

Young People, Politics and Television Current Affairs in Australia

Vanessa Evans and Jason Sternberg

The victory of John Howard's coalition government at the 1996 federal election and its re-election in 1998 have brought about a series of harsh, restrictive youth policies that for some, border on 'institutional discrimination'.¹ Youth wages have been cut and access to the dole tightened.² At the same time, policies to reduce youth unemployment, homelessness and suicide have been neglected, schools have been closed down and higher education fees increased.³

Young adults in Australia are increasingly constructed as political objects. However, the extent to which they are viewed as political *agents*, that is, active citizens 'who are not simply informed, but who are motivated'⁴ about the political process and the social, cultural and economic issues Australia will take into the new millennium is problematic. In popular and academic discussions of Australian youth culture during the 1980s and 1990s, young people have been regularly presented as politically ignorant, cynical and apathetic.⁵ Indeed, large amounts of political apathy and cynicism are amongst the defining criteria of Generation X/Y, the demographic cohort which young adults across the world are regularly claimed to belong to.

Concerns about young people's alienation from the political process have converged at the policy level during this decade around renewed interest in civics and citizenship education.⁶ However, more important political influences for young adults may be parents, peers and the media. Indeed, the apparent turn away from politics by young adults has been intimately linked to a decline in the number of young adults consuming news media.⁷ The accelerating decline in young people's news media use is a recurring theme in contemporary discussions of journalism in Australia and elsewhere.⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Jon Casimir observes:

The mass media in this country is in the biggest problem it's ever been in dealing with the youth market. We basically have news and sport; current affairs are not even getting to the youth market. They're certainly not reading newspapers. They're not watching most of the stuff that we're all talking about ... and the basic truth is that kids are going elsewhere.⁹

This article explores young adults' attitudes towards political information on television news and current affairs in Australia. It presents evidence to suggest that television current affairs is at least partly responsible for young people's disillusionment with politics but also suggests that the link between youth culture and political cynicism and apathy needs to be reconsidered. This article draws on qualitative research conducted in the lead ups to the 1996 and 1998 federal elections with audience groups in the age range of eighteen to 25. The purpose of these focus groups was to ascertain whether television current affairs encourages political participation and active citizenship among young adults.¹⁰ The research also aimed to assess the extent to which television current affairs programs discussed political issues in a

manner relevant to young people's everyday lives. Do young people's readings of television news and current affairs constitute a form of 'postmodern citizenship' which allows young adults to 'renegotiate power relationships and claim speaking positions' which are highly mobile in nature?¹¹

Focus group participants were recruited from the University of Queensland, business students at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college in Brisbane's southern suburbs and students from a state high school in Brisbane's northern suburbs. A 'snowballing' technique whereby associates of the researchers were used to recruit their friends and acquaintances was also used. Recruiting the five groups in this way increased the sample's diversity in terms of educational background and employment status. Group size ranged between five and seven, recommended as the optimum for allowing equal participation and all members of each group were well-known to each other in order to facilitate free-flowing and open discussion.¹² A total of 43 (M=10, F=33) people participated in the research.¹³ Tape recorded discussions were held in venues familiar to the participants; classrooms at the relevant campuses in the cases of the school, university and TAFE students and in the homes of participants in the other cases.

Political News as Adult Discourse

Young people feel language used in the news media is 'too sophisticated'¹⁴ and John Fiske has described the broadsheet media's mode of address as corresponding to the lifestyle of a white, middle-class, middle-aged male.¹⁵ Interestingly, this is why young people believe newspapers focus largely on business and politics¹⁶ yet content does not always bear out this supposition.¹⁷ Focus group respondents, including those engaged in higher education and employed in professional positions, claimed political news on television used language that was too complex for them to understand. In this regard, the news media would appear to be failing at one of its most fundamental tasks; providing information comprehensible to all segments of the community.

Helen: I'd like to learn more about politics, so that my vote really counted, but like to be honest, I couldn't sit there and watch The Great Debate because it would just go straight over my head.

Steff: They use terminology that the average person [can't understand].

Helen: I know that ... the last vote ... Triple J had ... I don't even know the opposition guy's name other than Paul Keating. What's the other guy's name?

Julian: Hewson ...

Helen: And they said, 'What are like your main issues?' And he said a few and like the day after or something they had Paul Keating on there. And do you know I based my vote on that, like on maybe five minutes on the radio because I don't have a clue ...

Furthermore, not having background information on what the news stories were really about was identified by respondents as a main reason for finding political news and current affairs difficult to understand and therefore not worth investing time in.

Bianka: You hear 'surplus' and you think, 'What the fuck is a surplus?' Like all those things that they say you're expected to know but you'll never know unless you ask a parent ... When you don't know anything about the GST, you watch it, they're speaking gibberish. You don't understand it unless someone goes from A to B.

'Hey, Hey It's Ray': Current Affairs as the Agent of Cynicism

Political current affairs television was viewed by respondents as too complex to incorporate into their everyday viewing habits, but young adults also feel it is not worth investing time in television current affairs because any political information received from the programs is usually trivialised and played for entertainment value. For example, *A Current Affair* was described by Debra, a nineteen year-old university student, as *Hey, Hey It's Ray* after the celebrity of its former host Ray Martin, and was seen by her focus group as a form of populist emotional exploitation. As the following responses suggest, there was a strong feeling amongst the groups that television current affairs portrays politicians as being 'full of it'.

Bianka: The whole politics thing. They're all liars; they're all full of it.

Craig: All the media carry on with is stuff like when they asked Hewson if [the] GST would be applied to a birthday cake and they just blew that up. Who gave a shit?

The respondents felt news and current affairs did not help them develop a political identity. They also expressed distrust in politicians who attempt to 'persuade' them to choose a lesser evil. As Bianka points out: 'They all change their minds when they get what they want. I mean what's the point?' What eventuates is a distrust of not only politicians but also the media that is supposed to decipher the positive and negative elements of each candidate's actions.

Also, rather than explaining politics, 'the news media typically criticise political individuals'.¹⁸ Journalists too often focus on strategy, interpreting political and public policy news as if it were a sporting event, which in turn makes citizens feel like spectators or dupes. Roderick Hart argues such styles of political reporting 'significantly lower our sense of political efficacy, the sense that we make a difference in the public realm'.¹⁹

Teresa: ... they bag the shit out of each other ... it is basically, 'Vote for me because I'm bagging the shit out of the other guy.'

Natalie: ... they were talking in circles and nothing was really answered and I didn't get anything out of it. I mean he's talking about his package. He didn't sell it very well to tell you the truth because he doesn't really tell you the things you need to know.

Arguments that television news and current affairs disenfranchise people through trivialising politics may be applicable to the audience in general. However, Ian Ward argues such opinions are particularly strong amongst young audiences who are regularly seen as 'threats to democracy' through being constructed by the news media as gang members, drug addicts or dole-bludgers, among other stereotypes.²⁰ In this way, current affairs television is open to accusations of complicity with governments in setting an agenda of increasingly repressive youth policies.²¹

Matt: ... All they do is shaft us. You don't want to work, you don't want to do this, you don't want to do that. Why don't they come and talk to us, instead of saying, 'They do this, they do that'? But because negativity sells to the old people, they believe what they want to believe.

Hannah: I don't think anyone of our generation was represented in the people they questioned.

Rebecca: Yeah, like students, first couple of years out of uni, first job, unemployed.

Carla: They can't really cover every single person ... but I don't think I could get anything out of that [episode of *A Current Affair*] for me.

Matt: ... If they can't make it relevant people don't want to listen to it.

'When I look at the Television, I Want to See Me Staring Right Back at Me':²² Macro & Micropolitics & Relevance

Straddling the binaries of child and adult, young people occupy unstable and sometimes problematic spaces. Often they are marginalised by systematic prejudice practices by adults.²³ Their apparently low levels of political interest are not 'necessarily a sign of apathy, but may indicate that many of everyday life's struggles take place in arenas that traditional politics have been slow to recognise'.²⁴ Fiske posits a difference between the macropolitics of democratic and social institutions and the micropolitics of everyday life.²⁵ Popular culture may well construct relevances at all levels but Fiske claims the crucial relevance is at the micropolitical level. Current affairs professionals might argue that this is exactly the type of information they provide and that audiences do not receive conventional political information because they do not want it. However, the focus group discussions suggest that for young audiences, the combination of macro- and micro-political information should not be reduced to tabloidism and is more than simply stories about shonky used-car salesmen, cellulite cream or the impact of the budget on beer and cigarettes. Indeed, one member from the University of Queensland group described *A Current Affair* as 'a glorified whinge program for angry consumers'. Central to the groups' concerns was the notion of relevance. To what extent do televisual politics allow young people to understand how issues impact on them and their status as citizens?

Hugh Mackay suggests that while young people are not concerned with 'wider' political issues, they tend to take notice of issues impinging directly upon them such as beach pollution or the interest rate on a personal loan.²⁶ Although some studies²⁷ suggest young people only pay lip-service to these political ideals, research does point to young people shifting towards more micropolitical interests such as environmental concerns and equality²⁸ and seeing relevant political issues as ones that touch their daily lives (for instance unemployment, violence, sex and drugs).²⁹ The search for relevance and connections between macro and micropolitics is reflected in the news interests of young people. Young people reject political and economic news but research suggests that they do have an interest in topics such as education, jobs, personal development and relationships.³⁰

Fiske argues 'the micro-level of lived practices' is most important for groups with 'limited education and high cultural capital, but more developed popular

knowledge and cultural competencies'.³¹ Even taking into account socio-economic differences within the demographic, young adults, through their very position as young would appear to fit into this framework. In the 1998 study, when respondents were asked what improvements they would make to *A Current Affair*, relevance was the issue *all* group members identified as the show's biggest problem.

Carla: ... something like how is this tax reform going to affect university students or the younger generation? As soon as you hear that you'll switch on and probably watch it ... Fair enough they can't always cater for university students or the younger generation. Maybe every week or every month they could have a day when he's [Ray Martin] going to bring in the younger generation and hear what they say.

Bianka: Yeah, talking about someone who's left home, working their first job, or low income. How does it affect me?

Jon Katz points out: 'For the young, culture is politics, personal expression and entertainment all fused together, often the biggest and most important story in their lives'.³² This situation places young people in an interesting set of contradictions: 'politics is nowhere because politics is everywhere'.³³ The point here is not that all young people feel this way but that 'those who possess this energy often direct it to areas of their lives outside the domain of traditional politics'.³⁴ This is not the problem so much as the news media's failure to realise this. However, programs such as *Good News Week* and *The Panel* have broadened their definitions of news presentation by using humour and establishing links between private and public issues. These shows are having an easier time attracting young demographics than conventional news media.³⁵

Bianka: With *Good News Week* ... they explain the story piece, [and] the questions come from like the panel. But with the news if you don't understand what's going on in the first place you don't understand what they're saying. *The Panel* is funny yet informative.

Rebecca: ... they are normal people and they're giving their opinion but they do it in a way that you can totally understand.

Teresa: It's not so adulty.

Ask Someone Who Cares: Rearticulating Political Cynicism and Apathy

John Hartley argues that reducing citizenship from the public domain to the privatised, feminised, suburban, consumerist and global sphere of postmodern popular media entertainment in the way programs like *Good News Week* and *The Panel* do has shifted the site of civil activity.³⁶ David Trend claims that manipulation of media in this environment can define alternative frames of reference for political thinking, linked to new ways of self-expression and experiencing the world.³⁷ These alternative frames allow each citizen to assume many – and sometimes contradictory – subject positions.³⁸ It is these postmodern public *spheres*, as opposed to a singular public

sphere, that may allow youth to renegotiate power relations and articulate previously unattainable speaking positions.

In this way, the cynicism and apathy towards politics expressed by the young adults in this article can be seen as empowering, 'reconstituting the ability to make a difference when nothing makes a difference'.³⁹ In a world where current affairs television appears to actively encourage political cynicism and apathy, the responses of the young people can be read as enabling a political identity to be forged 'when there is no centre to measure it against'.⁴⁰ Brad, an eighteen year-old high school student, provides such a reading of the intellectually and emotionally disabling discourses of television current affairs. On the surface, Brad's responses to the news would appear to be those of the archetypal Gen-X slacker.

Brad: Actually it sounds really sick, but I ... don't really get horrified ... when you see things like earthquakes in Japan and that big explosion thing in wherever — Oklahoma.

However, Brad's responses could also be reinterpreted as fluctuating between what Larry Grossberg calls hyperreal and grotesque inauthenticity. This stance distrusts and rejects the very fact of political belief and the possibilities of any political investment, while at the same time celebrating 'the terrifying, the destructive, [and] the horrific'.⁴¹ Such a position allows Brad to claim: 'I don't care because I live in a society where I don't have to care'.

Like those audience responses above which search for relevance in current affairs, Brad orients himself to the world based on Fiske's notion that people show most concern about 'issues where I can make a difference (and where, therefore, my limited energies are best directed)'.⁴² While some young people might search for connections between political news and their everyday lives, Brad directs his energies into not caring as a way of negotiating the gap left by the failure of news and current affairs to provide such information.

Brad: ... you can't pay out on me because I get it easy, because trust me, I don't and there's not a government that I know of that will change anything like that.

In this way, Brad's responses to the world around him as presented on television news and current affairs are a kind of 'enlightened desperation', in which 'political interest is driven underground'.⁴³ However, his responses should not be seen as apathetic because they offer:

... strategies by which individuals can continue to locate themselves within affective maps, and continue to struggle to make a difference, if not in the world, at least in their lives, even though difference has become impossible and possibly irrelevant. Such strategies do not offer people positions as identities from which they can judge themselves and the world, but as places in which they can temporarily install themselves so that they can act, so that they can gain some control over their lives, so that they can negotiate the spaces between pain and comfort, between terror and boredom.⁴⁴

**Conclusion: Towards a Youth Media Citizenship, or
An ‘Anthem for the Year 2000’⁴⁵**

This article has suggested that due largely to the news media’s presentation, politics, democracy and citizenship have developed a bad reputation with young people. In many respects, the very foundations of democracy have become contradictory and marginalising for the young. However, Tara Brabazon⁴⁶ states that in an era of few alternatives youth are inherently suspicious of the rhetoric behind the media while at the same time they are naturally drawn to the reflexivity and social consciousness the media yields for them. This attraction may be especially strong for new media such as the internet, but it also exists for more enduring cultural technologies such as television, radio and magazines. Brabazon argues that declining opportunities for employment, sexual freedom and political inclusion have forced youth to explore their citizenship rights through the media.⁴⁷ However, what is offered here is a potential site for renegotiated power relations and speaking positions, not an actuality.⁴⁸ For Brabazon, the ‘media citizenship’ displayed by the young adults cannot deliver the type of postmodern democracy being advocated. She argues that young people, who have achieved such ambivalence and ambiguity through the media, are themselves betrayed by the media rhetoric of which they are suspicious but drawn to. The problem, she asserts, is that both postmodernity and youth culture are being increasingly sold back to themselves,⁴⁹ leaving young people to see the world through little more than a type of nihilistic irony.⁵⁰ It is certainly possible to read Brad’s responses in this way.

However, to argue that media citizenship is open to incorporation or that it ‘cannot be a lasting solution’, is to overlook a crucial point. It is not meant to be a lasting solution, but the gaining of edge and advantage for what is accepted, in advance, as the inevitable next round’.⁵¹ Media citizenship is not a permanent position of ‘strength through apathy’, but a struggle exposing the crisis of democracy (for instance polarisation of opinion, decline in public debate, media sound bites as answers to complex problems and the inadequacy of conventional party politics).⁵² This struggle allows for the opening of new social and political possibilities. Trend argues that while many would suggest this battle represents the failure of master narratives, it is, in fact, giving way to a dramatic decentering of authority, ‘a new emphasis on the importance of the margins’.⁵³ For the young, ‘citizenship’ has become a retro concept. The solution is not to call for more and better utopias, more and better images and maps of possible futures.⁵⁴ New vectors are needed for sharing political information. Whether this sharing takes place through the internet, television, radio or print, young people must have relevant political information made available to them if they choose to access it.⁵⁵ They must also be provided with the opportunity to participate in the development of ideas and information.

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- 9 Jon Casimir, Presentation at Young People and the Media conference, NSW Parliament House, 19 October 1995.
- 10 The research focusing on the 1996 election was conducted at various stages during 1995. The March 1996 federal election was preceded by considerable speculation about the scheduling of the

- poll, with the window of opportunity running from November 1995 until March 1996. The 1998 research was conducted in the month preceeding the October federal election of that year.
- 11 Tara Brabazon, 'Save Ferris?: A guide to Xer media/citizenship', *Metro Education*, no 14, 1997, p 12.
 - 12 D L Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, London, Sage, 1988; Justin Lewis, *The Ideological Octopus*, New York, Routledge, 1991; Hugh Mackay, 'Hugh Mackay's seven deadly sins', *Australian Financial Review*, 1 June 1993, pp 36-37.
 - 13 The gender imbalance in the focus groups is due to the fact they were largely self-selected by participants. Rather than attempting to produce a representative sample of young people, it was felt that establishing focus groups in which the majority of members were known to each other and would normally interact socially, would produce more honest and free-flowing conversation. As such, this article does not claim to be comprehensive in its findings. For a succinct critique of focus group methodologies in media audience research, see: Brent MacGregor and David E Morrison, 'From focus groups to editing groups: A new method of reception analysis', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol 17, 1995, pp 141-50
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 - 32 Katz, op. cit., p 97.
 - 33 Hart, op. cit.
 - 34 Fiske, 1993, op. cit., p 3.
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 - 39 Larry Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*, New York, Routledge, 1992, p 233.
 - 40 *ibid.*
 - 41 Grossberg, op. cit., pp 232-34.
 - 42 Fiske, 1993, op. cit., p 7.

- 43 Hart, op. cit.
- 44 Grossberg, op cit., p 233.
- 45 silverchair, 'Anthem for the year 2000', Sony, 1999.
- 46 Brabazon, op. cit., p 12.
- 47 ibid., p 11.
- 48 ibid., p 12.
- 49 ibid.
- 50 Thanks to Michael Keane for this term.
- 51 Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, pp 244-45.
- 52 Trend, op cit., p 179.
- 53 ibid.
- 54 Cf Grossberg, op. cit., p 11. McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography*, Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1994.
- 55 McKenzie Wark, ibid.