the classifieds. They used to call them the rivers of gold. And Seek, Car Sales dot com and real estate dot com now are worth eight times the value of Fairfax... So Fairfax is a shell of itself. |
| Robert | Well, <i>The Age</i> do have Domain dot com – |

Charles Which is useless. If you wanted to buy a property, anything that's on Domain is on Real Estate so you may as well go on Real Estate and there's more stuff there, anyway.

In his age group, Robert presents as an early adopter of new media motivated by the failure of traditional media to meet his expectations. A detailed analysis of the following speech event reveals Robert's struggle to make sense of the political discourse is a struggle over his connection to democracy.

<p>Well, (a) <u>I've given up listening to radio stations and shock jocks</u>, if you like. Between (b) <u>them and the likes of the <i>Herald Sun</i> and the <i>Sydney Daily Telegraph</i></u>, mm, <u>they run the show</u>. Where's democracy in this country? I'm yet to find it. (c) <u>So I get my information online</u>. I could, talking about refugees (gesturing towards Geraldine), it's interesting. (d) <u>There was an article in <i>The Guardian</i> today about the people, refugees to Lampedusa off Italy</u>. And you know, I mean, Italy had a day of mourning for that. And it's a problem to them. Like twenty thousand over a couple of years? I mean that's nothing. Compared to what, a few thousand we might have had here. (e) <u>But, over there they've been treated like people</u>. Whereas here, nup (shaking his head), (f) <u>I'M ashamed of this country and their treatment of refugees</u>. I mean, as if people leave their homes in these countries where there's trouble just to come to Australia. Can't people understand WHY they leave those countries? Wouldn't you leave and try to go to get a better life if, with all the violence that they have, with their kids and parents and so on being slaughtered? The way we treat it is just a disgrace. Um, (g) <u>so I get my information online</u>. But (h) <u>it does seem to me that headlines in the</u></p>	<p>(a) Here Robert begins with a negative motivational frame; he stops doing something, with implied reluctance in the words 'given up'. (b) He attributes blame for this to various heritage media and the cause he cites is that 'they run the show'. Now we have the problem under diagnosis – Robert can't locate democracy and is looking to find it. (c) In a positive motivational frame he says he uses new media; the prognostic frame implies that different media who don't run the show will give a better result. (d) Robert uses a global media issue frame to argue his case.</p> <p>(e) The media issue frame includes a prognostic frame about the treatment of refugees overseas. It leads Robert seamlessly to another diagnostic frame.</p> <p>(f) The elaborated problem is that he is ashamed of his country and, distancing himself, it becomes 'their' treatment – he attributes blame to others.</p> <p>(g) Robert returns to the mediatisation meta-frame using a motivation response frame.</p>
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<p><u>Sydney Daily Telegraph</u> which are mostly rubbish anyway, they're not telling the truth, and the <u>Herald Sun's</u> not much better. The News Limited press, the Murdoch press... (j) <u>even The Australian</u> sometimes. It's supposed to be a newspaper of record. (k) <u>Well, mostly rubbish. I find mine online.</u></p>	<p>(h) He elaborates on the original diagnostic frame blaming traditional media and adding causality – the media are not telling the truth.</p> <p>(j) A frame of failed expectation.</p> <p>(k) The final diagnostic frame is unambiguous and followed immediately by a motivation frame.</p>
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Sonya is prominent among those who use online sources. She frames her reception of political discourse in terms of its reliability and whether the information is consumed from insider or outsider footings:

Sonya So, and again sorry, as you understand English is my second language, so for you guys who were actually born here, you guys rely on completely different sources for finding information you want to find. And majority of my friends are from different backgrounds and from (inaudible) countries so living here and having English as a second language, they have completely different sources to find particular information they want. Like for example, local um radio which is you know in your own language, Italian, Greek, Spanish whatever. Um, or from the internet in your own language and funnily enough information, international information can be completely different from what you HEAR in Australia. You know, different opinions, much (inaudible) and much more colourful observation of what a particular party do, does or will do. And –

RF So you're actually saying that some of the information you get about politics in Australia –

Sonya Completely different.

RF – is actually coming from outside the country?

Sonya That's right. That's right. Well people have I'd say, I am lucky enough to speak a number of languages so I can, I'd say for me it's quite easy to find information. Let's say if I want to speak to (inaudible) website, and for example google Tony Abbott. And there's quite a lot of information there which probably even

Australian don't know about. Um, and I'd say if you really want to make a decision who you are going to vote for, I find out that you know I can rely on information outside the country much more than inside, because inside, um, political correctness is making huge difference. Um, the way, um, how Australia actually advertise particular parties, um, priorities again, um, sometimes you know before the election people are – say Tony Abbott, you know, he knows exactly what to talk to or how to talk to interest people. You know the words for example, I'm going to give up to 75 thousand to, you know, to the mothers. People not really asking the questions, Ok he's going to give up to 75 thousand but where he can get the money from? People just here (firmly touching the side of her head) before the election, before the election tomorrow, today I go 75 thousand here sitting there so I'm going to vote for him because 75 thousand. If you go international you can see explanation, OK.

Sonya's sense-making of the political discourse generated in Australia leads her to diagnose problems of political correctness, party political advertising, politicians who make spending promises lacking detail and media failure to ask the right questions. This leads her to the view that voters come to polling day with the only thoughts in their heads being about the dollars sitting there and that is why they will 'vote for him'. The promise of the \$75,000 – a new and generous parental leave scheme promised in the 2013 federal campaign (which she presumes the others in the group will understand she is referencing without her spelling it out) – was reported on international news sites in which Sonya places more trust than she gives to the local media.

Charles stands out as an avid and active consumer of old and new media:

Charles I am into the mainstream papers. I read *The Australian* and the *Financial Review* but I share the views about the News Corp papers generally. And I do read a lot of stuff online as well. So, I read quite broadly but my, and I watch TV, so the ABC and SBS typically. So I get a whole spectrum of views, I guess.

When asked directly how they make sense of the information they receive from multiple sources, the active users of diverse media, Geraldine, Robert and Charles, use frames of discernment:

- RF So with all these different views expressed in the media and, clearly you're a group who've got radio, and online as well as the traditional newspapers and so on. I'm thinking about, how do you actually make sense of the information that is available to you through those sources? How do you actually pull out of it what's meaningful for you?
- Geraldine I reckon you need to look at the credibility of the author. A lot of young people, they take everything for gospel. If it's on the internet, it must be right!
- Lesley I go and discuss it with my husband. Do you know what I mean? Get a second opinion, if I've found something that I want to know what's going on. I'll go and get someone else's opinion.
- Charles Yeah.
- Robert Be a sceptic.
- Charles I mean, in a sense, there's a lot of it but there's also a lot of stuff that's not very good. So, yeah, you do have to, in a sense, sift through it otherwise you can get the opinion that you want, you know.

Lesley, who is uncertain of herself and makes limited use of news media, turns for a second opinion to her husband, whom she can trust more easily than her own ability to make sense of news and events.

What is revealed by analysing this theme in discussion is that citizens are making use of the increasingly diverse media treating political information. This is driven by opportunity and circumstance created by the phenomenon of new media. But it is also driven, in part at least, by a distrust of what is said by any single media source and a need to check out other sources to get more of the story, or a more complete story. This theme is related closely to the previous theme of media performance which participants rated poorly and viewed with suspicion as to their motives.

Framing (dis)content

Overwhelmingly, participants expressed a negative view of the quality and content of Australian political discourse. For Sylvie, it had a visceral effect. Her framing can be understood as implied shame:

- RF How would you describe the tone of political debate around that time?
- Sylvie Negative. Insignificant. Disappointing.
- RF And how, Sylvie, did it make you feel as a citizen?
- Sylvie Um, annoyed really, that this is all our country would amount to (spreads her hands). This is the highest political discussion that we could have in the country. These are the leaders – and this is what we're arguing about.

Sonya's diagnostic framing reveals that the information generally available falls short of her expectation which she spells out. She prefers her information, dry and without sensation. She wants to know not only what voters will get but what they won't get. And she wants a long-term vision with policies that will address problems the country may face over the next four to five years:

- Sonya What I'm trying to say is I find out for me personally I don't think information before the election in Australia is good enough. It's not really good enough, it's good enough but it's too, um –
- Jacqui Not in depth?
- Sonya Yes. Yeah no, and too polished. And too restricted in a way. That you can't really um, it's more, I call it sensationalized, yeah. Instead of just, you know, dry information which give you a key (holding her hand vertically to indicate two columns) pluses and minuses. Plus, what you get. Minus, what we may not get or can, you know, um, let's say five or six years' time, can give this particular policy to make all of Australia, or what kind of problems we may have.

Many participants looked to the political discourse for policy content, and found it wanting:

- Mavis Do we actually know what the government policies are? Because I'd like to know the agenda behind them (laughs).
- Elise Yeah, well that's true too. It's interesting because I've got also a 24 year old, she's doing her Masters, and she said – this was like before when Julia was still in government and everything like that. She had no idea because every day, again the media, all you heard was bad mouthing and everything like that. And she said, I've got

no idea who I'm going to vote for. I mean, because it was a joke, it was just – a farce, everything about the whole – everything. And, um, everyone backstabbing everybody and everything like that. And she said, what are the policies? You know she had – all she knew was, because she's doing teaching, Masters in teaching, was that the, Tony Abbott said that he was going to cut the education expenditure. That's all she knew. So that was the only thing she thought that, I shouldn't vote for him because he said he's going to do this but, you know, he kept on saying I'm going to bring out the policies and, you know, before and everyone will know; well we still don't know what they are. Well, I don't know what they are. Does anybody know what they are? So the younger people, they've got no idea. They've simply got no idea, whereas years ago, at least you had a bit of an idea, phfff, who to vote for.

Maureen Yeah. I remember when I was, just before I turned 18 and was allowed to vote, he came – vote for Whitlam – and I remember he, you know, there was a policy speech and I remember getting the newspaper and sitting down and reading the newspaper and, you know, finding out what all the policies, all of his policies were. I don't think you could have done that in this election.

Elise Nuh.

Keith I agree. I agree.

Mavis What's the agenda behind it? I mean, do they – ? Is there an agenda that they're going to get rid of all the farms and all the, you know, dig produce into the ground and import it? I know there's trade things. It seems wicked to me we can't support our own – food. You know?

Maureen Mmm. That's the thing about, you know, the way policies are presented. You do feel that there's such a secret agenda because there's definitely no public agenda.

For Mavis especially, the political discourse as she receives it prompts her to pose questions for which there seem to be no answers forthcoming. Their complaints of lack of substance and policy in political discourse cause some participants to be unsure of meanings and their footings

for understanding become unstable, creating meanings of doubt about secret agendas, trust and media lies:

- Sonya No. I'm not saying that they're lying here. I'm just saying sometimes the information is just so foolish.
- Sylvie I would argue sometimes they are lying...No doubt. I have absolutely no doubt that sometimes reporters twist the truth.
- Jacqui ...Y'know, the truth can be stretched (put fingers of both hands together and slowly pulls them apart) a lo-o-ng way.

For these participants, the performance of the media and the content of political discourse are inextricably entwined. Clearly, there is a view that the content needs to be improved. Having the power to improve things is subject to separate diagnosis.

Frame analysis of this theme reveals that these citizens hold to a concept of political discourse as policy discourse. The discontent derived from the received discourse is as much about what is not said as what is said. The receivers find the discourse is not what they expect and their suspicion is that there is an agenda that is not their agenda in play. Truth and lying emerge as an issue when the footing is one of suspicion. The visceral effect is disappointment and annoyance.

Framing power and influence

The ability of the media to set agendas, to show bias or determine what is true, and to act without accountability were articulated as symptomatic frames in a diagnostic framing of relative power and influence. Here we see a widening of the blame frame to include elites other than media organisations:

- Maureen I think, I feel that the corporations are even stronger, even more powerful than government –
- Mavis They ARE.
- Hamish (Nodding)
- Maureen The government is influenced by the corporations, um, to a point where, everything they do, is factored on whether or not they are going to get the approval of these powerful, these powerful – powers! Um, its –
- RF Can you give an example to illustrate that?

- Maureen Um? Well, the whole thing about the NBN. Who does and who doesn't approve of it, in whose interests is this going to be? Um, my personal feeling is that what's happened is that the right wing agenda, you know, the right wing has taken over the, taken over the political discussion so that everything is moving to the right. And my personal argument with the Labor Party is that they're weak, that they've given in to all of this rather than stand up for the values that they had back in the day.
- Mavis There's very little difference between the two parties if you, when it comes to the crunch, when they get into power, they do the same things (...)
- Hamish ... I think the politicians are reacting to whoever's pushing them the hardest. And I think it's these big lobby groups both on the left and right who have the ability to push them harder. And the ordinary citizen doesn't have that kind of capability (...)
- Lesley Yeah. Yeah, I don't feel that, yeah, I feel like, I feel like the power is with those that DO have money. I do feel that like, you've got to invest time and money into getting change and, you know, just a normal person on the street it's hard to do that.

For the participants, the issue is not just that power exists to influence the scope and content of political discourse, but that that power is held by some and not others. None of the participants claimed a footing or perspective inside the power-holding group. The relatively modest power participants claimed was a frustrated desire to have a say and be heard on the issues that matter to them:

- Elise We don't have the capacity, the infrastructure. We have all the problems on the roads now but we have no say. Years ago, the immigration, the number was 70 thousand a year, now it's increased to over 200 and something thousand. We can't cope with it. But, we don't have the capability of doing something about it or saying that we think the government needs to stop. Just hold back, you know, it just keeps on, I dunno, we – that's how I feel. I feel with whatever it is, we don't have the capability or capacity to say what we think should happen. It's the same with the transportation, you know what's going on now with –

Mavis (inaudible)

Elise – with the tunnels, the underground and everything like that, we don't have the say. You know, people that live in the areas, orright, they're up in arms and they say no we don't want this, but as far as the rest of the population, you know, nobody will listen to us, of what we actually want for our state or for Australia or whatever.

Keith It's the silent majority. I think most of them live in Oak Park actually. The silent majority DOES NOT get a go.

RF I'm hearing that you don't want to be silent.

Keith No definitely not. I'd like to have my say about the East West Link.

RF Yeah. And you clearly would, too, Elise?

Elise Yeah. Yeah.

RF ...Do the rest of you share that view? That you don't think you're being heard as a citizen?

Mavis They wouldn't want to hear from us, would they? (Turns to Don beside her and laughs).

RF Why is that?

Mavis Well they don't ask us what we think, about it. You're right (small gesture towards Elise), we haven't got the infrastructure to support all these people and everything.

Keith Actually, there's one issue which sits in amongst what you're talking about (hand gesture towards RF) and it's in gay marriage (Pause). To me that is an issue where the people should be asked. And yet that is one issue that's – we seem to leave up to the politicians, for some reason. Now I'm not saying whether I'm one side or the other, but that is an issue which is – we're told by the, by the ones that are for it that the majority of the population want it; I don't know. I'd probably dispute that figure actually, but anyway, that –

Elise Yeah. Yeah. You're right. We should have a say. Yep, absolutely.

Keith And there's a lot of issues like that, they are actually moral issues in the community, and yet they've been taken away from us. We don't get a say at all.

Looking for mechanisms to be heard moved the participants to discuss access to representative government and tell stories about their experiences of the political system.

Under analysis, the theme of power as discussed utilises frames of self-knowledge of personal lack of power. The discourse creates meanings that are both interior and exterior. The interior effects go so far as moral disturbance. The 'us' and 'them' emerge as opposing moral forces. Framing analysis of this theme in particular emphasises that the producers and receivers of discourse occupy distinctly separate, even opposite, footings. Further, discourse is revealed as something more than a tool to be owned and wielded by the powerful players in the political sphere. There is a power in the discourse itself that shuts out voices and conveys persistent messages to the receivers that they may be present but not heard. The proper role for ordinary citizens, as communicated by the contemporary political discourse, is to receive but not to participate. The participants, nevertheless, formulate views about issues important to them, strongly suggesting they continue to be engaged even if they are denied the right to have their say on those issues. But to what extent is the opinion that 'they wouldn't want to hear from us, would they?' justified by the explanation that 'they don't ask us what we think' framed from a footing of acquiescence and unwillingness to stand up and speak out? Are there echoes here of what Hirst (2002) discussed in his historical review of Australian democracy when he identified a reluctance to stand out from the rest arising from a national footing of egalitarianism where leadership is interpreted as a form of egomania?

Framing political process

Is there something about Australia's political processes that deny people opportunities to have their say or participate in the exercise of political power? Why not become a member of a political party, for example? None of the participants cited political party memberships although three reported that they had handed out how-to-vote cards at the election a month earlier. One made a claim of being quite close to the local Federal Member and an insider to local politics. The events of expression which included reference to politicians named the two recent Labor Prime Ministers whose leadership competition had dominated media coverage of national politics for almost three years. They named the Leader of the Opposition who had a month earlier successfully won government and the role of Prime Minister. One reference was made to Federal independent Members and one to a state Member of Parliament. Many

references were made to the local Federal Member and most references to elected office holders were about the local Mayor. Local government was the more familiar frame for understanding the political system and its effectiveness. The power of citizens had a different meaning when seen through a local government frame:

Charles I think actually for most of us the critical, um, level of government is actually local government. You know what I mean, like issues likely to be of concern are, you know, garbage or a better sports field or whatever it might be and, so, I think personally, I mean having been someone who's lived overseas that there actually, I think your average person actually does have quite a lot of power here. Um, that you can go and see your councillors. In that whole council election, especially in Oak Park, was quite fiercely fought, you know. There was a whole bunch of candidates we have at local government level and state government as well. So I actually think if there was some major issue in our community and, you know, we had to galvanize people to do something, I think it, yeah maybe the airport is a bridge too far, right, cos there's a lot of vested interests.

Robert Do you think that local government takes any more notice of you?

Charles Of us? Well, they're actually closer. You know, I think there would be a councillor living probably two or three hundred yards from you.

Proximity to official power affects meanings of non-elite power.

Sometimes the names of local political identities were mispronounced, suggesting a lack of familiarity with any discourse surrounding local political activities, issues and representative action. Nevertheless, when participants talked about their engagement with political processes, it was often through narratives involving local issues of complaint and unsatisfactory, if not failed, political response from local bureaucracy. Even helpful suggestions about mechanisms available to citizens were framed in negative tones, communicating lack of confidence in the process and cynicism anticipating lack of success:

Tom I think you can, not that it would do anything, but you could write a letter to your Minister.

Sylvie See I've done that.

Tom I'm just saying that's a mechanism.

Sylvie Yeah.

Tom If you're –

Jacqui Not one that I would probably do.

Tom – if you're really passionate about something you probably, I've never done it before. I'm just assuming you could probably arrange a meeting, I dunno, there's – there's one thing to say I want this and I want that but, from what I've learnt from the last election and all the information I gathered, um, if you want to get in contact with your Minister then write to him, um, there's ways to communication.

RF Now, Sylvie, you said that you've done that. You didn't say it with a lot of confidence. How did it – ?

Sylvie Yeah, look I've done it a number of times. I've gotten the general government-speak back which is, thank you for your letter, you're a VERY important person but we'll think about this and – have a nice life! (Waves her hand to one side. Laughs). It's that kind of response where you know it's the standard response. Um, I recently wrote to our – I've written to him a number times – the mayor, Oscar. Um, about an election commitment that he made to make green bins free. And I asked him how he's going with that election commitment, when I can get my free green bin?

Rita Let me know when the response comes through.

Sylvie Well, I DID get a response and his response was to, um, handball me over to some Director of Infrastructure something or other in the council who explained to me that, y'know, there's a policy process and um, they were going to do A B C D. And I waited a few months, wrote back, said well, how did you go with A B C D? I'm waiting for the policy paper to come back. And then he said, oh well, we've decided not to go with that approach anymore because the policy process is, what was his words? Um, 'doesn't allow enough innovation'. Um, which I responded and I cc'd Oscar into this and said, well, that's a really disappointing view that you take about policy processes. Can you please let me know when the

election commitment, which is what I'm asking about, not policy, is going to be committed – and I've had no response. So I – (pause)

RF How do you feel about all of that because you sound to me like a pretty engaged sort of citizen?

Sylvie Well, I have the feeling I won't hear anything about it until the next election and only if I really push.

Sylvie was rare among the participants for her persistence in trying to make democracy work for her, including her determination to keep the elected representative accountable to the electorate. For Keith, politics at all levels involves bureaucratic corruption. It goes to the issue of what citizens authorise their representatives to do. Don's response suggests he applies a meta-frame of trust in representative government for his understanding of the workings and effectiveness of democratic processes:

Keith The people who get to do the job are not the ones we vote for on Council. It's the ones sitting under there is where the issues are. Councils are probably the most corrupt place in Australia, then you get the state governments (Mavis laughs gently, sceptically?) and then the federal government. We don't see it. It's hidden behind things, compared to – you go, some Asian countries are just straight out in (...)

Mavis (Nodding) Whenever there's money, there's corruption. Big money.

Keith It's not so much kickbacks, it's who they get to do the job.

Mavis That's right.

Keith And. They create jobs for their mates. That's, that's where corruption lies in Councils, and that's big time. And I could, zillions of examples. So I won't, I won't do that. But from a political point of view, um, again I s'pose we feel powerless in the councils in that regard. There's one council that wants to subsidise, um, er, what's his name?

Don Flannery.

Keith What's his name?

Don Tim Flannery.

- Keith Tim Flannery. Yeah. Some councils want to subsidize his, um, forum. To continue on climate change. Now did you (gesturing towards Don) have a say in that? (Pause) I didn't.
- Don No. I, but –
- Keith To me that's a thing that's completely out of the Council's ambit, but –
- Don But taking that further, you can't – I don't – whether you agree with it or not is not important. But I think there are some things that you elect, or you put people in place for, to make decisions. Umm, we then have the facility to object to that decision that they make, somewhere down the track. Umm, but I don't think it'd work if they have to go out and ask everybody whether they think this is a good idea or not. I think that, we have, there has to be an element of trust there somewhere.

For those like Fiona, with little or no interest in politics but an obligation to vote, trust is framed as a personal encounter. The personal introduction can be interpreted as highly significant to Fiona who spoke of it three times in her telling of her story of meeting the mayoral candidate. Her language conveys meanings of courtesy and received feelings of respect. Fiona exhibits low need for cognition and use of peripheral processing. She makes no demand for complex policy platforms. The simple message – 'he was just so nice' – is sufficient for her to decide how she will vote:

- Fiona I guess for me I have no interest in politics at all (holds her hands in front of her with palms facing outwards). Um, I go based on mum (gesturing towards Rita) a lot, who she's going for. Um, and I dunno, like that just the ads they do as well, like who's more, I dunno, trying to target, I dunno, for me it's just –
- Rita There was that, um, there was what's his name? Yilts? Oscar?
- Jacqui Yildis.
- Fiona Oh yeah. He came to our door, um, when they were doing the local thing (waves her index fingers in circles). And he came to our door and introduced himself and said, look I'm running for, um, what was he running for?
- Jacqui For Lord Mayor.

Fiona Yeah. And he introduced himself so I just –

RF He's the local mayor, right?

Fiona Yeah. He introduced himself and he said what primary school did you go to? What high school did you go to? And he used to teach at my high school as well so for that was nice, just, y'know, that face-to-face one-on-one thing. It's important. I ended up voting for him anyway but, he was really nice and, you know, just saw him around the local community, it was good.

Tom Do you know what party he's affiliated with?

Fiona No.

Tom (Nods)

Rita See what I mean? She connected with who he was as a person.

Fiona He was just so nice.

Jacqui Person, as a person rather than what party.

Sonya Yeah, but do you know what he actually – ?

Jacqui Stands for?

Fiona He told me, like, he explained what he was, he gave me a brochure about it and I read that but, yeah, he was just, I dunno, it's important I think to know the person and also know what they stand for under and who they are as a person is very important.

Voting may have been simplified for Fiona once she had met a likeable candidate. Others understand voting processes involve a complexity that challenges sense-making and personal intentions. Don reflects on the surprise election to the Senate of an unemployed timber worker and motoring enthusiast who won on a tiny percentage of votes and strategic preference deals:

Don I think, though, that we might have various opinions on whether they're – but I think it's a healthy, um, community, a healthy country that can – you know, whether the electoral system's biased or they've used it with the preferential system or whatever. But, that someone who's a timber cutter, I think, or worked in the timber industry and, ah, he's out of a job, and all of a sudden he's Senator-elect. I think that's – I think the ordinary person while they might rubbish him a little bit for some of the things, the way he got there

– I think, to think that somebody like that can enter our Parliament and have some sort of a say and influence or whatever, I think is probably a better thing than barring people –

Keith Mmm. Yeah. I agree totally.

Don – from actually trying to get there.

Hamish (Nodding)

(Pause)

Don There were so many of them on our Senate paper.

Mavis That was ridiculous. How could you work that out?

Maureen You were almost forced to vote above the line.

Keith Hmm.

Don That's quite true.

Maureen Cos I was there doing the how to vote and I had a friend with me. And she had previously voted so she was waiting for me outside. With, you know, 93 (spreading her hands wide) I just looked at it and I was shocked (Mavis and Elise laughing loudly), and I thought I can't leave my friend out there waiting while I work out this 93, and of course you get to the end and you're putting 94 and you go \$#@#, so I just went one above the line, because it was just not practical.

Mavis In the Council elections there was 17 in one of the wards, wasn't there (looking to Don)?

Keith That's right, yeah.

Mavis How could you possibly make an informed choice?

Participants' understanding of their place and power in the multi-level political system is framed with a wide view of the bigger scheme of things and established understandings involving marginal seats and balance of power potentialities:

Lesley ...I was just going to say I think I know there's things there at a local level to get things done locally. But I think in the big scheme of things, I feel like there's no power. Does that make sense? So I think there's a difference between the two. (...)

- Charles Well, perhaps in Oak Park because it's a strongly Labor seat but if you look at what the independents and the marginal seat players have achieved for Tasmania, for New England –
- Lesley But they're swing seats.
- Charles – it comes down to Lesley's point earlier, that if you're in a marginal seat you actually do have quite a lot of power. Right? Yeah. I know someone who's working on something and –
- Robert Yeah groups, but not necessarily something as an individual, but they might (inaudible)
- Charles Well, I mean, Tony Windsor had a huge amount of power, and Andrew what's-his-face Wilkie. When you can get a 150 million dollar hospital in Hobart, it's big. So some of those, yeah. Yeah. So I would say the guys on the ground actually DO have power. So maybe the answer is we need more independents.
- Robert We do.
- Lesley Yeah. But in the strong seats, there is none. You know, in the strong – I just think, yep, it annoys me that I'm not in a swinging seat.

Being 'in a swinging seat' can be decoded as Lesley meaning her vote for a non-Labor candidate did not count. That annoys her.

In their discussion of this theme, participants rely heavily on footings of past experience and proximity. Those in the older age groups are able to cite instances of trying to use the processes and mechanisms of structured politics. Their attitudes are largely formed on success or failure to have their needs and expectations satisfied. The younger, less experienced participants reveal a preference to form their political attitudes based on relationships – even if it is the casual relationship constructed in a brief encounter with a political candidate who speaks to them and is 'nice'. Proximity makes a difference to these participants. Local government is 'closer' to them and the council candidate who knocks on their door makes it easier to connect with that level of government and that level of politician than those that are more remote. From their footings as voters, participants formed the opinion that political processes are cumbersome and difficult to manage. The shared experience of difficulty marking a ballot paper with large numbers of candidates listed becomes confirmation of an inconsistency between present footing and a past footing when the attitude formed that voting was to be an 'informed choice'. By

using this example, participants have found new meanings in the electoral process – abundance of choice mitigates against informed choice while independent candidates and marginal seat representatives convey meanings of political power used to positive effect by those at the margins.

Framing engagement and participation

Receiving/listening/hearing is fundamental to the concept of political discourse. Australian democracy presumes some, even minor, levels of engagement and participation. Participants in this project, framing their responses to Australia's contemporary political discourse, reveal a willingness to use the power of the individual receiver to reject the power of the discourse producer/controllers. They report a willingness to tune out and even to change long-time habits of political participation:

- Jacqui I stopped listening. Yeah I stopped listening. I even turned off 3AW (makes a cutting hand gesture).
- RF Did anybody else have that experience of tuning out?
- Sylvie (Nodding) Yeah, very much so.
- Jacqui (Addressing Sylvie) When did you have your tune-out?
- Sylvie Um, (laughs) there was a lot of tuning out. Because I didn't like either side. Any side. Yeah, I just, um, a lot of the debate was on those kind of things, the leadership battle. There was no real discussion about policy. When there was it was sensationalized, um. Y'know, there was always in the background the gay marriage issue, and would one of them take it on? And I just thought this is ridiculous, I'm not interested.

Jacqui's question to Sylvie – 'When did you have your tune-out?' – is normative framing. It normalises the response to discourse and gives it its own name – 'tune-out'. Use of the term as a noun conveys acceptance of the tune-out as a valid response. Further, specifying 'your' tune-out creates an endorsement frame for Lesley's own response. It is a frame that establishes behaviour as acceptable and sets up an expectation that others would – or even, should – share the same response.

Robert reported he had stopped listening to radio shock jocks. Keith, Mavis and Maureen all reported tuning out to some extent whilst keeping a general look-out for specific

things of personal interest. Elise and Evie were asked whether they were inclined to tune-out or take more interest in politics:

Elise Oh, no. I tune-out, I can't – I can't cope with it. It just drives me...

Evie She just gives me the newspaper when it comes and I just cut it out because I do scrap-bookings, so I just cut pictures, words and stuff.

The pictures, words and stuff of political discourse hold no meaning for Evie. Tom, however, is prompted to get more involved, but his framing is from an outsider perspective. He takes advantage of the anonymity of social media to get engaged in political discussion but is reluctant to lend any of his own ideas to others:

Tom As a citizen I felt like I wanted to get more involved. Go to working council meetings or the candidate forums they had around in our city. But, um, then I got engaged in the discussion on Twitter for my seat. Ah, I didn't want to get involved because politics in the seat is pretty vicious and I wasn't up for lending my ideas to someone, and I'm pretty sure that if I had of gone to a community forum that a lot of them would have been thinking the opposite to what I was. So I didn't feel like as it is in this seat I could contribute. Yep. And I actually saw a candidate as I was driving home from work and I, ah, stopped and had a chat to him. I posed all my concerns and all that kind of stuff and I just got the party speak.

RF So you didn't find that very satisfying?

Tom Um, it was a rush. But no, not satisfying.

RF It was a rush?

Tom I was nervous. (Laughter). Cos I could say he was an authority figure, maybe. I couldn't believe I had the guts to walk up to him and go, what about this? What about that? Why did Coburg get this and Oak Park and Glenroy haven't got the NBN? So, yeah.

Jacqui Good on you.

Social media allows Tom to be engaged without participation. Tom surprised himself by spontaneously initiating a face-to-face encounter with the candidate, framing the occasion in terms of power difference and authority. Jacqui's response of encouragement can be interpreted

as coming from a shared footing or awareness of the effort required by ordinary people to openly demand accountability in the political setting.

All the research participants accepted the Australian legal requirement that they must vote. But disappointment with the political discourse over several years had affected Robert's continued willingness to participate in making democracy as a voter:

Robert You were asking me before about my interest. I mean, I wouldn't even bother voting if it wasn't compulsory, in the last few elections. In the past I have quite happily, but, as I say, I think I'm disenfranchised, that's all.

Geraldine joins with a spirited argument in favour of voting with frames of social obligation. Layered with the social responsibility frame is a feminist frame that calls up the struggle of the suffragettes:

Geraldine The exact opposite to Robert. I feel, that, yeah – (...) if everybody's disa – doesn't get into it, and none of us vote then we're leavin', the mess is gonna be worse and it bugs me even more when it's women who say that. Because I think Australia was, I dunno, the first or the second country to give women the vote. People DIED trying to get the vote. And I see it as your responsibility to participate in society. And you can't opt out just because you think everything's crap, you know, and you have to get in there yourself, if you think like that, cos otherwise you have to sit back and take everything.

Without directly naming any provocation for taking her position on voting, Geraldine's response suggests meaning taken from an earlier statement from Lesley that she would always 'vote the underdog until we become a swing seat and then I'll worry about it'. Invited to consider a situation where voting was a matter of choice, Lesley had struggled with the concept of voting as a democratic obligation. The meanings she attaches to democracy and voting are framed by an expectation of total freedom of choice. But, when notionally given the choice, she is not clear about what her response would be:

Lesley Given a choice, I'd probably intend to vote – and slip my mind of it. (Laughter)...No, I think I'd want to be able to have a say, but I'd like to be able to have a choice whether I wanted to vote. I hate that we're democratic but not very democratic in voting.

- RF What do you mean by that?
- Lesley Well, we have to vote. You know, you can choose who you like as a democratic say, but you have to vote. So, d'you know what I mean? My choice. If I want to vote, I'll vote.
- RF If you want to vote, you can but you – OK.
- Lesley Yeah, but at the same time you can do a donkey vote and then, it's the same thing, but it's just a waste of petrol to drive down there to do that. So, do you know what I mean? So I would LIKE the choice and I think if I had the choice I'd probably, um, I'd probably take more of an interest if I had a choice, I think. Because at the moment I know that these people are going down there. They're forced to vote and most of them probably don't pay much attention, and (throwing her hands up) we just keep voting Labor. Do you know what I mean? Whereas because I know I'm in a strong seat and everyone's forced to do it, do you know what I mean? It's sort of, by forcing me to do it it's just like oh, I have to do it. Whereas I probably pay more attention to politics now than when I was younger. Um, I probably have more of an idea now. Yeah, I think if it was my choice I WOULD vote.
- RF You would take a greater interest, you said.
- Lesley Yeah, I think I would. Yeah because at the moment you're forcing me to do something, so you're just, oh yeah, whatever (makes a dismissive gesture), whereas, yeah, that's what I think.

Lesley put unnamed others – 'these people' – into a frame of forced voting and not paying much attention. Eventually, having tested her inner processing out loud, Lesley tentatively suggested a shift in her thinking with marked emphasis – 'I think if it was my choice I WOULD vote'. Among other participants, the discussion of compulsory voting revealed meanings of democracy as a system of government with flaws but a willingness to accept them nonetheless:

- Charles Aahm. Well – them's the rules here, so I guess I see them as part of citizenship. Um, and it's a system that, you know, has got flaws but, if you look around the world, you know it's still one of the best systems around – which is a sad indictment, I guess, of what else is out there.

Hamish was a close listener to a sequence in which Mavis concluded that a system that inhibited her ability to make an informed choice made her feel irrelevant as a citizen. Hamish was prompted to describe how he makes sense of such situations and how it affects his interest and behaviour as a citizen:

Hamish Yeah. I'd agree. I try to sort of act more in an individual way, sort of more locally, by buying certain products that I agree with (Mavis and Don nodding) or living a lifestyle that, um, that I, um, morally agree with and that kind of thing. Um, so it's hard to sort of see how I have an influence at all on the rest of Australia, so I just try and focus on MY local area and get involved with community gardens and that kind of thing. Yeah. (...)

RF So would you describe yourself then as being engaged or disengaged?

Hamish Definitely engaged.

RF You would say you're engaged?

Hamish Locally engaged. Yeah. I still keep track of all the national issues and everything, but I don't feel I have much power or say over those things. Whereas I feel that in my local community I can have that option, a greater effect.

Hamish interprets engagement as staying interested – 'keeping track of all the national issues' – and taking local, personal action to have an effect. None of the participants was a member of a political party. This can be understood as a rejection of formalised participation although others, like Hamish, were motivated to take personal or informal action. For some of them, social media is an alternative to formal memberships of political parties. They approach it as an enabler for citizens to extend engagement, building on interest with participation in the discourse and in networked social/political action:

Charles But then there's, you know with, there's quite a number of new channels for getting information and participating. So I've recently been involved in this thing which has got nothing to do with me but with the McDonalds in Tecoma...

So they're building a McDonald's there against the wishes of the whole of the community. And the site's change dot org so you can basically sign up to an online petition. And they got a couple of

hundred thousand people and some bloke went and delivered the petition to McDonalds in Chicago, you know? So the big, McDonald's here didn't want to know about it and so on. So, there's a lot of –

Robert Was that on Getup or -?

Charles It's called change, change dot org. Yeah, which is an online petition thing. So that is actually, so there are all this kind of media now – of ways of which people who are interested can actually participate and get involved.

Personal interests and circumstances cause engagement to ebb and flow:

Nina I think that most of the time I AM interested in politics but definitely in the lead up to the election I try much harder to seek out information myself rather than just sort of get what comes to me. But it's more sort of particular issues so I've been to a couple of rallies for marriage equality, um, this year and I will continue to do that until that policy is changed. So for me it's more like specific issues, not being involved in a particular party in general.

Tom I'm following the local Council. Recently bought a house. Very interested in local council. And I found the means to follow what is going on via social media.

The majority of participants agree that considerable effort is required to stay engaged and be involved in influencing change. Motivational framing is used to construct reasons for not taking action due to modern life pressures on personal time and energies:

Hamish I guess, in order to get your points heard, you've gotta put a lot of time and effort into it. Which is difficult when you need to pay the bills and stuff like that. Like, yeah. You've gotta put a lot of time in. And you wouldn't be able to put all the time you need to cover all the issues you're passionate about really. But you might be able to focus on one issue in your spare time, but that's about all. And like, it's a shame that you sort of have to sacrifice your own life to sort of get your message out there, cos I think, yeah, if it was a lot easier it'd be – I dunno.

RF So it takes a lot of time, you think, to be a citizen?

- Hamish Yeah.
- Keith A fair amount of effort.
- Hamish To be fully engaged takes a lot of effort, yeah, and really I don't think many people have the time to be able to do that when they're working fulltime, things like that.

Geraldine had also come to the view that it takes a lot of effort to be a citizen. Her motivational framing reveals a congruence of cognitive and affective processing:

- RF So why is all this important then?
- Geraldine Cos we want a good standard of living and it's our responsibility to speak up and I don't like to feel like I am being manipulated. If I think something should be better, could be better in our community, well – I'm not scared to speak up.
- Charles That's good. That's OK.
- Geraldine I think you should. It's your responsibility to make things better for everybody. Sound like a real dickhead! (Laughing at herself). (...) It's a lot of work. Before I was retired I was always the union rep at my work. And it caused a lot of problems. Because sometimes other people are intimidated. And you might be talking to people in the lunchroom or whatever, and then the boss will walk through and everyone will scatter (sits forward and makes spreading hand gesture). Like they don't want to be seen talking to you.
- Charles (Laughs)
- Geraldine Right? And, um, I was a sole parent and I was scared of losing my job, too, but I just had to brazen it out, and act as if I didn't even notice people were givin' me the cold shoulder in front of the boss. I acted like it was (sweeping gesture with her hand) – nothing. Inside I was shaking (shakes hands in front) like a leaf (puts hands in her lap). Now, only one woman, really, stood up and said, yep, no worries, I'll back you up. Most people say things to your face, and when it comes to the crunch they're scared, and they can't do it.
- Robert Well, you've all (inaudible) security.

Geraldine Yeah, but so was I, but whadda you, you've got your conscience or you, d'ya know what I mean? For your kids, there. That's how I look at it. I don't think, I've got, I think you've got as much right as anybody else to have your say, whether you're the bloody garbo or you're Kelvin Thomson. Doesn't matter.

Geraldine finds meaning through layers of frames. In this event of expression it is possible to see that there is no single frame for making sense. Her conscience, her kids, experiences of being a sole parent and a union rep, remembering being scared and getting the cold shoulder, and still aspiring to a good standard of living are inseparable threads in the woven meaning Geraldine gives to the importance of being a democratic citizen.

This section under analysis is significant for what participants self-report about their engagement with politics and how they negotiate their way in creating political discourse. 'Engagement' was discussed variously on their terms as 'tuning out', proactively using social media to stay informed, and attitudes to voting – having the desire (responsibility) to vote, having (the legal obligation) to vote and choosing or not choosing (having the option) to vote. Engagement was also discussed as making things better for everybody, involvement in local community activities, as putting in a greater effort to follow politics in the lead-up to an election, and for the amount of time and effort required, especially if a citizen wanted 'to be *fully* engaged'. Voting was a sub-topic that revealed opposing perspectives. It evoked strong feelings, passionately argued in one case and firmly held against the majority view in another. From the literature, it is accepted that discourse shapes attitudes, opinions and behaviours. The behaviour of the participants suggested an approach to making political discourse that was open to other opinions rather than firmly rooted in ideology.

Framing personal political influences

In the preliminary analysis of participant groupings, family was found to be a reference site for development of political dispositions and a source of political information. Early life experiences are cited by participants as enduring reference points for their current political attitudes and responses; but they are aware of change over time and are uncertain about where the political markers are in the formative years of today's young people especially:

Don I think it's when you begin to mix with a range of people either at work or socially or, you know, probably more so these days at

university; when I went to school there weren't so many went on to university, so you went, you had a job or did a trade or, some went on to other things, but that's where you started to form some ideas about, um, about what authority was doing in certain situations. If you belonged to a trade union, for instance, you were interested in how, um, how they were able to progress the conditions and so on for their particular members. And I think that's when you started to become interested in maybe being active in participation or support. Until that time, I think, with many other things that are interesting to people, I think that today there are so many distractions for young people particularly in coming to terms with social environment, whether it's social media, connecting – there's a whole lot of things that they're being bombarded with, but I think that politics ends up down the bottom of the importance scale. That's my opinion.

Maureen Well, I got involved in political discourse, probably the last year of high school. Because I had a friend who was actually older and came back to school to finish her high school and university. And at university because we were all fulltime students um, we used to, you know, sit around and do a lot of talking. Um, I don't know whether kids do that anymore because so many of them are off working and spend very little time actually at university just hanging out the way we used to.

Don traces his attitudes to engagement and participation to his working life and the influences of trade unions. Geraldine connects her experiences as a workplace union activist with her current opinions about the need to get involved or otherwise accept the political 'mess' that people complain about. Without going into detail about her childhood, Geraldine also goes back further to make connections between making meaning as adults and 'the environment, the way you're brought up'. In the following event of expression, she frames this early influence as 'gut reaction' and describes how habituated cognitive processing during upbringing can be challenged by the power of mediatisation:

Geraldine I've got an example of how the media did really change my mind on an issue, with the whole Syrian thing. And when I saw the footage of, you know, the kids you know, chemicals on them and all of this. I just thought, that's a crime against humanity. That's

wrong. We, I'm with Kevin Rudd, we should get in there and blah, blah, blah. Then I read an article by Julian Assange. And, um, I had to concentrate (laughs) but I read it! And it really erred on the side of caution and how we can't trust information and everything. And so, as much as I felt for these kids, it did change my mind, you know.

Robert Well, there's atrocities on both sides there. But still, the United Nations when they went in and investigated there was um –

Geraldine But I'm just saying it was my gut reaction as soon as I saw it.

Robert – it wasn't part of their brief to say who fired the rockets, that, we still don't know. I mean, we had plenty of reports that the rebels, that some of the rebels are using chemical weapons, and there's atrocities on both sides, it's a shocking, it's a civil war really.

Geraldine I was just meaning the power of the media that, you know, like, if I had been a man, a soldier I would have been there, righto, I'm there. (Gesticulating) Get me there, you know what I mean? I read this article and it just made me realize how gung-ho I was being and need to check things out first.

In this exchange, it is possible to discern how consumer citizens can be captured, first by their upbringing, and then by the media and the reputation of organisations. Robert relies on the integrity of the United Nations for his understanding of a situation as civil war. Geraldine is open to context and is able to resist the dominant media influence in finding meaning in contemporary political discourse.

For some participants, making sense of politics involves using reference points. It is not all their own work. They acknowledge external influences and suggest an awareness of stages in personal political development. Their diagnosis is that it has become more difficult for people to have exposure to situations and circumstances with potential to positively influence them, as had been their experience. Making sense of the political discourse, as a process of the mind, is a changing process because time changes or, in other words, times change.

Framing change over time

Not surprisingly, it was the older participants who often framed current attitudes and beliefs in comparative terms, aware of significant influences on their cognitive development. For them, changes over time in their reception of political discourse were sometimes confusing, making it difficult to make sense of more recent situations when similar circumstances or events in the past carried clearer meanings for them. The context of an increasingly mediatised environment established the footing for most frames of change over time. Throughout the three discussions, participants used frames that revealed high levels of awareness that they were in a period of transition from old traditional media to new media. None were untouched by or oblivious to the phenomenon of mediatisation with its pervasive influence over the way people live. None were members of political parties yet all had access to the internet. Over time, they find meaning through informal networks rather than formal memberships.

The participants who reported a change in their experience of received political discourse used frames that recalled themselves holding footings and perspectives in another time, in another era of communication and in a political environment that was markedly different from the current ecology. From their perspective as users of the internet and new media, discussion of change over time revealed positive meanings. Otherwise, participants' attitudes and opinions suggested a shift away from better times. Analysis at numerous points of the discussions reveal participants using frames of negative diagnosis, suggesting negative emotion is embedded in sense-making or is a manifestation of it. Framing analysis based on a reproduction of the data as written texts has gone part of the way to understanding how ordinary citizens make sense of the political discourse. But what more might be learned from how the participants sounded?

Tones of evaluation

In listening to the participants' verbal utterances and transcribing them for framing analysis, the meaning of the words used could not be fully conveyed without paying attention to the choice of words and how the words sounded. There was a tone to them that could not be ignored. In speech, tone is an affective force; it is among the qualities of speech that are considered as affective meaning-making (Wetherell, 2012). For example, it is incongruous to imagine meaningful words of love and endearment being uttered with tones of anger or the call to arms on the barricades of revolutionary Paris being delivered with the gentle tones used to hush a crying baby. What were the participants meaning when they chose that word and gave it a tonal

quality? Specifically, what was the prevailing tone of the discussion when project participants were diagnosing political discourse? And what significance does it have in making sense of political discourse?

The Leunig cartoon used to open Chapter 3 is an illustration of how media coverage of politics includes affective attributes attached to players, issues and events. The cartoon citizen is surrounded by the sounds of democracy which are absorbed by the human heart as an enduring tone of tribal aggression and mean stupidity. The ‘tone that will rule the country’ sounds like Tony, subtly referencing Prime Minister Tony Abbott. It also echoes a contention in Reddy’s historical study of emotions in 18th century France (2001) that feelings can be central to achieving and holding on to political power. Images of North Koreans in mass displays of affection for their ‘Dear Leader’ come to mind as a contemporary exemplar of the theory in practice. In other polities, political goals are pursued with campaign management strategies designed to attract ‘followers’ through social media and ‘likes’ for political candidates also support the point that gaining and holding political power is as much about emotion as it is about reason. Where there is ‘emotional liberty’, a term used by Reddy to mean ‘the freedom to change goals in response to bewildering, ambivalent thought activations that exceed the capacity of attention and challenge the reign of high-level goals currently guiding emotional management’ (p. 129), knowing the mood (feelings) of the electorate is a political essential. Media representations of how politics is received, such as Leunig’s cartoon, have been found to influence the political judgment of voters (Sheafer, 2007). This is an element of communication production recognised in media agenda-setting and priming. Affective attribution, however, is not the sole prerogative of discourse producers. The affective reception of political discourse is arguably discernible in the variations in tone used by participants when evaluating the discourse. Therefore, this section prepares for a tone of evaluation analysis to complement framing analysis. The priority here is to identify which tones are used by participants in their themed discussion and the strength of evaluative tones in choice of words and utterances.

Coding – for positive (POS), neutral (NEU) or negative (NEG) tone of evaluation – was applied in the early treatment of the discussion transcripts. The units of analysis for coding tones of evaluation are utterances within events of expression. The following serves as an example:

Mavis	Oh, I think I agree with Maureen. <i>You just get rubbish (NEG) in the paper. You don’t get policies (NEG) because I don’t know if</i>
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they can make any; it's too hard (NEG). And, um, but you just get all this nonsense, you don't get what we've done (NEG). Like the government's in and they don't say this is what we've done and this is our record. They have to – to slag the other (NEG) (Mavis uses both hands waving in opposing directions, and Hamish is nodding in agreement) – you know, there's just all this personality, celebrity infighting (NEG), and glamorous daughters or whatever. It's all rubbish (NEG). And, um, I just think that's what it's like, it's just, it's just another game isn't it (NEG)? (Looks to Maureen who nods agreement) It's just, you know. I have respect (POS) for Kelvin Thomson and Christine Campbell because they send a letter out every few wee – every couple of months, few months with what they've tried to do and what they've achieved or haven't achieved, and they're still trying to; so I feel they're interested in the people (POS).

In this event of expression, Mavis repeatedly uses negatively charged words such as 'rubbish' and 'just' as a qualifier to convey inadequacy in the received discourse. She also uses the phrase 'you don't get' to mark out the points of failure to meet her expectations in regard to spelling out policies and being accountable for the 'record' of achievement. Instead, the meaning she receives is that the opposing sides 'slag' each other. There is 'infighting' and game playing. In the language flow between 'slag' and 'rubbish', references to personality and glamorous daughters also take on negatives tones. In her comparative framing, Mavis applies a positive tone of evaluation to what she receives from her local Members of Parliament. They have earned her 'respect' so she feels they are 'interested in people'. In this single event of expression, Mavis has used eight negative tone utterances and two positive tone utterances; therefore this event of expression is marked as overwhelmingly negative in its tone of evaluation.

Not every event of expression was found to have a clear cut evaluative tone. There are utterances of positive, negative and neutral tone of apparently equal weight in the following example:

Charles	<i>Well, the game changer is the internet obviously. So now there's a multitude of voices and, yes, you do have to drill down and, yes, it's one of those things where you know yes, you've got so much more news now in a way (POS). But you, unless you've got the</i>
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capability, the training and the time to go through all that it's very hard (NEUT). So you are still in many ways reliant on mainstream media for the bulk of people, you know. And *that is that danger of concentration (NEG).* Is that one of the things that you're looking at? Media concentration?

RF Not specifically. But I'm interested in it because you're interested to raise it.

The issue of the internet as a media 'game changer' carries a positive evaluation because, in Charles' framing, it increases the number of voices in discourse. This is confirmed by the word 'yes' used three times in the following utterance. Charles' diagnostic framing continues with a neutral evaluative tone attached to his observation about the implications of this game change. He then frames the risk or flaw in the otherwise positive game change and uses the word 'danger' giving a negative affective attribution to 'media concentration'.

This analytical process found tones of evaluation, most often negative, were frequently used in diagnostic framing. Interestingly, they were also employed by participants in reporting how others familiar to them responded to political discourse:

Elise It's interesting because I've got also a 24 year old, she's doing her Masters, and she said – this was, like, before when Julia was still in government and everything like that. *She had no idea because every day, again the media, all you heard was bad mouthing and everything like that (NEG).* And she said, I've got no idea who I'm going to vote for. I mean, *because it was a joke (NEG),* it was just – *a farce (NEG),* everything about the whole – everything. And, um, *everyone backstabbing everybody (NEG)* and everything like that. And she said, what are the policies? You know she had – all she knew was, because she's doing teaching, Masters in teaching, was that the, Tony Abbott said that he was going to cut the education expenditure. *That's all she knew. So that was the only thing she thought that, I shouldn't vote for him (NEG)* because he said he's going to do this but, you know, *he kept on saying I'm going to bring out the policies and, you know, before, and everyone will know; well, we still don't know what they are. Well, I don't know what they are. Does anybody know what they are? (NEG).* So, the younger people, *they've got no idea. They've simply got no*

*idea (NEG), whereas years ago, at least you had a bit of an idea,
phfff, who to vote for (POS).*

Discernment of an evaluative tone in the perceived reception of discourse by others suggests a second-level of affective attribution in the sense-making process. The relatively few events of expression which included reporting with an indirect evaluative tone suggested it was not a productive route for detailed analysis here. However, identification of the possibility of second-level evaluative tones in *reporting* reception of political discourse warrants noting.

In pursuit of tones of evaluation across the three transcripts, 677 utterances were coded as having either positive, neutral or negative tone (see Appendix VI) All other utterances were assessed as having no discernible evaluative intent, being straight-forward observations or factual statements by the participant. When aggregated by theme, negative tones of evaluation were dominant when participants discussed media performance, the content of political discourse, the power and influence of the media, political processes and change over time. Positive tones dominated when participants talked about their own media use, the political influences in their lives and their engagement and participation. Many utterances coded as neutral could just as accurately be described as having a tone of uncertainty. This tone was most evident in the discussions about change over time, engagement and participation, and political process.

The language of discourse on discourse

Reception of language is about hearing the ‘what’, since spoken words are always filled with content and meaning. Formal signage may say DANGER, but ‘Look out!’ clearly means ‘danger’. We hear the meaning not the word/s. They may be value-laden or triggers for recalling past experience. Often words make sense and convey meaning only when they are heard with other words. Indeed, in conversation, tied words (Halliday & Hasan, 2013) where one needs the other to be meaningful, do not have to be uttered by the same speaker. In dialogue, language can make sense *because* two or more are engaged in a search for shared meaning. Making sense is finding coherence. How language coheres determines the power of language.

From this linguistic footing the question posed is this: what language did the participants employ to talk about political discourse and how did they employ it? The approach adopted is to look at words, not as components of language structure – building clauses or sentences with nouns, verbs, adjectives – but as vehicles of content and meaning (Volosinov, 1973). Favouring

a social-semiotic perspective that views language as transmissions of meaning in social contexts, calls for the data to be analysed as text with CON-text (Halliday & Hasan, 1985) where the prevailing political environment that precedes it and is 'with the text' is revealed in the language employed.

The wording of summary responses to the mediated political discourse received by participants are loaded with meaning conveying antipathy and dislike: 'dregs', 'mud', 'rubbish', 'shocking', 'disgusting', 'atrocious', 'lies', 'shallow', 'bias', 'bad mouthing', 'negative', and 'backstabbing'. Seen or heard together like this, the words become a lexical set typifying the political discourse of the time. As such, the participants when diagnosing the problem of political discourse use antipathetic language, the language of aversion. These words are more than description (Edelman, 1984/1974); they suggest a democratic life where ordinary people are being repulsed, pushed away from the political discourse by its content. There are no counter-balancing words offered to suggest receivers find the discourse inviting or embracing.

Consistent with this interpretation is the use of oppositional terms when participants describe their position in the political environment. Their word choices of 'them' and 'us' reveal role assignments and polarization (Pocock, 1984/1973):

'They're out there to manipulate people'.

'They have an agenda. Definitely'.

'The powers that be, whoever they are, they're you know, pushing us to constantly spend more money so that we have to work harder....'

'...so we won't argue with them'.

Keith's elaboration of this theme, as an example, frames the political discourse as a power discourse by using words and phrases such as 'control', 'pushed around one side to the other', and 'it costs us' before arriving at the conclusion of the message in discourse as he heard it, that of being 'pretty helpless, us blokes':

Keith	So whoever controls, so we've got two groups of people and then there's us typical people sitting in the middle, getting controlled by both of them. Pushed around one side to the other, all the time. And every time we get pushed, it costs us a little more and these guys push (gesturing one side to the other) costs us a little more and so on. We're getting pushed DRASTICALLY from both sides. So that's – to me, that's the political environment in
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Australia. Both sides get a go every now and again, and I don't have a problem with that, so we're just pretty helpless, us blokes, just sitting in the middle.

The repetitions of meaning in 'controlled' and 'pushed' and 'costs' build an intensity peaking with the vocal emphasis given to the word 'drastically'. With this language Keith is doing more than describing the situation as he perceives it. He is self-categorising, accepting a minor role in the hierarchy of political power where his potential for effective influence over the way he is governed is limited. This is consistent with Edelman's (1984/1974) analysis of the language of the helping professions that categorisation consigns people to niches according to their actual or potential accomplishments or behaviour. As a receiver of the messages implying categorisation within the social and political power structure, Keith's language reveals that he knows his place in that reality. Power, or lack of it, is a coherent theme among these participants.

Coherence is a fundamental property of discourse (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). A simple principle by which coherence is formed is argument repetition. Linked to coherence is the theory of cohesion defined as 'the lexicogrammatical realization of semantic features that link the parts of a text together' (Halliday & Huddleston, 1991). Taking these two language features, argument repetition and the semantic feature of a declarative statement of affirmation such as 'I agree' or a non-verbal cue such as nodding, it is possible to analyse the texts at hand for cohesion of shared meaning derived by the participants from their individual reception of the political discourse.

In this segment of discussion on the role of the media, Elise, Maureen, Hamish, Mavis and Keith all cooperate to construct a shared narrative of accountability and power when Elise presumes the others will know the situation she is trying to reference in construction of her argument. She invites the others in to share her received meaning using a question:

Elise But I think also, too, um, the media has got a lot to, um, what's the word I'm looking for, to answer to. Because every single day they come up with something new. Now they're – with Tony Abbott – well, I understand that they're trying to, like – the people – who's the person who was spending all that money overseas on, um – for teaching or learning? Oh, what's his name?

Maureen Barnaby Joyce?

Elise No, no, no, no. He was, he just went over there for, I don't know how many weeks, and spent taxpayers' money...

Hamish To do a course, wasn't it?

Elise ...to do some sort of research or something or other. Understand the media is trying to come, ah, find these people that are abusing, um, the way they're spending money and now they're getting into Tony Abbott for his cycling and everything like that, you know, there always has to be something every single day that they try to find fault in or manipulate, manipulate in other people. I find it shocking, absolutely shocking. And anyway. That's just the way it is.

Maureen It was really evident just before the election, too, in the things that were in the Murdoch papers. Just, quite disgusting really. I mean, even around the world people were saying how disgusting it was.

RF (Pause) So, from your discussion, clearly you think the media is a big player in the debate...

Mavis It always has been.

RF ...that goes on.

Maureen Oh yes.

Mavis Yes.

Hamish (nodding)

Keith Ninety per cent is, if not more.

Maureen They're really out there to manipulate people...

Keith Or ninety-eight per cent, probably.

Maureen Mmm. I mean, we know which side of the fence Mr Murdoch is on. He made that patently clear. Um, and what really, you know, got me is how things come out afterwards. You know, all that stuff about Tony Abbott didn't come out before the election. Now that he's quite safe and by next election everyone will have forgotten it comes out. Um, you know, articles about Julia Gillard, after she left, suddenly we get all these articles about what a lovely person she was...

- Mavis Yeah
- Maureen ...not before. (Maureen and Mavis laugh ironically)
- Mavis No. No.
- Keith Yes. You can see why people want to get hold of the media 'cos they have a lot of influence, a huge amount of influence. So we've certainly got two sides, left and right in the media. (Hamish nods agreement) That's what it really comes down....
- Maureen Oh come on. It's ninety per cent right and the ABC tries to balance. And that's all. And the ABC's the only one that actually even considers that there's such a thing as balance. The commercial papers know no balance. What's balance?
- Keith I probably disagree with that point. There's certainly one right and there's certainly one left.

The participants don't all agree with one another – Maureen and Keith make clear that they disagree on the extent of media balance – but neither does the theory of cohesion require that they should. The text as meaning is cohesive when the speakers repeat the argument by joining the speech interaction with their elaboration, with affirmations both verbal and non-verbal, with questions to others in the group and ultimately by the shared civility in language of being able to agree to disagree.

Hearing the poetry of politics

Clark's position that a good citizen-electoral is good in criticising the political poems she hears (2012) suggests that the citizen receiver in discourse needs 'an ear' for the rhythms and cadences of political language and 'a feel' for the texture or aesthetics of oratorical speech. The speech acts of these ordinary Australians talking amongst themselves do not match the performance oratory of public speechmakers. There is little of the refined poetics or style of political stagecraft in their delivery. Yet, the citizens participating in this study present as able critics of the political discourse. Some like Mavis do so referentially by repeatedly noting the absence of policy substance in what she expects to hear from politicians. Geraldine is one who is attuned to the aesthetics and criticises style over substance:

- Geraldine I don't like how the campaigning style in Australia has become more presidential. And they trot out their families like, here's

Tony Abbott (makes a gesture as of presentation to one side) my daughters are better looking than yours.

Charles (Laughs)

Geraldine You know, like, and it's sickening and the daughters are there because Margie doesn't like to talk. The thing is, don't even have 'em there. That bugs me.

Lesley It seems like it's a lot more on personality, than policy.

Geraldine uses mimicry in her gesturing and grammatical use of the possessives 'my' and 'yours' to attribute the style to Abbott by name and to Rudd, his campaign opponent, by inference. But this is not indirect speech valorising the discourse contributions of these political leaders. It is close to ridicule that valorises the non-elite for their ability to see through the crafted performance and stage a performance with a script of their own.

The participants' sense that they are being told lies further demonstrates a textural awareness. They discern a lack of sincerity, of the politicians and media holding back on information and their true agenda. By contrast, when Geraldine speaks about her own political involvement and standpoint, she does so with conviction:

Geraldine ... I also kind of go to Close Essendon Airport Committee, but I'm not on the Committee, I just go. And, Bill Shorten is one of our big stumbling blocks. And his friends, this is my other little take, he's friends with Lindsay Fox and Lindsay Fox lands his helicopter at Essendon Airport cos it's closer for him to get into –

Charles He owns it.

Geraldine Well, Bill Shorten doesn't want it closed down because he's mates with him and Bill uses his helicopter at times. So, and it's right next to his electorate. And when we did a survey, Bill Shorten came back with figures that said people in his area weren't affected by planes or helicopters, and it's just rubbish, he's just picked the people who he's surveyed cos that's just not true. So the whole lying thing really worries me, basically. I don't trust anyone. Unless, if I think it, that's a good enough thing (pointing to herself. General laughter).

RF So why is all this important then?

Geraldine Cos we want a good standard of living and it's our responsibility to speak up and I don't like to feel like I am being manipulated. If I think something should be better, could be better in our community, well – I'm not scared to speak up.

Charles That's good. That's OK.

Geraldine I think you should. It's your responsibility to make things better for everybody. Sound like a real dickhead! (Laughing at herself).

The self-deprecating humour with which Geraldine concludes suggests an embarrassment with being caught out at being the sort of person who consciously uses her democratic rights and knows her democratic obligations. In her quintessentially Australian self-expression, she presents as a prototype for the ordinary, everyday, 'good Aussie citizen'.

In a brief turn to observation analysis, the Oak Park participants in three separate discussion groups reveal meanings about the conduct of political debate and the construction of democratic discourse. They listened and spoke with respect for others in their group. When they disagreed, they did so with care not to offend. They took turns and were accepting of signals to let someone finish having her/his say. They asked questions of others in the group, demonstrating recall of what had been said earlier and interest in drawing more from the discussion. The evidence is that they 'walked *their* talk'.

Jacqui was moved to imagine what she would like to hear from party politicians rather than what she actually hears. She creates a 'fictional discourse' to illustrate that it is possible to re-democratise the discourse:

Jacqui Yeah, it would be nice to have your local political party, even if it wasn't just really (holding her hands rounded and close together), y'know, if it was a little bit broader and took in a, quite a few suburbs of Melbourne but in pockets, instead of going up there going, 'well, this is who we stand for', it's like 'no, no, no, no', what are some things that they could perhaps help with? Y'know, just because your party says 'we're going to give money to schools' but you think 'you should give it to the church, y'know', it's like, can they actually say 'look, I can listen to what you're saying and I can understand it. The chances of me getting it are not big but I WILL raise it, y'know. Get OUR concerns. What WE think is important to OUR electorate. Y'know, rather than sit down give out the political speak about what's, y'know, 'what

we're gonna do for you' type of thing. That would be nice for them to hear...
that they want to listen to what I think is important...

Summary findings

The findings from this chapter are based on three groups of citizens from Australia's most average suburb and, as such, their voices can only be indicative rather than representative of how, given the opportunity, ordinary Australians find meaning in the political discourse. Their self-revelations about how they conceptualise democracy and the extent to which the political discourse influences their engagement with democracy have value *because they are their voices* and are not the aggregated voice of public opinion commonly represented by opinion poll reports. They warrant attention because opportunities to hear what ordinary citizens say in their own words about the circumstances surrounding how they are governed are few and far between. It is not the intention in discussing these findings to generalise attitudes and impacts to all Australians; but neither is it intended suggest these are views peculiar to a few and deny the potential for them to resonate loudly with and sound familiar to a significant number of other ordinary Australians who share their context and are receivers of the same discourse.

When making sense of political discourse as they encounter it, these participants talk in themes. Their top-of-mind theme is media performance which is generally of poor quality because it communicates agenda-setting, bias and lack of accountability. Closely linked to this priority theme is media power and its influence over the public political agenda. Citizens recognise the rising influence of new media. They find their power in new media with its accessibility and diversity which contrasts with the traditionally exclusive field where combined media and corporate power influence politicians and political parties. Dissatisfaction with the content of political discourse is about lack of substantive argument, absence of policy, the focus on personality and celebrity. These dissatisfactions coalesce to create doubts about truth and trust among ordinary people, not just about the honesty in political discourse, but political process and the polity itself. Story-telling of personal experience with elected representatives and bureaucracy, coupled with reported observations about political parties and perceptions of lack of accountability in the system of representative government, contribute to an overall negative tone of evaluation in ordinary people's talk about politics and political discourse in particular. 'Where is democracy?' echoes with layers of meaning.

Participants are more positive when they move from discussing their reception/consumption of political discourse through traditional media to their potential for reception/production of political discourse through new media. The positive tone is also attached to discussion of personal political influences including family and friends, work environment, and individual and social values. Under a themed heading of engagement and participation, participants talked about their interest – or lack of interest – in political discourse and political processes, especially in voting. When asked by the facilitator to make a notional choice between compulsory and voluntary voting, none want to abandon obligatory voting – although one clearly attaches her enthusiasm for voting to the closeness of the local contest. Other sub-themes in discussion of democratic engagement and participation are citizen capability; the time and effort required to be informed and active citizens which some express as a barrier to participation; personalised and local action as an individual response to the perceived powerlessness and ineffectiveness of social action; and obligations of citizenship.

In expressing thoughts and meanings around these themes, participants often reveal unspoken expectations of receiving discourse. They omit details, assuming that the others in the discussion will know what they are talking about. They imagine a foundation level of ‘common knowledge’ within political discourse. For example, it was taken for granted that others would know Murdoch, Julia, Kevin, Barnaby Joyce, Bill Shorten, Lindsay Fox; no detail was given when references were made to the \$75,000, nor explanation for referencing the comparative attributes of daughters. It was expected that everyone in the discussion would recognise those players and those issues – they were all in the same context.

That having been said, they were not all of the same mind. Differences can be heard among the voices. Some are more articulate than others and these tend to be the curious and purposeful rather than the accidental receivers of discourse. Some are more talkative than others; two of those with less to say were retiree Don and bee-keeping environmentalist Hamish. Yet when they do speak, it is with a quiet confidence suggesting prior thought about the issue. Nina is quiet on most issues except that of same-sex marriage where she reveals herself to be an activist. Fiona, one of the youngest participants, has little to say without being asked directly to give her view which may be interpreted as consistent with her admission that she has no interest in politics at all and goes ‘based on mum a lot’. Evie, by contrast, is of the same age and doesn’t talk about politics at all with her friends but she speaks at length in the group discussion about her local experiences of traffic and public transport and the inability of

authorities to act. The occasion gives her a rare opportunity to have others listen and see things from her perspective.

Framing is predominantly diagnostic; that is, participants identify problems, they are aware of multiple causes of the problems and they attribute blame for the problems. Some framing, however, is less complex, presenting as complaint rather than diagnosis. There is some prognostic framing; that is, they frame opinions or ideas about what can repair or minimise the problem. Many frame their interest and behaviours, their motivation for engagement and participation (or lack of it), as closely related to or as a natural progression of their diagnostic and prognostic framing. These findings of themes, affective attribution, and evidence of close, possibly consequential, relationships between diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing by receivers when making sense of political discourse are laid out for discussion in the following chapter.

The discussion is structured around the confident finding that Australia's citizens know what they want to hear. And they can outline how they want to hear it. They want to hear politicians asking them what is important rather than telling them what is deemed by others to be given to them. They want to be respected participants in the discourse. They want honesty. They want to hear trusted politicians promise to do their best to deliver what constituents nominate as their priorities, and to explain the case if and when they can't deliver. This project finds Australian citizens are ready to receive that sort of discourse.

Insofar as a chapter of text can call on the reader to 'hear' research data under analysis, this has necessarily been a lengthy chapter of listening. But the task of analysis is incomplete without further discussion which is continued in a new chapter. What follows is an analytical discussion of the data as language, stories of experience, sounds of resistance, why themes of power and truth are heard more loudly than others, and what can be heard when individual voices are re-heard as a collective voice.

Chapter 7



Fig. 7.1: *The Listener*. Reproduced with kind permission. Jack Chadwick 2012

Do you hear what I hear?

This chapter aims to follow key directional signposts identified in the literature review in Part A to see if or to what extent they are recognisable in the data under analysis. It begins with a discussion of language since it is the vehicle that brings inner thoughts of received communication into the outer realm to be heard. The discussion looks at how language marks out the citizen's sense of place in the public political space. Because the language used by the participants in this project is so heavily laden with negative tones, the discussion considers toned language as the sound of resistance and a signal of a citizen counterpublic emerging within the Australian polity.

The discussion of context for hearing meaning in discourse is primarily a discussion of mediatisation; consumerisation and globalisation are pushed into the contextual background by the prominence ordinary people give to both negative and positive impacts of mediatisation. Neoliberalism is not a word used by any of the participants but the impacts of neoliberal rationality echo through the discussions. The research finding is clear, that citizens harbour resentments about the media's power and agenda-setting influence in the production of discourse, and they blame the media for the quality of the discourse. But it is not all negative.

The research also found that digital age media is widely used and experiences of new media are positively framed by ordinary Australians with varying levels of political engagement. The discussion considers how mediatisation and the new age of communication might be enabling the emergence of a political counterpublic or publics.

Political power and the lack of it alarms and frustrates ordinary citizens. Their claim on power along with their expectations of accountability from the elites are discussed as derivative of an idealized democracy that, on the meaning they themselves take from the political discourse, ordinary people reluctantly confirm no longer exists. But do they accept what their own evidence suggests? The finding that ordinary Australians are wedded to compulsory voting is discussed in the context of a professionalised politics where citizens cling to what remnants of democratic power remain available to them.

The significance of respect between citizens and their democratically elected representatives is discussed as a relationship mediated through political discourse. The discussion builds on the finding that ordinary Australians are convinced that their voices are neither welcome nor heard and that they are continually lied to by the political elite. The citizen's role, status and relationships are discussed as constructions of received meaning through discourse.

Effects on citizens from the meaning they take from political discourse are discussed based on findings of overwhelming negativity and, in particular, their concerns about the dumbing down impact of a dumbed down discourse. ELM (elaboration likelihood modelling) serves as a useful theory for briefly exploring the notion of a persistently negative discourse normalising negative reception as the default experience of political discourse. The chapter concludes with a discussion of contemporary citizenship and citizen engagement, and the citizen's role, status and relationships as constructs of received meaning through discourse.

Public language, voice and opinion

Why is it that the language tone when these ordinary people talk about the contemporary political discourse is so overwhelmingly negative? Their words and phrases are employed in what might be construed as a litany of problems. Could it be that this negative-sounding language is no more than symptomatic of a culture of complaint in the Australian polity, or a crankiness from voters in a country that gets the government it deserves (Bryant, 2014)? In context, the language conveys more than irritability and bad temper. It speaks of something

other than a passing moodiness. ‘Dregs’, ‘atrocious’, ‘disgrace’, ‘disenfranchised’ – these are strong words. Without qualifiers to soften or equivocate, they convey a depth of considered meaning and conviction reached over time rather than a casual comment. When Robert says ‘I’m ashamed of this country and its treatment of refugees’, it is difficult to characterise as a throw-away line. It can be interpreted as a reluctant re-framing of his expectations about the way Australia responds to people in crisis. In the past, the country repeatedly welcomed refugees but now they are turned back and reviled. Robert’s language and tone is negative because of a dissonance between his old and new expectations, between old and new framing of his image of Australia. Meanings of failed expectations are heard in many events of expression. They are there when Mavis talks about what she expects from the newspaper now which is mainly for the crossword. They can be heard when Maureen frames her expectations of party policies around her expectations established during the Whitlam era when policies were spelled out in detail in the newspapers for the general public. So the negativity is a signal of reluctant re-framing. The situations involving refugees, newspaper content and policies of political parties can’t be understood using the frames constructed around past situations involving these same issues. The inability to make sense using the old frames has been replaced for some, like Mavis, using a different frame; it makes sense if she only expects to use the newspaper to do the crossword. Robert and Maureen continue to struggle to make sense of current situations by refusing to abandon the old frames and expectations about treating refugees and fulsome explanations of party policies. Their refusal or inability to recalibrate their expectations causes their language and tone to sound resistant and argumentative.

It might be argued that the language is critical and positive for making discourse rather than resistant and negative, and is fully consistent with the role of the public which is to criticise and have opinions (Dewey, 2012; Lippmann, 1921, 1927; Rogers, 2012). If public criticism is legitimate when directed at those in whom the people have vested authority and is consistent with what the literature says about democracy, citizenship and accountability, why does the language convey repetitions of frustration and despair? There are several threads to follow in this discussion. They wind around the right to have a voice; around deserving to be listened to; around expecting to be heard by one’s own representative; around not being told what your view is, based on the polling responses of a small sample of people, and consequently having your voice muted – even appropriated by others. Australian citizens are not alone in their frustration (Couldry et al., 2010):

In Josh's case we can justifiably talk of *disillusioned connection*. Josh's disillusionment linked directly to his (frustrated) sense of how democracy should work. He defined democracy explicitly in terms of the public resolution of shared concerns: 'a democracy to me is when a decision needs making, you've got the balance between the speed of your response and...the quality of the response on the other side of it' (p. 133).

In an early chapter, Couldry makes the case for why voice matters (2010). His critique of neoliberalism as a rationality that denies voice may help explain the dissonance between the democratic expectations of these ordinary people and the reality of their experience of twenty-first century Australian politics. When he conceptualises voice as a value, while making the point that it is not a consumer voice or a political voice that matters, he does so on the foundational view that voice articulates aspects of human life that are relevant, whatever views are held on democracy or justice. The finding, that the meaning citizens take from the discourse is that their voices are not valued, undermines theories that neoliberalism gives market actors an economic voice albeit at the expense of the democratic voice. The economic 'voice' may be heard at the cash register and the political 'voice' may be heard at the polling booth. The findings support Couldry's theory that the voice these citizens want heard is *their voice* as a person with relevant things to say about their lives. The case has been made that Australia has not been quarantined from the rise of neoliberalism but rather embraced it during the Hawke/Keating period of Labor government and strengthened it through successive government thereafter (Cahill, 2009; Fawcett, 2014; Manne, 2009; Rudd, 2009). Although it is not a term used in everyday political discourse – Liberal Party politics and small 'l' liberal political positions are more familiar terms – neoliberalism, through the hero status it gives to the market economy to the exclusion of other organising mechanisms, saturates the political discourse. So when these ordinary Australians report their frustration at not being given a voice in the discourse, they are recognising an aspect of neoliberalism at work and acknowledging the lesser place neoliberalism gives them in the making of democracy. The coded message in the discourse of the neoliberal polity is that progress for the nation and the everyday wellbeing of the people is delivered by economic, social and political experts and, by inference, it is best for the non-expert rest of the population to be silent. Neoliberalism enjoys – that is to say, it prefers – a silent majority. In decoding the discourse, ordinary citizens are harbouring resistance to both the silencing of voices and the dominating force of expert power.

Although the political power imbalance is an issue for these ordinary Australians, they are not claiming expert power for themselves. The finding is that the political discourse communicates a public powerlessness to receivers such that they have lost their right to live free of the domination of others. This condition of powerlessness they speak about has built up over time because they can remember when it used to be otherwise. The use of ‘them’ and ‘us’ language comes from an established oppositional footing found in repeat experience. It didn’t just happen yesterday. ‘Them’ is constituted by the experts – the working media, politicians represented in the media, and the people who own the assets including media assets that give them influence with politicians. Where power resides and how it is used has been the subject of much academic and popular literature. When ordinary people talk about power it is in the negative, about their powerlessness. They are not discussing theory but the reality of their lives. When they cohere around getting ‘the usual government-speak’, they are agreeing on what has happened not just this time but on what is familiar experience. When they experience the government bureaucracy as oppositional, they experience a breach of the Hobbesian contract (Hobbes & Oakeshott, [1651] 1946) in which power held by the many was conferred on the few and by which all would be authors of the common wealth. ‘Conferring’, as outlined by Hobbes, is not a giving up or surrendering of power; it is a strengthening of individual power in the form of common power. Representative democracy rests on this concept (Dunn, 2005). The findings of this research represent a challenge to these concepts and suggest they have mythical status with little or no relevance to today’s citizens who struggle with the uncomfortable truth of their experience and continue to hang on to the image of the polity as democratic and themselves as democratic citizens.

Language in communication realises and socialises the inner thought. It might speak of the other but in doing so it reveals the imagined self. When the textured language is cohesive and in the minds of people who consider themselves not alone but in communion with others, it recognises and constitutes by that recognition a community united by what is imagined as shared – an interest, condition or commitment which is not shared by others. The language of the participants in this study was found to be cohesive. The essence of their arguments criticising the political discourse is agreed, no counter-argument being mounted in defence of the prevailing discourse. The affective response to the political discourse is so visceral that receivers appear to struggle to imagine others exposed to the discourse as not having the negative response they have. Those revealing feelings of disgust and shame do so with high

levels of confidence that others like them must surely feel as they feel. They imagine themselves in communion with unknown others who feel disgust and shame.

Through language voicing meaning, these ordinary Australians effectively conceptualise a public that is other than the public whose discourse does not include them or represent them. They conceive of themselves as constituting another public – Warner’s counterpublic (2002). This counterpublic imagines itself as having relative lack of power. It is a majority non-elite disrespected and unrecognised by a minority elite. It models behaviour the authenticity and civility observed as absent in the discourse of the other more powerful public. It constructs an alternative discourse in language that problematizes yet risks being heard simply as complaint. This language is both certain in its diagnostic framing of politics and political discourse and hesitant as receivers test out alternative responses to political dilemmas. It lacks the metaphors, slogans and clichés of celebrity designed to persuade in the dominant political discourse. And it is discursive rather than strategically targeted at an audience.

The experience of powerlessness in trying to get the attention of elected officials and the bureaucracy meant to represent and serve them can be conceptualised as a counterpublic experience. Warner, in his analysis of queer politics, contends that the way debate is conducted cultivates self-awareness. In the rise of queer activism, traditional debate styles are rejected deliberately to create an alternative self-understanding to that produced in the public sphere. In this way, debate using distinctive language sets out to construct a counterpublic aware of its subordinate status. Successful emergence of a recognised counterpublic is related to the success of a counter discourse. Might it not also be possible that a counterpublic is forming around the negative tones and language used by the receivers of contemporary political discourse? The counterpublic can be recognised by the persistent meanings of subordinate status, powerlessness and alienation surrounding them.

The ‘us and them’ language used by ordinary Australians talking about politics can be heard as counterpublic language. The ‘us’ is constituted by those who are aware of their own powerlessness or recognise it in others like them. ‘Us’ have a shared knowledge of government-speak. ‘Us’ have things to say that are worth hearing and ‘us’ share the conviction that ‘they’ are not interested in what anyone else might say. ‘Us’ as a group is subordinate to ‘them’ by virtue of the power held by ‘them’. The language also presents as counterpublic language when it constructs ‘otherness’ and simultaneously constructs ‘self’. Otherness is well-established concept by the literature in relation to culture and identity and in understanding how imagined communities come into being (Anderson, 1991). Language contributes to national identity, for

example, in the Australian community where words like ‘mateship’, ‘ANZAC’, and ‘Gallipoli’ and phrases like ‘c’mon Aussie c’mon’ and ‘carn the pies’¹⁴ are loaded with meanings for Australians that are not immediately understood by others. A shared language style and vocabulary invites positive unity. Counterpublic language is evidence of subordination. It acknowledges unity based on a powerful negative – on a damaged form of publicness (Warner, 2002). Warner sees broad, if not unlimited, scope for growth of a counterpublic:

A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theatre, diffuse networks of talk, commerce and the like (p. 56).

Arguably, since the extent of a counterpublic is indefinite and not demographically contingent, the concept can apply to a substantial number or even a majority of the public, so long as the subordinate status is understood as shared by them and imagined others like them.

The ‘relation to power’ meanings in the discourse are clear. What is not as yet clear is the horizon of opinion and exchange that marks out the counterpublic. Warner points to the role of diverse media as vehicles for opinion and exchange in making the counterpublic. The research found easy access and widespread use of the internet among ordinary Australians. Whilst traditional media ownership and access may have once limited horizons of opinion and exchange, that context has changed. Mediatisation and media technologies have removed historical limits to the horizons of mediated debate. The truth about horizons of debate and discourse lies somewhere in the virtual networks and online communities who share information, opinion and, significantly, organise co-ordinated action. These represent ideal conditions and mechanisms for the growth of a counterpublic ecology. If the existence of a single democratic counterpublic is too much to imagine at this time, what is not so remote is the notion of a number of dissident publics coalescing around a shared awareness that the common cause of their dissension and what unites them is their negative power relative to neoliberal authority sustained by its discourse. If you can keep the public discourse fragmented then it militates against the audience seeing itself as united and having the potential to challenge the power imbalance (Warner, 2002). The rise of a significant counterpublic among ordinary citizens may not have bothered twentieth century governments. But twenty-first century media

¹⁴ The ‘pies’ are the Collingwood Footballers who wear the club emblem of a magpie. ‘Carn’ is an elision of ‘come on’.

makes it not just possible but, relative to earlier ages of communication (Blumler, 2013; Blumler & Kavenagh, 1999), much easier to self-organise and talk back to authority.

Publicity and power

The concept of an emerging threat to elite power from counterpublicity links to the history of publicity reviewed in the work of Habermas (1992). He tracked the transformation of the public sphere to a point of disorganisation where the public previously engaged in rational-critical debate was relieved of its role by institutions and organised private interests establishing themselves *above* the public (italics inserted by Habermas, p. 176). Because it aligns closely with the research participants' understanding of what happens to them in the contemporary political sphere, it is worth particular note:

The process of the politically relevant exercise and the equilibration of power now takes place directly between the private bureaucracies, special-interest associations, parties and public administration. The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute its acclamation...the decisions left for them to make individually as consumers and voters come under the influence of economic and political agencies...they endeavour, via mass media that themselves have become autonomous, to obtain the agreement or at least acquiescence of a mediated public. Publicity is generated from above, so to speak, in order to create an aura of goodwill for certain positions...it makes possible the domination of non-public opinion (pp. 176-78).

If non-public opinion is read as expert advice, Lippmann (1921) makes the case for the defence when he represents the experts and administrators as workers who relieve the people of the burden of having to know and understand the myriad issues that require political decision. Undoubtedly there is a complexity to contemporary economic, social and political life unimagined in the ages of classical democracy, enlightenment and representative democracy. One hundred years on Lippmann, too, would no doubt be challenged by the evidence that ordinary citizens are still expecting, even determined, to have a say in how they are governed and that their expectation goes beyond some of their number by random selection being asked occasionally for an opinion. Public opinion has been devalued by the rise of opinion polling and media news-making based on commissioned political polls in particular (Mills, 2014). The findings here are consistent with research confirming a distrust of opinion polls which are

established tools of trade for media and professionalised politics despite voters, ‘simultaneously source and recipient’, becoming perhaps more confused, sceptical and alienated (Mills & Tiffen, 2012). Mills and Tiffen conclude ‘it is wrong to hold the media reporting of polls responsible for political superficiality and conformism, but neither are they a cure for it’ (p. 127). The media’s passion for political polling as a driver of newspaper sales and influence over the shaping of the political landscape is received as capturing (if not impersonating) the public voice, for agenda-setting and wielding excessive power.

Making sense through stories of experience

The research participants told stories in making the case for their negative evaluations of the political discourse. These personal narratives of family connection, failed dealings with bureaucracy and politicians and, in a more positive tone, their actions and community involvements ground their reception of political discourse in experience. This is consistent with Dervin’s alternative communication model where messages are not things to be gotten (the transmission model) but constructions tied to specific times, places and perspectives of their creators and valued only to the extent that they can be understood within the context of receivers’ lives (2003). Receivers are situated meaning-makers. When the discourse is dialogic people are helped by others who see the situation as they do and by those who see it differently. The data analysis in the preceding chapter found in the coherent argument, the language and the civility with which their discussion was conducted that ordinary people lean towards a communitarian model of discourse. That is, they talk to one another to find points of agreement around which they can come together. This model relies on language that is the antithesis of the divisive language of outrage discourse. So from where does the received toxicity in political discourse originate if not from the people? In part, it might be explained by the outrage (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011) fuelled by media shock jocks and the lack of civility (CHASS, 2013; Leigh, 2013) in the bear pit of question time in the Parliament. The contemporary format and calibre of adversarial parliamentary debate is at odds with the noble conduct and courtly virtues historically attached to public representations of power (Habermas, 1992). There is, of course, the media logic that conflict has the colour and movement that makes news while sensible debate is less compelling or entertaining, and dull. Entertainment with its ‘good guys and bad guys’ is ‘what we want’ (Vanstone, 2015). An alternative view is that these phenomena are not the cause but the symptoms of a political discourse that denies its democratic telos. Outrage and incivility in political discourse manifests because it is authorised in ways and by means

which are exclusionary. It is received as it is because the model excludes the very people for whom, under the warrant of representative democracy, discourse has a purpose and who, in this research project, have shown themselves fully desirous – and capable – of constructing an alternative model of civic discourse, both democratic by intent and democratising in practice.

If there is a counterpublic voice in resistance to the current de-democratising discourse and political experiences, there is general agreement on the issue of compulsory voting. It may be that holding on to the guarantee of a vote every three years or so is simply a reluctance to change, a non-rational clinging to Australia's quirky habit of democracy in spite of all the difficulties. Or could it be acceptance of the reality that democracy has become no more than 'poll-ocracy'? Perhaps, like the early Americans who were told decades later by de Tocqueville that they were practising democracy, twenty-first century Australians are yet to recognise that they are practising politics of a narrow form not yet named in the discourse. It can be argued that poll-ocracy has emerged from a breakdown of representative democracy. The counterpublic recognise it without naming it. They say that those democratic fundamentals of honesty and accountability from their representatives do not apply between elections. They are told by their Prime Minister, fending off a move against him in his party room, that it is the people who hire and the people who fire. It is understood that the next hiring/firing date is way off into the future. In between the dates designated for hiring/firing, the people are helpless. Would a more authentic political discourse re-brand the Australian political system because the current brand is no longer apt? Perhaps that was what Robert was struggling to make sense of when he asked 'Where is democracy?' It could be that representative democracy as he knew it is not just hidden from view at all. The counter-discourse suggests representative democracy in Australia has passed a 'use by date' although the post-democratic state is yet to be acknowledged and named for what it is.

Discussing context

Mediatisation makes it impossible for ordinary Australians to imagine living an everyday life where the media, either as technology or as a power in society, plays no part at all. Mediatisation makes it possible for Australians in the present age of communication to work, learn, network, be entertained, conduct their personal business, deal with authorities and so on. Analysis reveals ordinary Australians are seasoned media consumers. They all have access to the Internet, with the majority using local and international information sites and social

networks with ease. A few who used to favour print media products wonder why they still bother with them. The trend to consume less of what is in print and more from what is accessible online is consistent with the decline in newspaper circulation figures and the business decisions by those same newspapers to produce online editions of their papers. Australia has become a target market for online publications *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *Buzzfeed* and *HuffPost Australia*. Now there is a preference, even a reliance, on social media for knowing what is happening in real time. Despite its reputation for building human connectivity, social media postings can be followed without commitment or affiliation. Tom's decision to follow the candidates in his electorate via their Facebook pages and Twitter feeds rather than go out to local candidate meetings demonstrates how citizenship manifests as consumption rather than association. Following candidates' political narratives online is part of everyday consumer activity. The candidate's presence online has that important product convenience of being delivered directly to the consumer. It can be consumed as frequently as wanted and in whatever quantities the appetite demands or tolerates. Aiming to keep pace with new media distribution platforms, radio and television programs continue to widen their market reach as media-on-demand products.

So when ordinary Australians make their entry point to a discussion on political discourse by first passing judgement on media performance and moving quickly to blame media for the perceived poor quality of the discourse offering, they can be seen as having a footing, primarily, as media product consumers. Political discourse as product is not only delivered by the media but made by the media, hence the attribution of blame for a product that fails to satisfy. Product evaluation is characteristic consumer behaviour. A willingness to blame the media before blaming the politicians for the political discourse suggests ordinary people are highly aware of their media relationship and less aware of their political relationship. That is, they come to their view of political discourse primarily through the role of media consumer. This might be seen as a success for the political consumerism movement of the 1960s with its 'boycotts and buycotts' (Bennett, 2004). Much has been researched and written about the politicization of communities to increase awareness of their power as consumers and motivate them to consumer-type action to control markets. The evidence here, though, points to what looks at first to be a reverse process – a consumerisation of political communities which has the effect of demotivating citizens as political agents. Consumerisation is conceptualised here as a condition where agent power, colloquially speaking, is limited to 'take it or leave it', to 'like it

or lump it', or 'we make it you take it'. The 'it' is the product of professionalised politics and a style of government that says the professionals know best.

Contemporary societies like Australia have been described as both consumerised and mediatised. That is, there is no part of those societies, including the sphere of politics, beyond the influence of the media and of the market. Consumerisation and mediatisation feed one another in what can be seen as a parasitic relationship. It is well established in the literature that political strategies and campaign tactics are based on product marketing concepts and skills in selling consumer products. It is similarly established that in neoliberal polities the business of politics and government is inextricably entwined with media logic, reach and power. As a class, if not as individuals, the political elite have submitted to the media and the market. Successful neoliberal politics relies on this submissive relationship continuing without serious disruption. Consumerisation of political communities is necessary to limit the risk of citizen power interfering with this submissive relationship. There is nothing arising from this project that suggests that context for political discourse is under serious challenge.

Discussing power, truth and the citizen voice

Politics is and has always been about power. The theory of representative democracies like Australia is that power resides in the people but, in practice, citizens enjoy only occasional moments of voting power at the national level every three years. Between election days, democratic power as an ideal is enshrined in processes that keep citizens informed, enables them to join the public debate and form opinions, and effectively hold their elected representatives accountable for their public service performance. But these processes and the discourse in particular are now acknowledged by ordinary Australians to be deeply problematic.

The citizens' reality is that they find themselves shut out of the power arena when their expectation is built around a framing of democracy as being about them. Their diagnosis of the situation is that the powerful voices are those of the political elite, the media and corporate interests who are not interested in listening to other voices. This is consistent with theories of communication power, especially in neoliberal polities (Castells, 2013; Couldry, 2010). Contemporary chronicles of media behaviour investigated by *The Guardian* in the UK reveal a culture of global media power practised at flouting the law, dictating to politicians and lying to destroy people who happen to be celebrities or even ordinary people out of the public eye

(Davies, 2014). In their corporate identities, the media are powerful business mates (Chadwick, 1989) although global media owner, Rupert Murdoch, nurtures the public view that he also makes and breaks governments. Successive Prime Ministers have made it a priority ritual to call on Murdoch soon after coming to power. They go to him, conceding that he is one of the most (if not, *the* most) politically influential men in the world (Wolff, 2008). What power do ordinary people imagine they have when comparing their prospects with this manifestation of global and corporate influence?

It is instructive to consider the scope of positive/negative power of the media through the prism of *The Guardian's* expose of News International's illegal (and immoral) behaviours surrounding phone hacking in the UK as testament to the unashamed power certain media can and do assert over governments, police forces and so-called independent agencies (Davies, 2014). PR skills are used to create and market products of every type, including political personalities. Ordinary people recognise they are being manipulated and by whom and, although they say they know it and can name it, they feel powerless to do anything about it. The ecology of mediatisation that permits having and maintaining power for a few is in direct conflict with the process of democratisation that is contingent upon universal power-sharing.

However, the ecology is changing as new media technologies are being used by ordinary people. These technologies have socialised the means of production of discourse. The restricted role of the receiver in discourse is becoming a hybridised role of receiver/producer with new potential to influence the discourse itself. This shifts the power dynamic from being a two-way relationship between the political and media elites to a tri-partite dynamic where the mass audience is transmogrifying to become a player, if not a welcome partner, in discourse. In the first stages of the change process, the 'once-were-receivers-only' are discovering their power to search out what information they want, to share it and to comment on it. In the early days, those getting around the knowledge gate-keepers were themselves accorded an elite status as citizen journalists. The term is less used in the second decade of the new century because so many people are assuming the role of receiver/producer. This is reducing the power of the traditional discourse producers. It is too soon to understand how the shift in power balance will settle. It may not settle but continue in dynamic tension. The possibility cannot be discounted that the traditional elite, especially those used to power in both media and political realms, will act to interrupt the democratising trend towards more power in the keyboards of ordinary citizens. Neoliberal governments, in what they so often term as 'these uncertain times' of terrorist threat, are already legislating new powers to control metadata and limit freedoms in the

claimed interests of greater security. In Australia, within days of arguing that new metadata laws were needed to track terrorist threats, the legislative rationale had been extended to cover authorities' needs to track child molesters and likely domestic violence offenders. Future research, it is hoped, will examine these and other measures for their potential to undermine the trend to democratising power through socialised media technologies.

Discussing the 'dumbing down' effect

According to these ordinary people, when they consider joining the discourse they are defeated in their mind set by the certainty that there are more powerful, exclusionary voices. As Mavis understood it: 'Well, they wouldn't want to hear from us, would they?' The citizen's problem of not being listened to or heard in the political discourse can be decoded as not being recognised and respected in the public realm. The significance of this problem was acknowledged by the Liberal Minister for Communications and leadership hopeful, Malcom Turnbull, when he named the issue of respect for citizens in a national television program. This was interpreted by commentators as his unofficial job application to the electorate (Borrello, 2015):

'Australian political contests are won or lost at the sensible centre,' he said.

'We recognise there are strong arguments on either side but what we as politicians have to do is treat the people with respect.

'Don't slogan at them, don't pretend problems don't exist.

'Lay out the problems, explain what the problem is as clearly and concisely as you can ... and then have a debate about the options. That would be an intelligent debate which respects the public.

'Sometimes politicians think they're reaching out to the electorate by dumbing everything down; I think that disrespects the electorate.' (website page).

In this project, it was Geraldine who raised the issue of dumbing down of the political discourse. It was a self-reflecting statement: 'And I reckon I have been so dumbed down'. This is a voice from the outer adding to the many voices of political commentators who have highlighted their observation of a change in the public discourse. The significance this discussion gives to Geraldine's voice over the voices of the observers is that hers is the voice of personal experience. She describes something that has been done to her. She is able to track a sequence of actions and thoughts that led to her self-diagnosis:

I used to get a newspaper delivered. Stopped getting it delivered then I got it online, getting *The Age* online, and then I've stopped that because I thought it was just like a magazine, you know. It just wasn't like a proper news... So then, I got a trial of *Crikey*, you know that thing, and it really scared me because I couldn't understand heaps of it. And I reckon I've been so dumbed down... I mean, like you know, *The Age* and stuff all the time, like, I really, I needed background articles to understand the articles, if youse know what I mean. It's made me think that I'm getting older and just not getting it, you know, like I've really needed to have more knowledge than I had to read some of the articles in *Crikey*. And yet, I read the paper all the time. But I was just worried that I was – used to seeing everything in such a simplistic way. I really had to concentrate to read it.

In these words, Geraldine effectively proposes the hypothesis that dumbing down of the political discourse produces negative cognitive effects in discourse receivers. Not everyone will have her self-awareness. Geraldine presents as an engaged and active citizen. She articulates her need to understand and her habit of reading the paper to stay informed. Geraldine can be recognised as having high need for cognition; that is, she scrutinises communications more and is more affected by the cogency of argument than others with a lower need for cognition (Baran et al., 2014; Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983). Geraldine links her fear about her 'dumbed down' condition to an experience of media although she also looks to her self – perhaps she is 'getting older and just not getting it'. There is evidence, however, to suggest that the media is not the only force responsible for the dumbing down effect. Australian political parties have been on notice that their changed strategies for informing and educating the public are creating a legacy of entrenched civic handicap (Soutphommasane, 2012):

It may be that Labor is now the victim of its own political strategy. Debates are increasingly divorced from the economy as a whole. Where political leaders such as Paul Keating tried to educate public opinion about economics, today politicians do their best to dumb things down. This could just be one of the most significant legacies of Rudd's populism: it has entrenched in our politics a civic handicap, which we're only beginning to appreciate. Voters are no longer being asked to judge policies and leadership according to what is good for society. Where once political parties would seek to devise their arguments at the level of the nation, the target is now much smaller. For all that the rest of the world may envy our growth, it should not envy our shrinking debate (p. 13).

Even as a preliminary discussion seeding the need for a deeper investigation, it would be inadequate here to treat the dumbing down phenomenon only as a content problem of

information and argument. The conduct of political discourse is noted and overwhelmingly deplored by the participants in this project. Research has already established that contemporary discourse is inclined towards incivility and outrage (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). When the manner of discourse is received as consistently negative and in contradiction to their expectations, it creates – in some citizens at least – visceral responses of frustration and aversion. The participants here say their action in response is to tune-out and they speak of it quite matter-of-factly: ‘When did you have your tune-out?’ ‘Oh there was lots of tuning out’. When considered alongside established research findings (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012), the alienating nature of dumbed down discourse amidst an abundance of entertainment and distraction sets up dilemmas beyond those discussed on the basis of high need of cognition. The further dilemma is for those citizens who can’t bear to listen or watch because of the angry, even toxic, way discourse is conducted. If they stay in this tuned-out mode, citizens risk becoming being part of the ‘information have-nots’ who are chronically uninformed. As such, and leaving aside any broader civic responsibilities, it is arguable that their civic-ability, as voters to make sound decisions when choosing their representatives at elections, is compromised.

This double movement scenario, of producers dumbing down the discourse and receivers tuning out, sets up a compounding risk to making healthy democracy. More research is needed to test the hypothesis that a dumbed down discourse, in content and context, creates a democratic poverty among citizens and, to hypothesise the next logical step, that dumbing down the discourse is de-democratising.

Discussing the collective voice

Listening intently to the individual voices of the participants in this project has been a preoccupation for almost the entire period of investigation. What was said and how it was said has been analysed and discussed at some length. At this point, the discussion pays attention to the combined voices. Indeed, there is the sound of a collective voice. The collective voice is heard saying that democracy, as Australians once knew it, is unrecognisable now. Is this just an acknowledgement of the dynamic nature of making democracy, or is it something more? Has politics as process in a self-governing society changed so fundamentally that democracy is no longer an apt or fitting term? The collective voice heard through this project suggests that that, indeed, is their sense of the situation. If their received meaning is valued, if there is analysed evidence to back it up, and if democracy is nothing more than a brand anyway – and that case has been well made (Dunn, 2005) – is it not time for an expanded discussion of the what type of government the people want in the context of their post-democratic condition?

How might a post-democratic condition be conceptualised? Firstly, it is necessary to say that the term ‘post-democratic’ used here is meant to be understood rather as Ranciere (1999) said it ought *not* be understood. At the risk of over-simplification, Ranciere conceptualises post-democracy as the utopian disappearance of politics, when disagreement disappears and consensus reigns. In this work the term is intended to convey a somewhat dystopian condition created by the disavowal of democratic values to the point where the people are aware of politics being done *to* them and not *by* them as the word ‘democracy’ (*demokratia*: government by the people) signifies should be the case. The argument posits that government by the people is no longer real because it is not recognised by the people as their doing. The proposition is contestable given that Australian society employs a system of parliamentary democracy and is socialised within narratives of ‘democratic values’. If parliamentary democracy is regarded as an operational construct then democratic values constitute an identity construct. The values go to who ‘we’ are and how ‘we’ behave and what ‘we’ hold dear. Both these operational and identity constructs are relevant to the fundamental condition of how Australians live together. Whilst individual voices may be heard speaking with frustration about operational issues, the collective voice seems to be speaking most persistently about the values of truth in public life, public power and respect for the citizen – which are remarked upon in their absence.

If democracy is always under construction and never a fixed state, how is it possible to consider democracy as a ‘thing’ of the past? Australia’s parliamentary democracy operates much as it has always done with parliamentary representatives, a bureaucracy and a judiciary. It is not facing any apparent threat of overthrow. It is certainly flawed in the sense that it attracts diverse criticism and there are systemic performance problems. Yet the collective voice is not heard calling ‘time’s up’ on parliamentary democracy. Given the unhappiness in the collective voice, what meaning can be taken from this absence of threat to the political system?

One seemingly perverse meaning is that the unhappiness, of itself, gives satisfaction (Dean, 2009). In her discussion of Ranciere’s politics as disagreement over the equality of speaking beings, Dean argues that democracy organises enjoyment as an effect of circling around the staging of disagreement. So contemporary protest such as marches, vigils, internet petitions and the like aim at making oneself visible in one’s lack or power inequality. They do not aim at taking power:

The aim of equality is sublimated in the drive to make one’s disagreement with inequality appear. One gets satisfaction by appearing in one’s disagreement...Our

politics is one of endless attempts to make ourselves seen. It's as if instead of looking at our opponents and working out ways to defeat them, we get off on imagining them looking at us (p. 35).

Pursuing this theoretical thread, the collective voice – in agreement about the unequal power balance in Australian political discourse – can be heard primarily as a call for recognition rather than an insistent demand for genuine equality in the exercise of power to be realised. To the extent that political discourse permits inequality to be named, and enables those naming their political lack to be visible in the moment of voicing their disagreement, then democracy succeeds. Its success lies in the satisfaction citizens derive from their utterances of disagreement and their negative tones. On this reading, what citizens require of political discourse is that they be permitted to publicly disagree such that they are visible and recognised in their disagreement; it has little or nothing to do with eliciting a change to the substance of inequalities and eliminating the basis of disagreement.

Not incompatible with understanding the lack of challenge to the parliamentary system from this perspective is an understanding that it is not the system *per se* that the people are really bothered about. Putting aside their individual diagnoses, the collective voice can be heard in a relationship discourse within the political discourse. Its keywords are 'truth', 'accountability', and 'recognition'. In their words, the meaning they are looking for is respect or more specifically the respect due in their capacity as citizens. In this capacity, they look for respect from those who are entrusted with the power citizens give over and, in so doing, enter into a relationship with the elected representatives and the officers of the bureaucracy and institutions which use that power.

The bad behaviour of politicians in the parliament – the primary site of representative power – is understood as lacking civility because it disrespects the citizens who put them there as their representative deliberators and decision-makers, and it disrespects the people's House. Uncivil behaviour in that place fails to recognise the dignity of the citizens represented. Lack of recognition is confirmed by lack of accountability from elected representatives and bureaucrats to the citizenry. It is further confirmed when the information required by citizens to keep those in office accountable is withheld from them or distorted by spin, partial truth or lies. The lacks and the lies deny the relationship. There is no 'reciprocal intuition' (Honneth, 1995) and ordinary citizens are losing the struggle for recognition. These meanings are made clear by the contrasting ways of conducting the political discourse. It is conducted with respect and civility by and among citizens seeking solidarity. The discourse is uncivil and outraged

when dominated by the political elite, including the media, who are determined to seek out points of difference and conflict. Professional producers of political communication may not imagine themselves to be in a relationship with their audiences but their messages are being understood in the context of the receivers' experiences of failed political relationships.

An everyday interpretation might be that Australians see democracy as going through a bad patch and, since they don't have the power to change things and such circumstances are known to be cyclical, they just have to wait for the tide to turn. There is evidence of 'waiting behaviours': Mavis still buys the newspapers even though she has decided they are no longer worth it; Charles and Tom invest time in online information gathering and diversifying their news sources although they often don't use the information as a basis for action; they remain individually engaged and critical but are not inclined to organise collectively. Hamish can be counted among those who continue to do their bit to care for the environment through small, personal actions. Another way of interpreting the lack of challenge to the system might be that democracy is understood to be in a seriously poor condition and needs fixing but, flawed as it is, there is no better alternative. The project participants made some suggestions with a view to improving politicians' communication with the people in the electorate. But there was no sign given of a concerted effort to make the fix happen. Yet another meaning to be taken from the evidence is that Australians accept that their system of democracy is broken and frustratingly beyond their capacity to repair. At the same time there are meanings of resistance in the language and argument about media control, power and truth. This gives meaning to the attitudes in favour of compulsory voting: this obligation is the one certainty of participation still guaranteed by the political system, however broken it might otherwise be – that they will get to have a say, even if it is through little more than a mass opinion poll taken once every three years. The collective voice heard on the issue of compulsory voting was overwhelmingly for its retention. Yet it would be incautious to interpret this as belief in the efficacy of, or commitment to participation in, representative democracy. Being able to register an informal vote or a protest vote, for example, is more about voice-raising than democracy-raising. It suggests the Australian polity is most aptly branded and qualified as an electoral polity of poll-ocracy; elections and voting are what citizens can still rely on.

What is clearly heard when listening to the collective voice is that these ordinary people know that the context of their lives, not just politically speaking, has changed. In their framing they attribute the change firstly to the media. It performs differently than in the past; it has more power, and it combines with corporate power to more openly influence governments. At the

same time, the technological developments in the media give citizens greater access to global information and events and they use it as an everyday part of their lives. In their words, the internet has made the difference. The difference is in the conceptualisation of the public sphere, public space and those who constitute the public. Rather than rely on Habermas, who theorised in his early work on the public sphere and the division of the human into the private person and the public person (1992; Turner, 2013), it is helpful to turn to Castells (2013; Stalder, 2006), whose theories of mass self-communication and networked individualism in response to digital technologies speak of a seismic shift in the way persons relate to the world as globalised public space. Arguably, the individual is living increasingly as a public person rather than a private person. Publicness is no longer predominantly characterised by face-to-face interaction. A person using the internet in the 'privacy' of her own home reconstitutes that space as part of a public space and herself as part of a networked public. Neither does the decision to act privately or publicly rest any longer with the person. The controllers of digital platforms create public profiles of internet users by tracking their online traffic and, without any transparent request to the users, they knowingly release their private likes and dislikes into the globalised and mediatised public domain. Also, publicness is being changed by legislation. In 2015, citing risk of terrorism, the Australian Government with the support of the Opposition legislated to ensure that any aspect of an individual's life involving a digital connection that creates data must be held for at least two years so that it might be known by 'authorised' persons representing a notionally fearful public. In what appears contradictory, this official publicness is protected by secrecy and specific provisions to ensure there is no public (or individual) right to know why, when or on whose decision the citizen's private life ceases to be private. For some, this is the action of a Parliament that mistrusts the people it represents.

This breakdown of trust between representative government and citizens is two-way. Before the passage of the counter-terrorism and national security legislation, ordinary Australians through this project were already saying they could not trust government. The further meaning they convey is that, in lying to them and withholding information, the government means it does not trust them with the truth. It is a relationship of mutual distrust. The relationship between government and citizens had already become more distant and remote with the Marketisation of public services and, effectively, the Marketisation of citizenship (Freedland, 2001). That process put layers of intermediate public service providers and the regulatory bodies required to oversee them between government as purchaser of services and the once-were-citizens now addressed as individual consumers or clients. In its role as provider

entrusted with the welfare of the people, the Government effectively divorced itself from its citizens. So again recalling Roberts's question – 'Where is democracy?' – the utterance can be understood, not as a question about something that is obscured from view, but as a loss of the trust relationship between government and citizens. There is a confusion over how to re-conceptualise the relationship, once entered into freely by the people on the basis of mutually understood conditions. The follow-up question to be answered is: How did it come to this?

This is a question about process. In the early review of literature it became clear that making and un-making democracy were on the same continuum. De-democratisation, we are reminded, is not just a sudden reversal or overthrow of low-capacity democratising regimes – it is a possibility everywhere (Tilly, 2003). Now, in the twenty-first century, polities that proudly claim their status as continuing democracies for centuries are found to be de-democratising (Brown, 2006). The ordinary citizens participating in this project may not use the term, but they speak to one another and hear one another from a footing of familiarity with the process and can be heard as support for Brown's theory that we are in a period of undoing the demos (2015).

CONCLUSION

When this project was conceptualised, Australian politics was being talked about for its increasing negativity, incivility and outrage. The mediated discourse was perceived as laden with righteous anger, reproduced slogans and lacking in reasoned arguments. Anecdotally, there was dismay at the grass roots level. Ordinary people were said to be tuning out of politics. Commentators were in general agreement that the political discourse was being ‘dumbed down’. The first decade of twenty-first century political discourse in Australia was deemed by some to be worse than it had been in remembered political experience. While this view was contested, it remained conceivable that the negativity pervasive in the political discourse would turn ordinary people off politics and cause citizens to disengage from democracy itself.

Understanding how citizens receive and respond to a nation’s political discourse is important knowledge for a working democracy. The detailed rationale for investigating the problem – how people make sense of the political discourse and how this affects their engagement with democracy – is based on the original concept of the people being at the core and discourse as central to fulfilment of the role of citizen in a democracy. Among key terms used in this project report is the definition of ‘engagement’ as ‘interest’. This definition takes account of two factors. First, it acknowledges that voting under threat of penalty for failing to do so is not a suitable indicator of democratic engagement in Australia. The second reason for defining engagement as interest and distinct from community participation acknowledges how, in the networked society of the twenty-first century, the digital age citizen can be active – interested and participating – without following traditional patterns of public involvement through face-to-face contact with her fellow citizens. It is reality that the digital age citizen can be fully engaged with democracy in the solitude of her own private space.

Part A of the thesis begins by exploring the making of democracy through the ages. The thesis, at its outset, accepts the concept of democracy as a process rather than a fixed state or condition. It holds as fundamental that a truly democratic polity is a dynamic ruling *by* the people *for* the people, and delegated power in the truly democratic polity is recognised as belonging to the people to whom those authorised to use power in governing are to make themselves accountable. From the literature, parliamentary democracy, representative democracy, and electoral democracy are all understood to have emerged as adaptations necessitated by the impracticability of direct democracy in contexts such as de Tocqueville found in his study of early American democracy. As a process, democracy can be made or un-

made. Recent literature has identified the un-making of democracy or de-democratising. De-democratisation occurs when processes surrounding the government of the people fail to uphold the fundamentals of what it means to be democratic. Because processes play out in context, Part A includes an examination of consumerisation, mediatisation and globalisation, particularly as a mechanism for strengthening neoliberalism as a political rationality, for the significant influence they exert on the making of democratic discourse. In combination, these contextual influencers distract, individualise, entertain, commodify, inform, empower, divide, disempower, and capture the *demos*. In context, individuals are variously consumer citizens, captured consumers, audiences, globalised citizen consumers, target audiences, citizen receivers and, increasingly, receivers/producers of political discourse. Context changes the discourse voices. The neoliberal context notionally gives individuals an economic voice but this is at the expense of the democratic voice. As a case study of recent Australian political events demonstrates, real tensions emerge when democracy is being made in a consumerised, mediatised and globalised polity. It is contested that the standard of Australia's political discourse has never been so low. What is certain is that the levels of outrage and incivility in the political discourse in the period before, during and after the 2010 election of the minority government were matters of widespread concern and criticism.

Questions about how discourse is received prompted an interest in understanding the reception process as process of the mind. A review of the literature confirmed both inner and outer processing of received communication. How the brain works is a fascinating subject and vastly beyond this researcher's expertise or the scope of this project. Yet social psychology is a neighbouring field of research to political communications research and so a tentative exploration of knowledge where the two appear to intersect was a worthwhile, if not comprehensive, opening up to the complexities involved in attempting to answer the research question. Drawing from the field of social psychology, and drawn to take a particular interest in the theory of Elaboration Likelihood Modelling (ELM), an interesting question emerged: might a citizen receiver's capacity to make sense of complex information and argument be weakened by persistent exposure to a dumbed down discourse that habitually activates the peripheral pathways that process shallow meaning communications, leaving the central pathways for processing complex meaning under-exercised? Without flagging any attempt at a definitive answer in this work, I return briefly to the question when drawing together reflections on and conclusions from what the project participants had to say about 'dumbing down' the discourse and analysis of sense-making.

Part B of the thesis is a close listening to the receivers of Australia's contemporary political discourse. It is deliberately heavy with the individual and collective voices of the project participants. Oak Park is the ideal vantage point from which to make sense of Australia's political discourse. Statistically, it is the most average of all Australian suburbs based on 2010 census data. Insofar as any group can make claim to offering *an* average Australian view of the political discourse and its effect on political engagement, this thesis makes that claim for the participants in this project without claiming theirs represents *the* Australian approach to sense-making or political engagement. The thesis details how participants were brought together through an innovative method of recruitment taking advantage of Election Day 2013 and the guaranteed flow of large numbers of eligible prospects at an accessible location during a known period of hours. Given that elections across the national and eight state or territory levels of government in Australia occur with predictable frequency, and similar opportunities are likely in other democracies, the Polling Booth Participant Recruitment (PBPR) method successfully developed and implemented in this project suggest a usefulness for future political communications research. Wide-scope group discussions were preferred as an alternative to the focus group and group interview methods. Group interviews can yield more than individual interviews through the interaction between interviewees. The wide-scope group, however, deliberately sets out to generate a momentum of interactions around a topic in which the researcher assumes the less intrusive role of facilitator rather than interviewer. The aim is to create a climate conducive to unearthing the unexpected. Wide-scope groups are suited especially to projects interested in exploring discursively why choices are made, how meanings are found and attitudes formed. In this project, it was considered important to conduct the wide-scope groups on the same day so the researcher could be reasonably assured that the participants would be talking about the same events and event-shaping discourse. The political arena is often unpredictable and can be volatile. It was preferable that any variable should be determined only by participants' interests, their choices and their natural patterns of exposure to political discourse rather than by the serendipity of political drama and debate to which some participants might be exposed but not others. Same day data gathering (SDDG), planned and executed with attention to detail, is a highly efficient method for a single researcher working with a small cohort of participants. However, the demand to closely follow multiple sessions, each of around 90 minutes of discussion, can be tiring so the method, in that sense, is limited.

The participants in this project were found to be generally keen to give their views, suggesting it did not often happen that they were asked what they thought and then, having their say, that they would be listened to with close attention. From them, it can be understood that political discourse is received with meanings that resolve as themes of media performance, power, public voice, political representation and accountability. Closely linked to the issue of power, they talk in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and their feelings of lack of respect from those in power. When they talk about public voice as ‘their’ voice, they talk about lack of recognition. They find meaning in what is and is not spoken, in who is and is not heard. They hear the missing voices that create significant gaps in political discourse.

Citizens like the Oak Park residents know when they are being given a ‘sell job’. They recognise when they are being targeted with shallow slogans, promises short on detail and politicians promoted as celebrities whose success is proportional to how well they stay on message, no matter how banal it may be. These ordinary Australians are attuned to discern when they are being kept in the dark, when information critical to them being able to make good choices as citizens is being kept from them. They are irritated by the personality products on offer when what they really want is access to a full suite of policy products. They get the three-word slogans, but they want the whole story. Even though many understand the financial pressures forcing change on traditional media organisations – they note how the ‘rivers of gold’ from print advertising have dried up – they regret the shrinking of in-depth news coverage and commentary as a personal loss.

When the political discourse is thinly constructed with three word slogans, outrage, and celebrity as qualification for political leadership, it is dumbed down. There is a dishonesty in dumbed down discourse when the language is over-simplified to discourage the people’s understanding and judgment. From these participants, it can be discerned that it is a failure of democratic logic to make increasingly simplistic political discourse an appropriate response to the communication challenges of an increasingly complex political realm. The lack of policy, loss of transparency and lies heard in political speech are making the discourse untrustworthy to these citizens. The voices of politicians like Malcolm Turnbull who give speeches about improving the language and content of discourse are, assuming their sincerity, too few voices in the wilderness of defending and upholding democratic discourse. Indeed, what passes for contemporary political discourse is arguably a myth sustained by words alone and contradicted in practice. In its making – which is exclusionary, lacking accountability and respect for the power of the *demos* – the political discourse is, in effect, un-making democracy; it is de-

democratising. This effect is reinforced by the meaning the Oak Park citizens reveal about themselves in the discourse: that they as citizens are powerless and their persistent exclusion from discourse-making is part of maintaining a political power imbalance to their disadvantage.

It can be concluded from the meanings that attach to the reported experiences of political engagement analysed here that being a democratic citizen in the twenty-first century is becoming increasingly difficult. Diagnosing a litany of political problem issues is dispiriting for citizens. The dumbed down discourse affects them. Indeed, for some, it causes them to doubt themselves and fear the loss of their cognitive abilities. Those with high need of cognition – which is about needing explanation sufficient to understand and is not to be confused as having anything to do with intelligence – are in a resistance struggle against being dumbed down personally. Prolonged exposure to a certain type of discourse raises questions about learned behaviours and susceptibility that go well beyond the scope of this endeavour and belong more in the realm of social psychology as a field of research. Nevertheless, it is appropriate here to hope more work will be done to explore the question of whether those susceptible to the shallowness and repetition characterising a dumbed down discourse risk losing the personal inclination, if not the ability, to process complex arguments within the brain. This is a significant question for democrats at a time when the issues facing societies and their representative governments are increasingly complex and the operational treatment of these issues is increasingly out-of-sight of ordinary citizens.

Frustration with the political discourse – to the extent that citizens turn off or tune out – can be interpreted as widespread. For most participating in this project, the discourse is alienating. Alienation, however, is not to be interpreted as dis-engagement. Many of the participants, despite admissions of tuning out and discussion of the phenomena as a shared experience, remain politically engaged. That is, they continue to be interested – even deeply interested – in political events and issues at home and abroad, and in how government is responding to those issues. The alienating effect of the locally produced discourse causes many engaged citizens to explore the global political discourse for meanings about the Australian polity. These are the ‘explorer receivers’ who, empowered by the digital age of communication, engage with a globally produced discourse as a sense-making response to the banality of the local discourse.

A contest can be mounted to the proposition that being a democratic citizen is increasingly difficult. Mediatisation has undoubtedly acted as a de-democratising influence with which citizens have had to contend through the twentieth century. But it can be claimed

with equal legitimacy that technological changes and the consequential rise of the networked society are making it easier to be a democratic citizen in the modern era. The fourth age of political communication, as Blumler – a lead investigator of the third age of communication – himself declared, is a seismic shift from the evolutionary nature of the three preceding ages. The digital age is not the next stage of a neat progression in political communication but the impetus for a defining change in the political ecology. All of the participants in this research were connected to the internet which some used as an essential tool for political engagement. Beyond engagement, there is a newly conceptualised public arena for political action. Remembering Castells' story of his naïve youth, it is clear that the era of young political activists leaving subversive pamphlets on seats in darkened picture theatres hoping to engage and motivate an audience is long over. Because of access to the means of both receiving and producing discourse, where the means is a global network that shrinks time and space, the potential for democratic citizenship is enhanced rather than compromised by the technologies that also fuel mediatisation. But it is only a potential. The same technologies create a plethora of other potentials to be entertained and occupied and all compete for the available time and attention that might be given over to advancing citizenship. If curious and active citizens continue to go in search of more meaningful information and commentary, rather than simply tune out or turn off, then the de-democratisation of political discourse might well be stalled and reversed. A counterpublic discourse does not have to be the discourse of defiance. Counterpublicity and publicity can be companions in democratic space/time.

Elites are being challenged to acknowledge the potential power of citizen networking in a digital world. It can be anticipated that some will be accepting and some will resist. It is uncertain if or how the combined power of media moguls and governments will use their resources, including legislation, to resist a re-democratisation of political discourse. But it is reasonably certain that the potential for citizen participation in making discourse and making democracy has never been so good.

This thesis project leads to the conclusion that democracy cannot be taken as a given: there can be no as-of-right expectation that being born into, or being awarded citizenship of, a state branding itself as democratic will lead to lives of democratising political experiences for its citizens. Neoliberal government is increasingly unresponsive to the needs of citizens other than as economic units within a global competitive marketplace. Holding on to power to manage the economy dominates campaigns to win representative government. Responding to popular opinion to improve the chances of re-election is electoral government masquerading as

democracy. Conclusively, an unresponsive and unaccountable government chosen by popular poll masquerading as the power of the people cannot lay claim to governing democratically.

From this work it can be concluded that representative democracy in the twenty-first century is being reconceptualised from the footing of the ordinary citizen. Trust as an essential in the citizen-representative relationship is at low levels. Representatives are increasingly unaccountable; they are perceived negatively for withholding information and being unwilling to tell the truth and, importantly, there is little or nothing the citizens understand they can do about it. Meanings received from the discourse are that representatives act *instead of* citizens, not *for* them. Refusal to trust citizens with information is decoded as disrespect. Citizens are respected only for their votes. Representative government is marked by the tendency for elections to be tolerated as periodic ceremonies ritualised to legitimise governing by elites who think they know what is best for the citizenry at large. From this project it is clear that among the non-elite, voting or, indeed, compulsory voting is accepted as a reasonable expectation of citizens and an established rule of the Australian polity. From their overwhelming support for compulsory voting, it can be concluded that Australians are not minded to let go of their voting right/obligation anytime soon.

Are citizens engaging with or dis-engaging from democracy? It can be concluded that in this cohort of ordinary Australians, citizen receivers are alienated by the received discourse but remain engaged with the Athenian ideal that it is their right to have a say and be heard. It is can be expected that, when given the opportunity to talk about politics, ordinary Australians will respond positively and capably. The innovations in method developed and utilized in this project have proven fit for purpose and are open to use in future research projects. There are undoubtedly some within the political elite who might well conclude that creating more, and more natural, opportunities to listen to ordinary voices would be worth trying. Such a response would encourage innovation in research. A positive research response to these conclusions would be an increase in projects focused on how ordinary people make sense of the messages they receive so they can ponder the question – ‘How are we to live well together?’ rather than the persistent questions akin to ‘How are we to make the market work better and prosper the enterprising among us?’ When it comes to receiving and making sense of political messages it cannot be concluded that participation automatically follows engagement. In future political communication research there is the potential to explore further the relationship between democratic engagement, networked discourse making, and networked political participation. Sense-making, inner and outer, is situational so finding meaning in the digital age has the

potential to fascinate in political communication research just as neuroscientists continue to be fascinated by the brain and its potential.

Ordinary Australians have been found to make sense of political discourse through diagnostic framing. They use language to sort meanings by themes and apply tonality. Sense-making involves layers of accumulated meaning. They apply tonal markings to their diagnostic language to make clear positive and negative meanings. When they are confident in their sense-making they communicate meanings with unambiguously toned words – ‘dregs’, ‘rubbish’, ‘shocking’, ‘atrocious’, ‘slinging of mud’. When participating in discourse, they test their own sense-making against the sense-making of others by punctuating spoken expressions of thought with invitations to confirm that they are making sense: ‘D’you know what I mean?’ They create narratives of earlier sense-making to make frames for their contemporary processing of meaning. Frames constructed from earlier sense-making in family settings are enduring value frames. Despite the anger and incivility in the discourse modelled by politicians and media, when ordinary people make political discourse face-to-face, they do so with courtesy and, on occasion, with respectful disagreement. The meanings ordinary citizens find in the political discourse challenge the effectiveness of the communication style and discourse content that Australia’s political elite continues to produce and deliver. What many citizens hear in the discourse doesn’t sound to them like the democracy of their expectations. It makes them feel powerless and they are distrustful of the media and, to a lesser extent, the politicians who produce an exclusionary discourse. Their narratives of trying to get the political system working for them are predominantly negative. None of this, however, can be said to have the consequential effect of democratic dis-engagement. Yes, the discourse is alienating. It frustrates and causes some people to tune out. It scares some people and causes them to doubt their own capacities. Others respond by acting locally where their personal influence can have effect.

Future projects may find conclusive evidence of dis-engagement from democracy. But the evidence gathered and analysed for this project leads to the conclusion that, despite the tendency of discourse to alienate, citizens largely remain engaged with the ideal of democracy, and hold firmly to the idea that it is theirs.

Afterword

‘Democracy is losing the plot, to our peril’

What is surprising is that the political rhetoric in countries such as Australia, the United States and Britain includes so little argument for democracy in the world today...So when will democracy’s great silence about its ‘grand narrative’ end?...The challenge to democratic values is everywhere...My hunch is that a meta-narrative about democracy’s aspiration in our time exists already but it hasn’t yet emerged from the cacophony of our political and media sphere...maybe the unproductive incivility of politics, its relentlessly myopic focus, will gradually give way to a longer-term view. A grand narrative would take hold, one that tells people here, as well as people everywhere, what the goals for democratic societies are for this era. Then political discussion could again be about how best to get to the place on the horizon where voters want to be.

Chris Zappone, Comment, *The Age*, 6 August 2015

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/in-fight-with-islamic-state-democracys-strange-silence>

Since this project began, the chorus of concerned commentary about the democratic discourse in Australia has not subsided. It sounds louder. The increase in volume can be attributed, in substantial part, to concern over new curbs imposed on democratic discourse by the government elected on 7 September 2013 – the day participants were recruited for this project and one month before they met in their three discussion groups. Since then, in ways neither foreshadowed nor reasonably anticipated, the Abbott Government has reshaped the terms of political discourse in Australia through a series of decisions and behaviours including:

- A policy of official secrecy about any and all matters relating to the methods employed to ‘stop the boats’ carrying asylum seekers in or approaching Australian waters.
- Under the information policy applying to ‘on water’ or ‘operational issues’, successive Ministers have refused to answer questions and be held accountable on a series of claims about numbers of boats, inadequate processing of claims for protection, paying people smugglers to turn back and forcibly returning refugees to the countries from which they fled.
- Alleged breaches of international human rights obligations pertaining to off-shore detention.
- Personal attacks by the Government on the President of the Human Rights Commission over her agency’s report on detention centre conditions with the stated intention of forcing her from office.

- New laws making it illegal for any person to reveal information about their experiences and knowledge of matters pertaining to detention of refugees.
- New laws to ensure that the metadata of all Australian citizens is retained for two years ongoing, ensuring it is easily accessible to government and its security agencies without giving reason to the individual or making open application to the courts.
- Proposed new laws to cancel the citizenship of dual citizens alleged to be supporters of terrorists.
- Despite pledges to the contrary, cutting funds to the independent public broadcaster, ABC.
- Government criticism of ABC editorial decisions and demands from the Prime Minister to censure staff and change programming, constituting a breach of the ABC's charter of independence and treatment of the public broadcaster as a propaganda instrument of the state.
- A raft of broken pre-election promises without applying the same accountability demands or truth in politics standards demanded of the previous government.

Without the benefit of a fresh round of wide-scope discussions, the reaction of ordinary citizens to these changes in political context can be interpreted by reference to the Abbott Government's persistently low approval ratings in opinion polls since 2013.¹⁵ In early 2015, the Prime Minister was forced to fight off a leadership challenge mooted by his own backbench and make public promises to 'do better'. The Opposition leader, relative to the Prime Minister, fared better generally in the opinion polls, but not much better overall. On both sides, there is the appearance of a crisis of leadership in the public sphere, if not in the party rooms.¹⁶ Concerns about the discourse have become concerns for democracy itself.

This goes to say that the 'difficult distance' from which this problem was viewed in its conceptualisation is no less difficult at its completion. Three years on, revisiting *Request to a Year* (Wright, [1971] 1994) suggests the 'firmness of hand' – a steadiness – to address the current threat will be required on all sides. Through this work, we now have consensus among commentators and ordinary citizens that we – and democracy – are, indeed, on the metaphorical 'ice-floe' and the edge of the waterfall is just there. We hope for rescue.

August 2015

¹⁵ See <http://www.essentialmedia.com.au/> and <http://www.newspoll.com.au/opinion-polls-2/opinion-polls-2/>

¹⁶ See **Bill Shorten's leadership tottering after 'let's have ideas' gaffe** <http://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/bill-shortens-leadership-tottering-after-lets-have-ideas-gaffe-20150327-1m8y7h> and **The real leadership challenge: only six Liberals are suitable to be PM** <https://theconversation.com/au/topics/liberal-leadership-crisis>

APPENDICES

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

You are invited to participate

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled **“citizen reception of Australian political debate and effects on engagement with democracy”**.

This project is being conducted by a student researcher **Jean Ker Walsh** as part of her PhD study at Victoria University under the supervision **of Dr Tom Clark from College of Arts**

Project explanation

This project is a study into how political language is heard (received) by people in the course of their day-to-day life. It aims to understand what voting age Australians think of the nature and content of political debate they encounter via the media. It aims to know how the debate influences what they do as citizens, not just on polling day, but as members of communities with democratic rights and obligations.

What will I be asked to do?

As a participant in this project you will be asked to contribute in two stages. The first is by participation in one of three focus groups to be conducted during the period August 14-September 14, 2013. The second is through an individual interview with the student researcher Jean Ker Walsh at a mutually agreed time in Feb-April 2014.

Before the focus group session is scheduled you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire. The background details provided will be used to allocate participants to the most appropriate focus group. Following the interview, you will be asked to review a transcript to ensure your views have been accurately recorded.

What will I gain from participating?

Apart from the personal satisfaction derived from contributing to an important project about the state of Australian political debate, you will be invited to an exclusive briefing on the project's findings. There will be catering provided at the focus group session and a cinema gift card to the value of \$30 will be offered to each participant as recompense for any inconvenience encountered.

How will the information I give be used?

The information given will be recorded and transcribed. Individuals will not be identifiable to anyone other than the project leader and student researcher. Interviewees will have the option to be anonymous and data will be coded accordingly. Participants will have an opportunity to review the transcripts of their own interview. Digital recordings and transcripts will be securely logged and filed. Generic or fictitious identities will be used in any publications arising from the project. Information will be stored securely for five years in accordance with University requirements.

What are the potential risks of participating in this project?

Politics can be a “touchy subject” for some people. It may be that moments of disagreement arise during the focus group session, although the facilitator will work to ensure participants treat each other respectfully. Insofar as the interview process involves recall of growing up and family environment, this may prompt memories of lost relatives and friends. The personalised approach by the student researcher who is an experienced interviewer will ensure participants showing any sign of discomfort are reassured so that discomfort does not deteriorate to distress.

How will this project be conducted?

The focus group will involve up to 10 people in conversation with one another. Topics will be prompted and conversation threads will be guided by the group facilitator. The interviews will be one-on-one, conducted at a time and in a setting convenient to the participant. The group conversation and interviews will be transparently but discreetly recorded.

Who is conducting the study?

Dr Tom Clark

College of Arts

Victoria University

Tom.clark@vu.edu.au or 03 9919 2196

Jean Ker Walsh

Student researcher

Jkerwalsh@bigpond.com or 03 94129 7244

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chief Investigator listed above.

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001 or phone (03) 9919 4781.

Appendix (II) Prospective participant questionnaire**CONFIDENTIAL**

Given Name			
Family Name			
Sex	Female ()	Male ()	
Home Suburb			
Phone contact			
Email contact			
Preferred contact* by	Phone ()	Email ()	
THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS ONLY FOR THE PURPOSES OF SORTING PARTICIPANTS INTO BALANCED AND APPROPRIATE GROUPINGS			
Age at last birthday	18-30 ()	31-50 ()	51-80 ()
Level of formal education reached			
Are you a member of a local group or association?	Yes ()	No ()	
Are you a regular volunteer?	Yes ()	No ()	
Are you a member of a political party?	Yes ()	No ()	
Do you watch television news at least once a week?	Yes ()	No ()	
Do you read a newspaper at least once a week?	Yes ()	No ()	
Do you use email or the internet at least once a week?	Yes ()	No ()	
Do you use social media at least once a week?	Yes ()	No ()	

*Strictly confidential: ONLY for purposes of confirmation of arrangements for collecting research data.

Appendix (III) Transcription notes and conventions

Transcription is based on audio/video recordings and produced as dialogue script.

Transcripts are words heard and gestures observed which are relevant in conveying meaning of the preceding words.

Groups of words are transcribed as sentences either complete or incomplete.

Sentence construction uses punctuation as conventional for written text produced to convey intonation.

The heard characteristics suggesting a manner of speaking are conveyed through word elisions.

No attempts are made to correct grammar in sentence construction.

Symbol	Meaning
Robert	speaker label
RF	researcher/facilitator label
New line	commencement of speech act
...	pause marking incompleteness
—	point of interruption
(...)	pause in conversation flow
?	questioning intonation
um	verbal hesitation
CAPITALS	emphasised speech
[nodding]	gesture observed
(laughs)	laughter
(pause)	pause for effect
Y'know	elided speech occurrence
\$#@#	expletive

Appendix (IV) Topic flows by discussion groups, Oak Park 2013

Group A	Group B	Group C
<p>Low standard of political talk</p> <p>Lack of policies</p> <p>Sound bites</p> <p>Media traction</p> <p>Media performance</p> <p>Current issue – entitlements, climate change</p> <p>Media manipulation</p> <p>Don't get the facts</p> <p>Truth</p> <p>Trust</p> <p>Rubbish in the paper</p> <p>Lack of policy coverage</p> <p>Personality, celebrity infighting</p> <p>Just another game</p> <p>Respect for sitting MPs</p> <p>Media accountability</p> <p>Current issue – MP travel rorts</p> <p>Media fault finding, manipulation</p> <p>International disgust</p> <p>Media purpose – manipulation</p> <p>Media owner bias</p> <p>Media influence</p> <p>Media balance</p> <p>Media driven by what sells</p> <p>Media motivated by profits and power</p> <p>Media agenda setting</p> <p>Differentiation between press and TV news coverage</p> <p>Perception of public taking political positions</p> <p>Parental influence on political leanings</p> <p>Family talk about politics</p> <p>Generational differences</p> <p>Family political tradition</p> <p>Current issue – environment</p> <p>Personal political stance</p> <p>Family talk about politics</p> <p>Government policies, agenda</p> <p>Heard badmouthing in media</p> <p>Voting decision</p> <p>Lack of policy information</p> <p>Past experience of media coverage of policies</p> <p>Comparative treatment of policy</p> <p>Agenda setting</p> <p>Current issue – farms, imports, food production</p> <p>Personal view</p> <p>Secret vs public agenda</p> <p>Voting confusion</p>	<p>Atrocious media</p> <p>Views on Facebook</p> <p>Current issue – refugees, shame</p> <p>Opposing views among family and friends</p> <p>Given up listening to radio</p> <p>Media control</p> <p>Looking for democracy</p> <p>Media sources – online, international</p> <p>Current issue – refugee treatment by Italy, ashamed of this country</p> <p>Truth in traditional media</p> <p>Preference for online</p> <p>Poor quality media vs new online sites</p> <p>'Dumbed down'</p> <p>Effort to stay informed</p> <p>Loss of investigative reporting</p> <p>Loss of advertising revenues</p> <p>Use of various media</p> <p>BBC and Al Jazeera</p> <p>Reduced international coverage by local media</p> <p>Media balance – ref CNN, Sky</p> <p>Personal view</p> <p>Media bias</p> <p>Current issue – Syrian conflict</p> <p>Ignoring the media</p> <p>Voting choice</p> <p>Personal view – I really don't care, what's the point?</p> <p>Power to make an impact</p> <p>Use of media – limited to talkback radio in the car</p> <p>Current issue – asylum seekers</p> <p>Personal experience – grandparent migrants from Ukraine</p> <p>Peer group influences</p> <p>Family history influences</p> <p>Personality or policy</p> <p>Policies are hard to find</p> <p>Policy communication – short grabs, policy by sound bite</p> <p>Family discussion of politics</p> <p>Time poor</p> <p>Media filtering information</p> <p>Media bias</p> <p>Trust in personal experience</p> <p>Opinions formed by upbringing, family environment, work experiences</p>	<p>Media bias</p> <p>Media filtering of political information</p> <p>Getting what the media wants you to see</p> <p>Media focus on negatives</p> <p>Need to do your own research</p> <p>Media agenda-setting</p> <p>Relative merits of various media and programs</p> <p>Media sensationalize, not just politics</p> <p>Media works as a form of advertising</p> <p>Going back to the media source</p> <p>Personal view – doubt about political fluency so 'go with my gut'</p> <p>Personal view – not much interest in political debate, rely on a couple of trusted sources</p> <p>Following political candidates online</p> <p>Following candidates on Twitter</p> <p>Listen/watch multiple media</p> <p>Personal experience – reliance on mainstream media</p> <p>Google for more info on policy of interest</p> <p>Radio preferred over television</p> <p>Personal view – all have basic opinions,</p> <p>Voting for parties</p> <p>Family influence on political attitudes</p> <p>Parties not taking a decisive stand on big issues – eg, same sex marriage</p> <p>Current issue – local MP stand on population</p> <p>Issues that matter – 'mean something to me personally'</p> <p>Decision-making based on family</p> <p>Matching philosophies</p> <p>Finding the information to know what's important</p> <p>Making sense of things in relation to your world</p> <p>Personal experience – I simplify it</p> <p>Follow instinctively</p> <p>Lack of interest in politics – I go based on mum</p>

Group A	Group B	Group C
<p>Young people don't listen</p> <p>Personal experience – Handing out how to vote cards</p> <p>Reflections on youthful experience of authority, interest in active participation</p> <p>Distractions for young people – social media</p> <p>Low importance of politics</p> <p>Personal opinion</p> <p>Personal experience of becoming politically aware</p> <p>Politicians like distractions from policy</p> <p>Lack of accountability</p> <p>Tuning out from media coverage of politics</p> <p>Special interest focus – climate change, NBN</p> <p>Current issue – parental leave</p> <p>Interest on things that affect you</p> <p>Personal response – can't cope</p> <p>Use of newspapers</p> <p>Use of Facebook</p> <p>Deliberate selection of sites</p> <p>Volumes of information</p> <p>Use of television</p> <p>Policies , some just too hard</p> <p>Current issue – asylum seekers, international conflicts, climate change</p> <p>Personal view – too hard to have proper policy. I don't know</p> <p>Access to wider information sources, but things that you can say yes to</p> <p>Use of independent media for multiple angles</p> <p>Rubbish and crap in election coverage</p> <p>Decision-making without facts</p> <p>Media not giving the facts</p> <p>Personal response – frustration</p> <p>Media accountability for what they do</p> <p>'Slower media' for fact checking</p> <p>Letting the politicians speak</p> <p>Media create crises</p> <p>Media treatment of politicians</p> <p>Current issue – Gillard Rudd</p> <p>Media surveys</p> <p>Media control of political leadership change – people excluded</p> <p>Media power</p> <p>Polling</p>	<p>Looking at policies</p> <p>Voting choice</p> <p>Personal experience – voting</p> <p>Reflection on political system</p> <p>Trust, balance on ABC</p> <p>Voices in the media</p> <p>Sorting what's meaningful from multiple media sources</p> <p>Shallow media treatment of Iraq war commitment</p> <p>Attitude changed by media coverage of Syrian conflict</p> <p>Trust in information</p> <p>Current issue – use of chemical weapons</p> <p>Power of the media to influence opinions</p> <p>Game changer is the internet</p> <p>Effect of internet on mainstream media</p> <p>Media concentration</p> <p>Relative downgrading of investigative reporting in traditional media</p> <p>Media ownership</p> <p>Capability and time to find information</p> <p>Truth in media</p> <p>Public kept in ignorance on some issues</p> <p>Media concentration</p> <p>Influence over MPs</p> <p>Personal action – writing to MP</p> <p>Local issue involvement</p> <p>Mistrust of MP</p> <p>Personal responsibility</p> <p>Feeling manipulated</p> <p>Social responsibility of the individual</p> <p>Personal experience – workplace activism, fears</p> <p>Right to have a say</p> <p>Power</p> <p>Opposing interests, inequality</p> <p>Media power related to political power</p> <p>Potential threat to democracy</p> <p>Current issue – environment, coal seam gas</p> <p>Feeling disenfranchised</p> <p>Alternative political process on policy</p> <p>Current issue – refugees, Barrier Reef shipping channels, MP expense accounts</p> <p>Referendum to make MPs think about what they're doing</p> <p>Lack of policy information</p> <p>Interest in election</p>	<p>Personal experience – candidate door-knock</p> <p>Important to know the person</p> <p>Younger generation</p> <p>Use of social media and news websites</p> <p>Talking politics with friends, in the workplace</p> <p>NESB friends use other than English and international sites – completely different from what you hear in Australia</p> <p>Trust non-local sources about Australian politics</p> <p>Relative benefits of overseas websites</p> <p>Pre-election information not good enough</p> <p>Sensationalism over dry information</p> <p>Additional information available</p> <p>News outlets and fact checks</p> <p>Informational is available on major promises</p> <p>Media and political influence</p> <p>Relative media performances</p> <p>Media lying or not lying – twisting/stretching the truth</p> <p>Reliance on one medium alone</p> <p>Compulsory voting</p> <p>Voter attitudes</p> <p>Senate voting system</p> <p>Vote buying</p> <p>Support for compulsory voting</p> <p>Personal experience – observations on ongoing political events</p> <p>Tuning out</p> <p>Stopping listening</p> <p>Leadership battle</p> <p>No policy discussion</p> <p>Current issue – gay marriage</p> <p>Overload of squabbles</p> <p>Tone of political debate</p> <p>Personal experience as citizen – annoyed at quality of debate</p> <p>Local community participation</p> <p>Marginal seats attention</p> <p>Disconnection from sites of political focus</p> <p>Politicians only care around election times</p> <p>Personal experience – put off getting more involved, vicious</p> <p>Twitter discussion, dissatisfied with approach to local candidate</p> <p>Local debate opportunities</p> <p>Digging for information</p>

Group A	Group B	Group C
<p>Being a citizen</p> <p>Uninformed to make the reasonable decision</p> <p>Personal response – how I feel</p> <p>Personal response – no point in acting ‘cos you just don’t feel like you’d be heard’</p> <p>Having a say</p> <p>Current issue – immigration, population growth, infrastructure capacity</p> <p>People capability or capacity</p> <p>Nobody will listen</p> <p>Silent majority doesn’t get a go</p> <p>Current issue – gay marriage</p> <p>People having a say on certain moral issue</p> <p>Current issue – abortion</p> <p>Current issue – aboriginal situation</p> <p>Conscience of society has changed</p> <p>Media control of agenda setting</p> <p>Greater issues facing citizens – selling off of our country</p> <p>Opportunities to express opinions</p> <p>Ability to try to influence</p> <p>Collective action – voice and numbers</p> <p>Individual action – Local council don’t care</p> <p>Authorities failing to do anything</p> <p>Personal view – I have no idea but</p> <p>Time and effort required to be heard</p> <p>Time constraints on being fully engaged</p> <p>False apathy</p> <p>Powers that be</p> <p>Corporations stronger than government</p> <p>Current issue – NBN</p> <p>Relative performance of major political parties</p> <p>People pushed on both sides</p> <p>Helplessness of sitting in the middle</p> <p>Media taking sides</p> <p>Politics drags down good people – they lose power once elected</p> <p>Capability of the ordinary citizen</p> <p>Motoring enthusiasts – what’s that got to do with politics?</p>	<p>Protest voting</p> <p>Rejection of major parties</p> <p>Hung parliament</p> <p>Having to like policies even though you don’t agree</p> <p>Shift to presidential campaign style</p> <p>More personality than policy</p> <p>Disappointment with other people affected by local issue</p> <p>Not getting involved</p> <p>Personal action – online petition</p> <p>Current local issue – McDonalds in Tecoma</p> <p>Online opportunities to get involved</p> <p>New media supplanting traditional media</p> <p>Fear of reprisal</p> <p>Personal experience – more actively involved through digital platforms</p> <p>Grass roots campaigns – International politics, modelling Obama</p> <p>Personal experience – more engaged – online petitions</p> <p>voting</p> <p>Citizen power</p> <p>Voting for change</p> <p>Investment in issues forms personal opinion</p> <p>Personal experience – volunteering at children’s school</p> <p>Current issue – smart meters</p> <p>Personal experience – powerlessness to resist government</p> <p>Personal experience – overregulated society, powerless to change</p> <p>Critical level of government is local government</p> <p>Relative power at local level</p> <p>Personal experience – meeting the Mayor</p> <p>Confidence in local Mayor taking notice</p> <p>Local issue – airport</p> <p>Difference in power at local and national levels</p> <p>Power of living in a marginal electorate</p> <p>Power of independent MPs</p> <p>Compulsory voting</p> <p>Making the system work for you</p>	<p>Getting the political speak</p> <p>Listening</p> <p>People’s issues – gay marriage, do we need the royal family</p> <p>Options for citizen action</p> <p>Personal action – getting the standard response</p> <p>Example of concerted follow up on a local councillor’s promise</p> <p>Not being heard or not caring enough</p> <p>Power of collective action</p> <p>Relative effort for outcome – ‘I just want my green bin’</p> <p>Personal experience – talking, not doing</p> <p>Accountability for promises made</p> <p>Political power</p> <p>Personal view – wanting to be among the people with time to lobby</p> <p>Ongoing importance of issues, not just at election time</p> <p>Current issue – population plan</p> <p>Local campaigning support</p> <p>Current issue – stopping the boats</p> <p>Heightened interest in politics at election time</p> <p>Personal action – attend rallies on marriage equality</p> <p>Mobilised by issues vs party</p> <p>Following local politics</p> <p>Personal experience – swinging voter choices</p> <p>Council politics rigged</p> <p>Looking after the electorate for the people, not the party</p> <p>Performance of local councilors</p> <p>Back door deals – getting reelected</p> <p>Over time evaluation of political debate</p> <p>More information means the situation is a bit better</p> <p>Personal experience – social media widens interest in political issues</p> <p>Personal experience – not a social media user</p> <p>How politics could be better</p> <p>More information – but not from the politician’s mouth</p> <p>Personal response – to seek out more information from online sites</p>

Group A	Group B	Group C
<p>Political system processes – voting paper size</p> <p>Making an informed choice</p> <p>Being relevant</p> <p>Citizen consumer choices</p> <p>Citizen engagement</p> <p>Globally aware, locally active</p> <p>Time to be involved in action</p> <p>Local issue – speed humps</p> <p>Corruption in councils</p> <p>Powerlessness</p> <p>Local issue – council support for climate change</p> <p>Electing people to decide</p> <p>Trust in elected reps</p> <p>Local issue – local traffic, experience of local action on tree removal</p> <p>Giving up</p> <p>Personal response – I'm over it</p> <p>Current issue – disability insurance scheme</p> <p>Motivation to act</p> <p>Reflection on Australian political situation</p> <p><i>ends</i></p>	<p>The system can be gamed</p> <p>Changed attitude to voting over last 10 yrs</p> <p>Obligation to vote</p> <p>Voting to follow the rules</p> <p>System is one of the best around</p> <p>System allows minor party candidates to be elected on small number of votes</p> <p>Choice of voting</p> <p>Personal view – not very democratic in voting, my choice</p> <p>Choice generates more interest in voting</p> <p>Don't want to be forced to have a say</p> <p>Personal experience – Malaysian elections, Australian system is superior although it's a very manipulated political system</p> <p><i>ends</i></p>	<p>Positive about being able to have political discussions like this</p> <p>Relative benefits of Australian politics over countries where 'the bullies win'.</p> <p><i>ends</i></p>

Appendix (V) Themes and sub-themes, Oak Park 2013

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Media performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. General quality b. Agenda setting c. Bias d. Accountability
2. Media use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Traditional media (press) b. Traditional media (radio/TV) c. Online news sites/websites d. Social media e. Other
3. Power and influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Traditional media influence b. New media influence c. Corporate influence d. Political power e. Citizen power f. Citizen voice
4. Discourse content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Substance b. Policy issues c. Personality and celebrity d. Truth and trust
5. Political process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Representative system issues b. Elected representatives c. Political parties d. Accountability
6. Personal political influences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Family and friends b. Work environment c. Values d. Other
7. Engagement and participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Interest b. Capability c. Time and effort d. Deliberation and choice e. Personal action f. Social action g. Voting h. Citizenship responsibility
8. Change over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Personal change b. Social change

Appendix (VI) **Tones of evaluation applied to sub-themes and aggregated for dominant tone, Oak Park 2013**

Theme	Pos	Neut	Neg	Commentary
1. Media performance				
	1+1+5=6	1+1+1=3	34+11+10=45	Dominant negative
2. Media use				
	6+17+20=43	10+1+1=12	7+6+2=15	Dominant positive
3. Power and influence				
	7+6+5=18	8+2+0=10	29+24+19=72	Dominant negative
4. Discourse content				
	0+2+7=9	2+2+2=6	18+22+15=55	Dominant negative
5. Political process				
	13+11+13=37	7+2+12=21	33+19+28=80	Dominant negative
6. Personal political influences				
	5+8+5=18	1+3+0=4	2+0+2=4	Dominant positive
7. Engagement and participation				
	21+31+50=102	15+10+9=34	22+21+17=60	Dominant positive
8. Temporality and change over time				
	1+0+5=6	3+2+2=7	3+7+0=10	Dominant negative

Appendix (VII) Excerpt of transcript as indicative of flow and nature/frequency of interventions

(Pause)

RF Alright, so there are things that you feel you can do but not on your own. Is that what I'm hearing, that you, you think that writing a letter is – what, you said (addressing Don) you had opportunities but you don't use them and –

Don That's right.

RF And why is that particularly?

(Pause)

Don Good point (Laughs a little).

RF So do you – I suppose what I'm thinking about is, what power do you think you've got as a citizen?

Hamish I guess, in order to get your points heard, you've gotta put a lot of time and effort into it. Which is difficult when you need to pay the bills and stuff like that. Like, yeah. You've gotta put a lot of time in. And you wouldn't be able to put all the time you need to cover all the issues you're passionate about really. But you might be able to focus on one issue in your spare time, but that's about all. And like, it's a shame that you sort of, have to sacrifice your own life to sort of get your message out there, cos I think, yeah, if it was a lot easier it'd be – I dunno.

RF So it takes a lot of time, you think, to be a citizen?

Hamish Yeah.

Keith A fair amount of effort.

Hamish To be fully engaged takes a lot of effort, yeah, and really I don't think many people have the time to be able to do that when they're working fulltime, things like that.

Keith That's one of the greatest conspiracies actually, where governments actually keep the bills coming in (rolling gestures with his hands) so you have to pay more and more money so you have to work harder so you have this false apathy so you won't go against any of their policies. Think about it. Interesting.

Maureen No, you're not far wrong.

Keith They certainly do the bills part, that's for sure.

Maureen Well, I don't know that it's government that's doing that, but the powers that be whoever they are, they're you know, they are pushing us to constantly spend more money so that we have to work harder. But at the same time there are these productivity issues so that, you know, we have to work harder for the little that we do earn.

Keith So we won't argue with them.

RF So you use the term like "powers that be". Where is the power?

Maureen I think it is largely with the large corporations.

(Pause)

Hamish (Nodding) Yeah, I think money speaks very loudly these days. Like you could do a whole heap, like you don't really need all that much time and all that much, aahm, effort really once you've already got the money. You could sort of pay people to put the time and effort in for you. Um so you could (inaudible) a lot better if you've got money. Yeah.

Maureen I think, I feel that the corporations are even stronger, even more powerful than government –

Mavis They ARE.

Hamish (Nodding)

Maureen The government is influenced by the corporations, um, to a point where, everything they do, is factored on whether or not they are going to get the approval of these powerful, these powerful – powers! Um, its –

RF Can you give an example to illustrate that?

Maureen Um? Well, the whole thing about the NBN. Who does and who doesn't approve of it, in whose interests is this going to be. Um, my personal feeling is that what's happened is that the right wing agenda, you know, the right wing has taken over the, taken over the political discussion so that everything is moving to the right. And my personal argument with the Labor Party is that they're weak, that they've given in to all of this rather than stand up for the values that they had back in the day. Um.

RF How do you – sorry Mavis.

Mavis There's very little difference between the two parties if you, when it comes to the crunch, when they get into power, they do the same things.

Keith I think there's two groups that, um, aren't them up there (making a figures upward gesture). There's, I think, the unions on one side and, you know, don't get me wrong, I DO believe in unions, they do serve a significant role but sometimes they go a bit far, but w won't talk about that part. They have an agenda. And that's a fair enough agenda, I don't have a problem with that. So you've got one side of politics there, you've got the other side of politics – I call it the capitalists. Large companies and so on. I mean, if it wasn't for large companies we wouldn't have cameras and those sorts of things that we need, so we need to be realistic about this whole thing. But it's the money area. I spent a lot of time in the treasury and the ANZ bank. The whole thing's – I call it a joke, actually. But anyway, apart from that. So whoever controls, so we've got two groups of people and then there's us typical people sitting in the middle, getting controlled by both of them. Pushed around one side to the other, all the time. And every time we get pushed, it costs us a little more and these guys push (gesturing one side to the other) costs us a little more and so on. We're getting pushed DRASTICALLY from both sides. So that's – to me, that's the political environment in Australia. Both sides get a go every now again, and I don't have a problem with that, so we're just pretty helpless, us blokes, just sitting in the middle.

Hamish Yeah.

Keith And the media (gesturing) is either on that side or that side.

RF So, in that scenario, you didn't mention politicians at all, the elected representatives. Where do they sit in that scenario?

Keith I don't think they know. There's some, I mean I've – there's a lot of Labor guys I think are fantastic, really good people. But they get dragged in (makes a sharp downward gesture) to one sort of politic, if you like. And the same on the other side. There's a lot of good genuine people there, really do want to make a difference. But they get dragged in by the politic of that particular side.

RF Do they have power or not?

Keith They lose the power once they get in there.

RF They lose the power?

Keith They get controlled by a small group who control the agenda of that particular group, at that side (gesturing), and that side.

RF How do the rest of you fell about Keith's scenario, there?

Hamish I agree with that. I think the politicians are reacting to whoever's pushing them the hardest. And I think it's these big lobby groups both on the left and right who have the ability to push them harder. And the ordinary citizen doesn't have that kind of capability.

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