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**Political discourse in the age of the soundbite:
The election campaign soundbite on Australian television news¹**

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Abstract:

For many commentators the ‘soundbite’ has come to represent all that is ailing with media representations of politics (that are too brief, too glib and with no detail) as well as the superficiality of modern political behaviour (with politicians’ repetitive and carefully-crafted soundbites seen as primary evidence of their focus on spin over substance). Soundbites have been much studied in the US and UK where one of the key findings has been their dramatic shrinkage, for example, in the US, from ‘over 40 seconds in the late 1960s to 7.73 seconds in 2004 (Bucy and Grabe 2007: 663). In Australia, a lack of similar empirical research means that much less is known about the Australian soundbite. Nonetheless, suspicion abounds that ‘the snappy sound bite has become the language of Australian politics...’ (Kermond 2004: 8) and ‘has done enormous harm by dumbing down political debate’ (Whelan 1998: 13). This paper examines soundbites from TV news reports of the 2007 federal election to find out the length of the Australian soundbite and the implications of this for democratic discourse. But it also considers the interplay between politicians and the media including shared values about what is ‘newsworthy’ by examining which soundbites are most frequently repeated and which politicians succeed most often in having their soundbites played on TV news.

It is frequently lamented that modern politics is conducted primarily on television and, worse still, via ‘soundbites’ in which politicians speak only briefly (and usually superficially) in television news clips. The Loughborough University’s Communication Research Centre found that the term ‘soundbite’ (also spelt ‘sound-bite’ and sometimes, incorrectly, as ‘soundbyte’) ‘emerged in the 1980s to describe “how politicians, adapting to the logic of media formats, have sought to organise their public communication around brief, pithy and memorable phrases’ (quoted in UK Electoral Commission 2005 :35).² Notably, this definition seems to place the blame on politicians for creating soundbites (in response to existing ‘media formats’) while others blame the media for editing politicians’ speech or not allocating enough space for it. For example, Cheryl Kernot argued that ‘it’s mostly the media initiating [soundbites] rather than politicians....’ (ABC 1997).

Soundbites have been much studied in the US but have also been investigated in the UK. One of the key findings in both countries has been the dramatic shrinkage of soundbites. In the US, according to several studies, the average length of time a presidential candidate spoke in his own words on network tv during election campaigns shrunk from 43 seconds in the late 1960s to under 10 seconds by the late 1980s (Hallin 1992). The sound bite then kept shrinking from ‘8.4 seconds in 1992, 8.2 seconds in 1996 to 7.8 seconds in the 2000 election’ (Lichter 2001 quoted in Bucy and Grabe 652, 653 and 657; see also Hallin (1992)). Bucy and Grabe (2007: 663) found this had shrunk slightly lower in 2004 to 7.73 seconds.

By comparison, in the UK, a 2005 report (Deacon et al 2005: 14) found that the average speaking time of politicians during the 2005 general election was close to 25 seconds on both ITV and BBC.³ While difficult to compare directly with the American studies (as the unit of measurement differed somewhat — with the UK study using an ‘aggregation of sound-bite time rather than individual speech acts’) — the results suggest that soundbites are longer in the UK (Deacon et al 2005: 14). This is not surprising given Britain’s long tradition of public service broadcasting and mandated public service licencing requirements (McNair 2003: 139).

The soundbite garners so much attention because it is such a visible (and audible) manifestation of a key democratic principle — that citizens are provided with an opportunity to hear election candidates speak. Shrinking soundbites therefore fuel concern about whether the media is fulfilling its role of providing citizens with political information and, more broadly, whether it is acting as a public sphere for deliberation.

Although there have been calls for researchers to pay more attention to the visual dimension of tv news (sometimes called ‘image-bites’ — when politicians are shown but not heard) (Bucy and Grabe 2007), it is the verbal dimension of political discourse that continues to draw attention - and the most concern. This is because verbal speech is so central to democratic theory, practice and institutions. Ultimately, two different questions underly debate over the soundbite: 1) is it new? and 2) is it damaging democratic discourse?

For some, the soundbite *is* a product of the TV age and a worrying development. In 1993, Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1993: 336) encapsulated such concerns when she argued that soundbites consist of ‘assertion’ rather than argument and impeded the

‘clash of ideas’ that is at the heart of democracy — ‘a clash best achieved through extended argument’ (Hall Jamieson 1993: 337). On the other hand, Dennis Glover (2007: 154) argues that ‘there’s nothing new’ about the soundbite and that although the:

‘word comes from television editors, not from Aristotle... that in itself doesn’t exclude it from being considered valid rhetoric. As Peggy Noonan [Ronald Reagan’s speechwriter] reminds us, ‘great speeches have always had great soundbites’, it’s just that they were called other things. Referring to the soundbite is how we remember the speeches of the Shakespearean characters Henry V, John of Gaunt and Mark Anthony and those of Cromwell, Amory and Churchill... The soundbite isn’t necessarily the opposite of a speech, it’s the essence of a speech, driving home its point, and if that makes for a good television news grab then all’s for the better.’

For others, the issue at stake is not how politicians speak or whether the soundbite qualifies as a valid form of political rhetoric but rather the role of the media, and particularly news organisations, in terms of how they represent politics and how much space they grant it. For example, in the US, former CBS Evening News anchor Walter Cronkite blames TV news programs for ‘picking out a few words that don’t even have nouns and verbs in them. That’s no way to present the issues of the day’ (Stephens 1996: 22). Others conversely argue that expecting TV news programs to deliver longer political segments shows a lack of knowledge about the format and point out that there are other programs where politicians go on to speak in much lengthier interviews (Stephens 1996: 22).

While the soundbite has been accused of turning voters off politics and killing ‘the art of oratory’ (Simons 2003: 4), for those who defend soundbites, trying to measure them or worrying about their decline is misplaced because quantity doesn’t equal quality. Stephens (1996: 22), for example, argues that: ‘Longer soundbites don’t necessarily deepen... explorations [of the issues of the day]. Politicians can produce four sentences of empty rhetoric as easily as one’. And, according to Stephens, quoting the candidate’s words is not always the best way to represent their position: narration by a reporter, visual images and computerised graphics such as charts may be just as effective (if not more so) in explaining or presenting a candidate’s case (Stephens 1996: 22). This view, however, is not as prevalent as those who criticise, and are concerned about, the soundbite. Daniel Hallin (1992: 19), for example, has argued ‘there is a great deal that is disturbing in the mediated style of modern campaigning’ that relies upon soundbites.

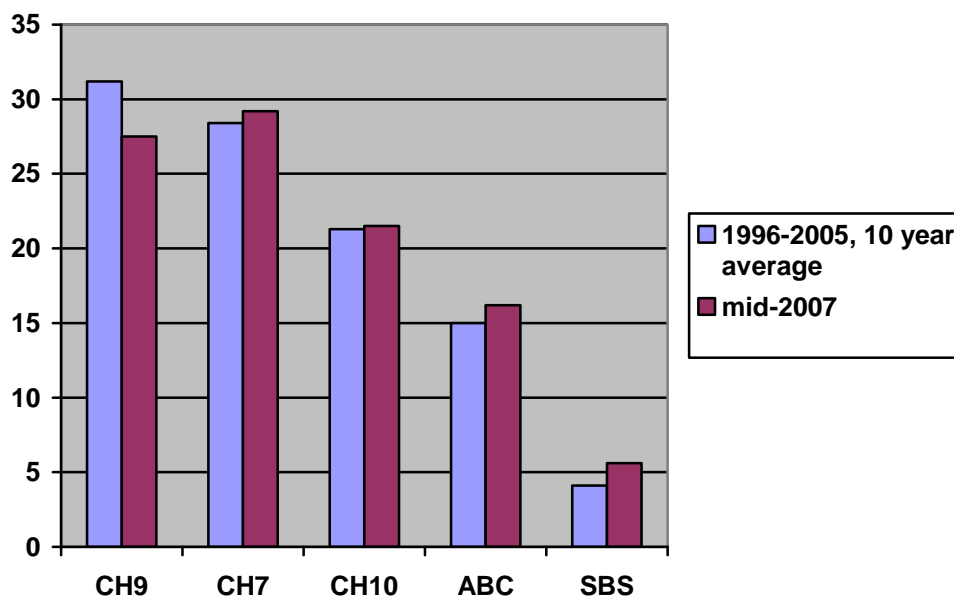
The soundbite in Australian news programs

In Australia, a lack of empirical research means that much less is known about the nature of the Australian soundbite compared to the British or American versions. But despite the lack of hard data, there are some widely-held perceptions about the soundbite including usual estimates of its length as 10, 15 or 30 seconds. For example, Liberal Senator Brett Mason (2008) argued that ‘Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard will turn up at a school; grab their ten second sound-bite and leave.’ There are suspicions that it ‘has done enormous harm by dumbing down political debate’ (Whelan 1998: 13) and ‘has led to a paucity of genuine intelligent debate...’ (‘Picturing the Australia of tomorrow’, 2006). In 2001, Kim Beazley, argued that

‘the very way in which modern politics communicates itself — often through the seven-second sound-bite seen on the nightly TV news — drives elector dissatisfaction in a world of fast information flows’ (Beazley 2001).

In Australia, the soundbite is particularly significant because television news is such a crucial medium for political communication. The reasons for TV’s continuing centrality have been well outlined by Denmark, Ward and Bean (2007: 89-90) who point out that the parties ‘focus their campaigns... on garnering favourable television news coverage’ because many ‘voters continue to rely upon free-to-air television as their main source of political news and information’ and up to 35% of voters ‘make their vote choice during the election campaign...’ A report by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (2001:275) found that free to air television ‘remains the most used source for news and current affairs’. Recent evidence suggests that the free-to-air TV audience is fragmenting and declining with an ACMA (2008: 195) report noting a decline of 5.6 per cent from 2001-2005. Nevertheless, TV remains immensely popular with nine out of ten Australians watching every week (ACMA 2008: 195). The commercial free-to-air stations are the most watched although there has been a small growth in public service broadcast viewing (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Australian TV broadcasters -audience share, 1996-2005 average compared to mid-2007



Source: Data taken from ACMA (2008:86)

Because such large numbers of Australians rely on TV for election news, the extent to which politicians appear on television and are able to communicate their policies and qualifications for office *in their own words*, makes the soundbite a very important indicator. The soundbite, in other words, is a way of measuring politicians’ ‘verbal access to the public sphere’ (Bucy and Grabe 2007: 652).

This is not to suggest that concerns about the soundbite do not apply to other news media. In print, the shrinking quote has been referred to as an ‘inkbite’ and on radio, a radio producer once estimated that the radio soundbite had shrunk from an average of 35 seconds in 1992 to 18 seconds just five years later (Green 1997). However, the soundbite is especially associated with television. TV news literally has little time for politics. TV news producer Peter Meakin has argued that TV news soundbites have halved in recent years as: ‘More and more emphasis is placed on compressing stories. We take the view that people want less information on a lot of stories rather than a lot of information on a few stories’ (Green 1997: 36). Shorter stories invariably create a demand for shorter soundbites.

Politicians know this and, along with their advisers, spend a good deal of time and effort honing their skills in delivering soundbites. Tim Fisher once gave a radio program a demonstration of how he could hone a message into precisely 15 and 5 second bites (ABC 1997). An Australian PR company that offers media training advises that ‘brevity is the key’ with some ‘media trainers us[ing] the 7-second rule’ and that: ‘With television, how you look and present comes first and what you say comes second. And don’t worry too much about the facts’ (Public Relations Australia 2004). A former adviser to Paul Keating, Bill Bowtell has argued that ‘the ability to distil a complex problem into a single line is “an important part of a politician’s armoury”’. Hired ‘campaign operatives, speech writers, media advisers, focus groups and market research companies ... spend a great deal of time on coming up with good lines’ for politicians. According to Bowtell, there are ‘tell tale signs’ of this when: ‘There’s a discipline in their use. So when you hear the [Coalition] talking about “union bosses”, you hear it consistently and purposefully throughout the week. You won’t find them talking about the head of the large unions — it will always be “union bosses”’ (Lee 2007: 35). However, repetition also carries risks. Then ALP leader Mark Latham was lampooned for repetition of the phrase ‘ladder of opportunity’ (and dubbed ‘Lord of the Rungs’ by some reporters) (Hudson 2004) and Kevin Rudd’s frequent use of the term ‘working families’ in 2007 was, as Stephanie Younane (2008) has noted, traced ‘to research conducted by [a] public affairs firm...’.

Methodology

Despite concern and conjecture, there is still little that we know empirically about the Australian soundbite with at least five key questions to address:

RQ1 – how long are Australian soundbites?

RQ2 – what makes a ‘good’ soundbite (that is, one that will be picked up on TV news)?

RQ3 – which politicians are particularly good at them and why? (that is, which have their soundbites picked up on TV news)?

RQ4 – what does the length and nature of the soundbite suggest about democratic discourse?

To address these questions, television news clips from the 2007 election were collected. The sample was recorded in Melbourne however, in order to examine whether it was appropriate to use one city as a sample, I performed a comparison of one day’s campaign clips (12 November) from Melbourne and Sydney. A copy of

SBS news for Sydney was not available but the filed reports⁴ of the four other stations were all identical between the affiliated channels in different states.

To obtain appropriate data from a large sample, I used a systematic sampling method (often known as the 'nth' method or 'constructed week') which uses a random number (often six) and then includes material from each consecutive day following that number (after checking to make sure the sample doesn't inadvertently coincide with any patterns on the sampling frame) (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, Murdock 2007: 48-9). Riffe et al (1993) in their study of models for sampling news content found this method of sampling to be more reliable than either random or consecutive day sampling. Riffe et al (1993: 138) also found that one constructed week was a very suitable measure of a whole year's media content and that precision increased only slightly by using two or three constructed weeks.

Following Riffe et al, I chose every 6th day in the six week campaign. The election was announced on 14 October 2007, so the six days were Friday 19th October, Thursday 25th October, Wednesday 31st October, Tuesday 6th November, Monday 12th November, Sunday 18th November and Saturday 24th November. This gave seven days for analysis however, the last date was polling day and clips from this date were removed from the final quantitative sample because that day was so unrepresentative.⁵ This therefore left six days of analysis – one for each week of the campaign except Saturday. The days chosen allowed a mix of routine campaigning days plus policy announcements and a party campaign launch (the Coalition's on 12 November).⁶

All free-to-air stations were included but not pay TV, and only primetime evening news clips were included as these news bulletins have particular significance for the TV channels in determining ratings success and remain the most watched timeslots (Bean 2005: 44). The unit of analysis was the individual news story. Therefore, 18 hours of TV evening news were recorded and checked for any election-related stories. This yielded 50 relevant news. Table 1 gives further details about the sample used in the study. It also shows something particularly interesting — the more popular a channel is, the less election news stories it has on its primetime news program. This already suggests something about the appeal of the short soundbite for media outlets, particularly the commercial media.

Table 1: Research design

Australian federal election, 2007	
Polling day: 24 Nov 2007	
Coding period: 14/10-24/11	
Selected sample (Melbourne) (every 6 th day minus polling day) = 19 Oct, 25 Oct, 31 Oct, 6 Nov, 12 Nov, 18 Nov	
	Market share of primetime (2007) (%)
Channel Seven 6pm news (6 items)	29.0
Channel Nine 6pm news (8 items)	26.9
Channel Ten 5pm news (11 items)	21.9
ABC 7pm news (12 items)	16.6
SBS 6.30pm news (13 items)	5.5
Total (6 days of 6 week campaign):	
50 stories = 108 minutes	

Source for TV ratings: Braithwaite 2007.

A coding sheet was created to measure soundbites in news stories. Soundbites were differentiated by actor into several groups including politician (sub-divided by party and by leader), host, reporter, other media, expert and public. The primary tool for determining their length was a stopwatch test and a frequency count to measure individual speech acts.⁷ Under the author's supervisions a team of five trained coders conducted the analysis. The team's interreliability was found to be above 0.80 on the relevant questions. While there is no universally accepted cut-off figure for interreliability, Ellis (1994 cited in Neuendorf 2002:91) states that 'correlation coefficients exceeding 0.75 to 0.80 indicate high reliability' (Macnamara undated). The quantitative results were then analysed using SPSS 16.0.

The Australian soundbite

On average, in each news story about the 2007 election, politicians spoke on four occasions for 6.99 seconds each time. Usually, two of these soundbites were from Labor and two from the Coalition and, in total, political soundbites took up 28 seconds of the news clip (Table 2). Kim Beazley's suggestion of a 'seven second' soundbite and the PR maxim of a 'seven second rule' is therefore extremely accurate. How does the Australian soundbite compare with those from overseas? Figures from Bucy and Grabe (2007: 663) and Hallin (1992) allow us to broadly compare Australian results with those from the US.

Table 2 compares the 7.73 second soundbite found for the 2004 US presidential election,⁸ with the Australian soundbite identified from the 2007 federal election. The table shows that, within a news clip that is virtually identical in length (2:09

minutes in Australia versus 2 minutes in the US), the Australian soundbite is shorter but more frequent. Australian TV news producers apparently like shorter soundbites but are willing to include twice as many of them and, overall, will devote more space to political soundbites (28 seconds compared to 18 seconds) than in an American news clip.⁹

Table 2: Comparison of Australian and American politician soundbites, 2004 and 2007 elections

	US (2004 election)	Aust (2007 election)
Average length of news story on election campaign	2 minutes	2.09 minutes
Average soundbite length	7.73 seconds	6.99 seconds
Average number of soundbites per story	2.33*	4.12
Average total composite time of soundbites per news story	18.01	28.24

Source: Bucy and Grabe (2007: 663)

* they used ‘candidate’ soundbites – we used politician soundbites – usually the same thing but sometimes a state premier might be included in our sample – may be why Aust total composite time is longer but doesn’t really explain significant differences ie . 4 to 2 and 28 seconds to 18.

In terms of party representation, Table 3 shows that 58 per cent of all soundbites in the sample were from the Coalition with 40.3 per cent for the ALP. One of the dates in the selected sample was the day of the Coalition’s election launch which meant that the evening news that night devoted greater time to the speeches made by John Howard and Peter Costello at the launch. But there is also a well-documented trend toward media outlets devoting more space to incumbents. The ABC’s (2007: 7) own analysis of its 2007 federal election reporting, which employed Media Monitors to perform a share-of-voice comparison of ABC programming, found a similar trend with 52.1% of the party share-of-voice occupied by the Coalition on TV compared to 39.6% to the ALP. As that report noted: ‘Unavoidably, Governments tend to get more time on air because they have a record to defend and (caretaker mode notwithstanding) will be called on to comment on domestic and international matters that arise during the campaign’ (ABC 2007: 5).

Table 3: Party comparisons of TV news soundbites and first preference votes, 2007

	ALP (N = 89)	Coalitio n (N = 119)	Greens (N = 2)	Family First (N = 0)	Democr ats (N = 1)
Total composite airtime for soundbites for the party (minutes and secs)	09:30	13:40	00:13	0	00:13
Average number of soundbites per news program	1.78	2.38	0.04	0	0.02
Average length of individual soundbites (secs)	6.40	6.89	6.50	0	13
Percent of all politician soundbites (%)	40.3	58.0	0.9	0	0.9
Percent of 1 st preference vote at 2007 election (%)	43.38	41.77	7.79	1.99	0.72

Note: N = the number of individual soundbites. The voting figures are for the HoR vote for 2007 election - <http://vtr.aec.gov.au/HouseStateFirstPrefsByParty-13745-NAT.htm>

Table 3 also shows how thoroughly the two major parties dominate the news space. Among minor parties, only the Greens and the Democrats received any soundbites. There was one soundbite of 13 seconds from the Democrats on SBS and two soundbites for the Greens (one on Channel Ten and one on SBS) totalling 13 seconds. It is, of course, difficult to determine precisely what might be expected in terms of space for minor party/independent speech during news programs however, first preference voting results from 2007 (in the final row of Table 3) are an indicator of the level of support for each party in the community and do tend to suggest that the Greens in particular were shortchanged and might well have expected to receive more coverage.

Of course, a soundbite is not the only measure of presence in a news program. It does not include, for example, the occasions when the minor parties were shown in images or were mentioned by the host or reporter. Nor is it a simple matter of comparing votes to soundbites. Nevertheless, Table 3 does emphasise the relative lack of time accorded for direct speech by anyone other than major party representatives and there are two other indicators which also suggest this. The ABC uses a formula to grant free time broadcasts which allocates space to minor parties based on 'their existing parliamentary representation, the extent to which they field candidates, and their support in opinion polls' (ABC 2007: 8 and 46). The ABC's allocation of airtime in 2007 saw the Greens awarded 12.5%, the Democrats 6% and Family First 6%.¹⁰ In the ABC's own news and current affairs programming, the

share-of-voice measure showed the Greens received 3.9%, the Democrats 1.6%, Family First 0.7% and Independent candidates 1.7% (ABC 2007: 7).

The thesis of a ‘presidentialisation’ of Australian politics — with an increased media focus on the party leaders — is something that ‘Television is widely considered to bear a good part of the responsibility for’ (Mughan 1995: 328). This thesis would suggest then that the party leaders would be quoted far more often than any other political actors. This was true particularly in the case of the ALP. Of all ALP soundbites, 72.7% were from Kevin Rudd. Rudd spoke in 29 news clips for just over seven minutes (an average of 14 seconds each story). For the Coalition, the results were less marked. Of all of the Coalition soundbites, 58.1% were from John Howard. Howard spoke in 31 news clips for just under eight minutes (an average of 15 seconds per story). This likely reflects the party’s campaign strategy of emphasising Peter Costello and the media’s interest in the leadership transition focus.

To this point, we have been averaging soundbites across five different news programs on different channels. However, the academic literature suggests that there are significant differences between news programs on different channels (Turner 1996). Clive Bean (2005: 53) has also demonstrated that the audiences of commercial and public broadcasters differ with the ABC having an audience that is ‘older, better educated, more “middle class” [and] politically interested...’. By comparison, the Channel 7 audience includes more people from ‘the lower socio economic strata’ (Bean 2005: 53) and Channel 10 has a younger audience (Braithwaite 2007; Green 2001).

A comparison between soundbites on the two public broadcasters and the three commercial channels (Table 4) shows that politicians speak more often on the public broadcasters and for longer — nearly 1 and a half seconds longer each soundbite — this is significant (20 per cent higher) with the average soundbite on a public broadcaster 7.65 seconds.

Table 4: Comparison of politician soundbites on commercial versus public broadcasters, 2007

	Soundbites (individual speech acts) N=202	Composite (total) speaking time for politicians (secs)	Average soundbite per speech act (secs)
Commercial channels (7, 9, 10)	92	570	6.19
Public broadcasters (ABC and SBS)	110	842	7.65

Another way of thinking about the contribution public broadcasters make to political discourse is to note that, of all the speech by politicians on news programs, 59.6% was on the two public broadcasters alone. Table 5 shows the total amount of space the public broadcasters gave to election news stories compared to the commercial

broadcasters. It reveals that the average story on the public broadcasters was nearly double the length.

Table 5: Total time devoted to election news stories, 2007

	Number of news stories (N = 50)	Average length of news story (mins and secs)
Channel 7	6	01:38
Channel 9	8	01:58
Channel 10	11	01:29
Commercial channels (7, 9, 10)	25	01:40
ABC	12	02:25
SBS	13	02:51
Public broadcasters (ABC and SBS)	25	02:38

Aside from major party dominance, presidentialism and the nature of public broadcasting, studying soundbites also gives us an opportunity to test hypotheses about ‘editorialising’ by the media. Esser et al (2001; 17) have found that journalists are increasingly ‘writ[ing] themselves into the story’. Describing trends in newspapers, but in a critique which has also been made of other media, Laurie Oakes has noted how ‘politicians [now] tend to be quoted only briefly. Most of what reaches readers is, for some reason, commentary by political journalists.’ (ABC 1999). Changing formats have also seen the host (or anchor) of news programs increasingly used to ‘build up audience recognition and loyalty’ (Kuhn 2007: 147). Reporters such as Oakes are also now well-known in their own right.

In this study, as Table 6 shows, in an average news story, the host spent about 16 seconds introducing the news story, the reporter then spoke five times during the story — for about 12 seconds each time. This took up over half the news story. Sometimes ‘other media figures’ — usually journalists interviewed as part of the story — were consulted in the story. As Table 6 suggests, editorialising is very apparent with media figures speaking for three times longer than the politicians they were reporting on.

Table 6: Media speech versus politician speech in news clips, 2007

	Soundbites (individual speech acts)	Composite (total) speaking time (minutes and secs)	Average soundbite (secs)	Average number of soundbites per story (N=50)
Host/anchor	56	14:54	15.9	1.1
Reporter	265	53:31	12.1	5.3
Other media figures	16	2:43	10.2	0.3
Total (all media)	337	71:13	12.7	6.7
Experts	46	6:50	8.9	0.9
Politicians	202	23:32	6.9	4.0

The use of experts in news bulletins to add commentary and opinion is a well-documented trend. In the US, Hallin (1992: 10) dates it particularly from the 1980s. It is also called the rise of ‘interpretive journalism’. Table 6 shows that ‘experts’ — including political insiders, people from polling organisations, university academics, businesspeople, union representatives and people from NGOs and interest groups — spoke in 15 news stories (30% of all stories) but, when these experts were consulted, they were accorded slightly longer soundbites than politicians. There were some significant differences in the use of experts on the public broadcasters versus commercial broadcasters. Along with allowing more space for politicians to speak, the public broadcasters fill their longer stories not with more reportage (the speaking time of reporters is broadly similar to the commercial broadcasters) but with longer introductions by the host and, when they appeared, much longer soundbites from experts and other media figures.

We now have a picture of the average TV news story on an election. The average story begins with a 16 second introduction from the host, the reporter then speaks five times (for over a minute in total), the clip also includes four soundbites (roughly two from each major party), these soundbites will be 6.99 seconds each adding up to a total of 28 seconds in which politicians are able to speak to citizens. This quantitative data tells us some important information about the structure of news stories and the length of soundbites, however, these results do not tell us anything about the qualitative features of soundbites. Which ones get aired and why? What features do they have in common?

Top soundbites in 2007

For a qualitative analysis of soundbites, I continued with the 6th day selection of dates but reincorporated the final 6th day of the sample (polling day, 24 November 2007) and added the election announcement date (14 October 2007). These two dates — the announcement and polling day — were removed from the quantitative analysis as they were unrepresentative of general election news stories during the campaign. However, as they do not impinge upon a qualitative analysis and are important in understanding the nature of the soundbite and news cycle, the

soundbites that began and ended the news coverage of the campaign were included in the secondary analysis.

To determine the top soundbites from these sampled days, every soundbite in every election-related story on all five primetime news programs was transcribed (this included not just politicians but any external actors quoted). The soundbites of each program were then cross-referenced to see which were repeated across programs. Those that were repeated the most often across different programs were judged to be the top soundbites of the day. While this sounds relatively straightforward, defining the individual soundbite did present a few methodological issues. For example, on 19 October, Rudd said one statement with two sentences at a press conference. All five news programs broadcast the first line as a soundbite, but only three programs included the second line and only one channel broadcast the complete second line. If you counted only the full soundbite (that is, sentence 1 plus the complete version of sentence 2) only one news program had that soundbite but if you counted the abbreviated version (just sentence 1), all 5 programs included it. Therefore, in this study, where longer and abbreviated versions of the same soundbite were broadcast, the abbreviated version was taken as the soundbite so that it was consistent across programs.

Table 7 shows the campaign began with two soundbites from a press conference that Howard had held a few hours earlier to announce the election. These two soundbites were extremely dominant — they were broadcast on all five channels and were usually shown first, as well as, in some cases, being paraphrased in the host's introduction. When all, or four out of five, news programs pick the same line out of the many lines they could choose from, it suggests that there is something intrinsically appealing to TV news about those particular phrases. Howard's entreaty for the electorate to 'love me or loathe me' and his differentiation between 'old', 'new' and 'right' leadership were both deliberate and appealing. The 'love me or loathe me' comment, for example, was one that he had been using since August 2007 — including on the *7:30 Report* (Koutsoukis 2007). Its appeal probably lay in both the use of alliteration as well as its tacit acknowledgment of a popularity problem.

Table 7: The Top Two Soundbites from TV primetime evening news on selected dates, 2007 election

Date	Top soundbites	No of news programs
14 October 2007	Howard: This country does not need new leadership. It does not need old leadership. It needs the right leadership.	5/5
	Howard: Love me or loathe me, the Australian people know where I stand.	5/5
19 October 2007	Rudd: This is the toolbox of the 21 st century. [holding up laptop]	5/5
	Rudd: We want to make sure that every Australian kid in the future has an opportunity to get themselves wired.	3/5
25 October 2007	David Vowes [to Rudd at senior citizens' club]: You're an ignorant bastard.	5/5
	Joe McDonald [unionist]: John's gone. You know that. I'll be back.	4/5
31 October 2007	Tony Abbott: I really do apologise	5/5
	Nicola Roxon: I could do an impersonation if it helps. [laughter from crowd] My office tells me it's quite good. [more laughter]	4/5
6 November 2007	Howard: I think he should have followed the tried and true path of me-too-ism and backed my horse Marla [laughter]	2/5
	Rudd: The absolute political cynicism of the Liberal Party on interest rates is breathtaking.	2/5
12 November 2007	Costello: They'd have you believe there were never Reds under the beds just economic conservatives. [laughter]	4/5
	Howard: I want to complete the transition of this nation from a welfare state to an opportunity society.	3/5
18 November 2007	Howard: This is a Rudd version of banana republicanism.	4/5

	(3 equal 2 nd place – all 2/5) Howard: He’s sort of relaxing in anticipation. Costello: I don’t think I’ve seen anything as silly as that said by a would-be economic manager for a long time. Rudd: This is a call to arms for the nation, a call to arms for the world to act now on climate change before it’s too late.	2/5
24 November 2007	Howard: [when voting] Can I change my mind? [chuckles]	4/5
	Rudd: I’m pretty confident that I have the family’s votes. [laughs and laughter from wife].	4/5

Note: When more than one soundbite was included in all 5 news programs, the soundbite that was broadcast first in the news bulletin in a majority of programs was listed as the top soundbite.

If Howard’s soundbites dominated the 14 October, Rudd’s description of a laptop as ‘the toolbox of the 21st century’ and his promise to get ‘every Australian kid... wired’ were similarly dominant on 19 October. The visual prop of Rudd holding aloft the laptop added to the appeal for TV news. As with many of the soundbites, the visual dimensions were important including the settings, backdrops and use of ‘nodders’ (supporters standing close by the leaders nodding in agreement as they talk).

On only a couple of occasions were politicians upstaged by other actors. On 25 October, the top two soundbites were from, respectively, a senior citizen and a union official. The senior citizen, David Vowes, was at a Tasmanian senior citizens’ club and, after Rudd was ushered in during the choir’s performance, accused him of interrupting and being ‘an ignorant bastard’. As the moment was unscripted, confrontational and dramatic it was judged particularly newsworthy and was included on every news program that evening. Interestingly, only one channel, Channel Ten, contextualised the man’s anger in partisan terms by describing Mr Vowes as a ‘Liberal voter’. In the second case, Joe McDonald, a Perth building union official (who that day had the first of six trespass charges against him dropped), used a soundbite with a threatening undertone (comments described by Rudd as ‘highly inflammatory, incendiary, and completely unacceptable’ (ABC online 2007)) which was included in four out of five programs and later used in negative Liberal Party advertising. As Manning (2001: 63) has noted, reporters find stories particularly attractive if they are ‘dramatic, immediate, sudden events, stories with human interest angles and stories that can be constructed around personalities...’

There is usually an assumption that garnering the top soundbite of the evening news is a much-desired publicity coup. However, demonstrating that it is not always so was Tony Abbott who, on 31 October, gave two apologies — one for insulting dying asbestos victim Bernie Banton (after a misunderstanding over a meeting at Abbott's office) and the second for being half an hour late to a televised health debate with his opposition counterpart, Nicola Roxon. That day, Abbott's apologies featured on every news program and the events were framed in extremely similar ways. For example, Channel Ten news: 'it was a sorry day for Tony Abbott. The Health Minister was forced to apologise twice.' Channel Seven news: 'Today [Abbott] issued an embarrassing apology. And another after arriving late to today's debate...'. On the ABC, the news host said: 'Well sorry was the hardest and most used word for Tony Abbott today. The Health Minister had to apologise first to asbestosis victim Bernie Banton and then for turning up late to a television debate...' The story had a rhythm and narrative — two apologies, one day = a bad day for Abbott — that was appealing in a news frame.

More broadly though, it was striking the degree to which news clips on different channels were similar with many of the same visuals, soundbites and interpretations applied and often in the same order. For example, on 19 October, all stories began with soundbites from Rudd about the new ALP tax policy; they then had a soundbite or two from Costello to rebut the policy, and most ended with footage of Howard being ambushed on his morning walk by comedians from the ABC's *Chaser* program wearing rabbit suits. This tends to confirm what a news producer argued in an ABA (2001) report; that: 'You'd have to say that all of the TV news services are pretty much the same, to the point where you can switch from channel to channel and they'll be following exactly the same rundown and story selection on three or four channels at once...'

An exception to this homogeneity was the 6 November (the day of the Melbourne Cup) when the news broadcasts showed a higher than normal degree of variation with no stand-out soundbite. This seemed to stem from the unusual nature of the day (a public holiday in Victoria) and news focus on the actual horserace rather than the political one.

As Bucy and Grabe (2007) point out, the 'image bite' is crucial to TV news. For example, on Melbourne Cup day, footage of Rudd watching the race and winning (his arms raised, smiling, people around congratulating him) may have been worth more in terms of positive representations (and be more memorable to viewers) than any soundbite he could have given. Similarly, the image bite of Howard kissing his baby grandson Angus at the Coalition campaign launch on 12 November was shown on all news programs and was a key image that was repeated on polling day (when he again kissed Angus before going inside to vote in a shot that also made all news programs).

The context of how the soundbites were presented was also important including how the reporter introduced the soundbite, the order in which they were shown, the visuals accompanying them (for example, an audience laughing in response) as well as the reporter's remarks after the soundbite and how they contextualised it. The reporters frequently used a 'metacoverage' frame (Esser et al 2001), pointing out to

the viewer the politician's attempts at media manipulation or the media's own prominence in the campaign. For example, on Channel 10 on 12 November, the reporter described Howard kissing his grandson as: 'The money shot' and a graphic describing the spending promises made in the Coalition launch was headed with the cynical heading: 'Vote Buying Spree'. Costello's line about 'reds under the bed' was described in several different programs as 'the line of the day'. This is, as Todd Gitlin (1990) has pointed out, the dominant tone of modern journalistic reporting 'a kind of knowing "postmodern" cynicism that debunks the image and the image-maker, yet in the end seems to accept them as the only reality we have left' (Hallin 1992: 23).

Contrasted with this tone, was the desire to insert some humour. Several of the top soundbites relied upon humour. Nicola Roxon's offer to impersonate Tony Abbott when he was late to the debate on 31 October, followed by reporters in the room laughing, made all news programs except Channel Seven. Costello's joke about 'reds under the beds' at the campaign launch saw him overshadow his leader that evening with all programs except Channel Nine including the soundbite. Somewhat fittingly, the campaign ended with two contrasting soundbites that were also attempts at humour. Rudd's joke after voting that he was 'pretty confident' he had his family's votes was self-deprecatingly modest but said in an upbeat manner and followed by hearty laughter from Rudd and his family. By contrast, Howard's attempt at humour while he was putting his vote in the ballot box alone ('Can I change my mind?') was followed by a nervous chuckle and almost a grimace. It was so self-deprecating as to suggest apprehension and was unlike Howard's usual political professionalism (perhaps reflecting his knowledge of the likely result).

Political campaign workers know that humour is very appealing to TV news — especially commercial news which needs to be entertaining in order to maximise audience and advertising revenue. Indeed, so crucial a part of American politics is the trend toward humorous soundbites, there are now specialist political 'humor writers' including Mark Katz, a former speech writer and advertising agent who worked for Bill Clinton and Al Gore and has set up his own 'Sound Bite Institute' where he can be hired to translate 'strategic messages into concise, compelling, quotable sentences and even perform 'Humor crisis communications' (SBI 2008). Both polling day soundbites are interesting given that self-deprecation is described as 'usually the safest and most effective political joke technique' (Lawrence 2007).

In terms of framing contexts, it was apparent that soundbites were frequently situated within a horserace frame amidst discussion of who was in front or behind in the polls or, alternately, were framed around an analysis of the parties' campaign strategies. Sometimes both occurred at once. For example, an SBS News reporter on 19 October stated after a soundbite that: 'Kevin Rudd needed his policy out before Sunday night's leaders' debate which he hopes will give him some momentum. He's still well ahead but the momentum's starting to run the other way. Two new opinion polls bear the whiff of Coalition recovery'.

There is an interesting question underlying qualitative analysis of soundbites — who is 'best' at them? On this point, it is important to bear in mind that leaders can change their delivery style over time but also that evaluations of them can vary markedly. For example, in 1997, Kim Beazley was nominated by the head of news

and current affairs at Channel Seven, Peter Meakin, as “‘quite good” at speaking concisely’ (Green 1997: 36), But by 2000, he was chastised for the very opposite — for being ‘tedious, rambling, long-winded, unnecessarily verbose...’ (Mitchell 2000: 17).

Rather than making general observations about rhetorical style, analysing news content is one way of measuring soundbite success as the extent to which a politician meets their objective of having their words broadcast on television (notwithstanding cases such as Tony Abbott’s).

In this sense, what is striking is the frequency with which news programs selected the same soundbites from Howard. We know from the quantitative analysis that only 58.1% of Coalition soundbites were from Howard. However, when Howard did speak, different news programs frequently selected the same soundbites. For example, on 14 October, the day he called the election, there were 15 soundbites from Howard broadcast on the three commercial TV news programs and, of these, only four were unique to a particular program. That is, 11 out of 15 were repeated across the programs indicating that there was a high degree of agreement amongst the producers as to which of Howard’s statements were newsworthy. By comparison, on the same day, 12 of Rudd’s soundbites made it on to the three commercial programs, but only one of his soundbites was repeated across programs. This suggests that only one of Rudd’s soundbites clearly stood out as TV-worthy compared to 11 for Howard.

An ability to deliver media-friendly, made-for-TV soundbites might perhaps be expected of a political veteran with extensive media training and decades of experience. It is apparent though that politicians use a number of strategies. Most obviously, politicians maximise their chances of having a preferred phrase picked up not only by training, practice and pre-scripting comments but also by repetition. For example, on 19 October, Costello said the same thing about the ALP copying the Coalition’s tax policy at least three different ways to maximise his chances of it becoming a soundbite:

1. Costello: ‘It is entirely clear now that he has spent in fact the last four days since we announced our tax plan, copying. 91.5% of it is the same’ (used by Ch10 and Ch7).
2. Costello: ‘If he had brought his exam paper in after copying 91.5% of the answers from the student sitting next to him, he would have got an ‘F’ for ‘fail’ (Ch9).
3. Costello: ‘Mr Rudd and Mr Swan do not understand the Australian economy. That is entirely clear from the fact that they’ve spent four days copying 91.5% of our tax plan’ (SBS).

In fact, the transcript of Costello’s press conference shows that he mentioned the 91.5% statistic eleven times that day (Costello 2007). Although the ABC didn’t broadcast any of Costello’s soundbites, the host did introduce the story by incorporating his statistic into the opening: ‘Kevin Rudd has delivered Labor’s tax policy, matching more than 90% of the government’s package...’ (ABC). Another measure of success then is not just whether a particular soundbite is broadcast but whether the politician’s idea is paraphrased or picked up in the reporting.

Conclusion: A soundbite culture?

Politicians get very little opportunity on prime time news to put their case directly, in their own words, to voters. Watching TV news, Australians almost never have the chance to hear a candidate speak for more than 15 seconds. Even on the 12 November, the day of the Coalition's campaign launch, John Howard delivered a speech for 42 minutes but that night on the evening news, voters heard only 10.4 seconds of it. On average, politicians soundbites are only 6.99 seconds long (usually two for each major party). This is not much time to build an argument, explain policy or provide information to voters. It is however, significantly more time than a minor party politician will receive.

Journalists are increasingly important brokers of meaning in political coverage — they appear more regularly than politicians and more than half of each news segment is filled with their context, comments and interpretations. As Tony Blair (2007) argued in his famous speech on the media '...the new technique is commentary on the news being as, if not more important than the news itself... there will often be as much interpretation of what a politician is saying as there is coverage of them actually saying it.'

The study presented in this paper was based upon a sample of news clips from the most recent election campaign. There is still more work to be done on understanding longitudinal trends. A much larger study of news items (including historical material) will help build a more complete picture. For now we can conclude however, that Australian TV news does indeed centre on snappy one-liners and symbolic visuals with the most successful soundbites being short, dramatic, combative or humorous. The selection of soundbites and the way they were framed was remarkably similar across news programs. In a broader context, Australia has the highest percentage of television revenue coming from advertising (Tiffen and Gittins 2004: 184) and, as we have noted, the most popular news programs have the least amount of time devoted to politicians speaking. The demand for news to be entertaining, with its format driven by commercial values and ratings has encouraged short, infrequent soundbites. Hallin (1992: 21) has also demonstrated that there is a 'strong connection between horse-race coverage and sound-bite journalism'. Consumer demand seems to be a driving force behind both (Iyengar et al (2004: 157) and TV journalists now consider soundbites 'an eternity if they hit 15 or 20 seconds' (ABC 1997).

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² Also sometimes called 'sound grabs' in Australia.

³ Note – approximate times only given as the report only provided data in a graph rather than in numerals (Deacon et al 2005: 14).

⁴ That is, the report not including the host's introduction or any interviews between host and reporter at the end.

⁵ As might be expected, there were more clips than for any other day during the campaign and far more time devoted to the election than on a normal campaign day as the stations sought to wrap-up their coverage.

⁶ Included in the sample were all news stories with a national focus – that is, I excluded any that focused on a profile of an individual seat (eg. on 19 Oct, Channel 9 in Melb did story on seat of Vic seat of Deakin – these were highlighted as 'a special report' and SBS in Melb had profile on Vic seat of Ballarat).

⁷ Individual speech acts were the number of times an actor spoke without interruption (for example, the politician might speak, then the reporter comes on and speaks, then the politician speaks again – this was measured as two individual speech acts/soundbites).

⁸ Local TV news may have longer soundbites with one study finding they were 12 seconds on average (The LearCentre Local News Archive, 'Local TV news coverage of the 2002 General Election', <http://www.fcc.gov/ownership/materials/already-released/localtv.pdf>)

⁹ In 7 stories, no politician spoke so averages were calculated (following Hallin 1992) on basis of actual soundbites. In this study, there were 202 politician soundbites in total.

¹⁰ For ABC free broadcast time during the 2007 election, the Greens received 6 minutes of ABC time, the Democrats 3 minutes and Family First 3 minutes compared to 18 minutes each for both the ALP and Coalition (ABC 2007: 46).