

Local media and local elections: voters' preferred information sources

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Abstract

The high turnover rate of councillors across Queensland at the 2004 local government elections has been attributed in part to the volatility caused by greater media and public interest in council issues. Candidates in all levels of government have always tried to reach voters in order to win elections. Many see the media as the most effective way to get voters' attention. Voters, too, have used media information about candidates to help them decide their vote. However, this study – which examines voters' use of local media in the lead-up to a local government election – suggests voters across all age groups are using a variety of information sources when deciding for whom to vote. The findings may signal a change in voters' attitudes to mainstream media information and alternative sources of information about candidates, challenging the news media's traditional role as gatekeepers over what the public knows.

Introduction

Candidates in all levels of government have always tried to reach voters in order to win elections (Cornfield et al, 2003). In reviewing the role of the media in reporting election campaigns, the then chairman of the Australian Press Council, Professor Dennis Pearce, observed:

We have gone past the day when election campaigns were conducted solely in public halls, from the back of trains and by personal contacts in meeting places. The use of the media is now the principal means by which candidates try to convey their message to the voters. (1999, p. 1)

Just as candidates may see the media as the most effective way to get voters' attention, voters, too, have used media information about candidates to help them decide their vote. Tiffen (quoted in Haswell, 1999, pp. 165-166) argues

that the media are “the central arena of election campaigning”, a role that is magnified during election campaigns when candidates, journalists and media organisations accelerate their political coverage efforts. At times of state and federal elections, media entourages follow political leaders on “meet the people tours” to film, write about and photograph these specially staged media events (Haswell, 1999). At the level of local government, writing on media and politics indicates that the news media can:

influence voter choice ... set the agenda by telling people what to think about, frame the news by emphasising what is important, prime the news to affect the criteria used by the public to judge political leaders, endorse mayoral aspirants and councillors via editorial comment and “backing”, campaign on local issues, and keep local ... [councillors] accountable (McGregor, Fountaine & Comrie, 2002, pp. 99-100).

For the majority of voters who will never have personal experience of the “power, politics and personalities” of City Hall, active use of the news media is “an acceptable substitution for first-hand knowledge”. Thus, peoples’ perceptions of council decisionmakers, local government candidates and elections are shaped by the news media (2002, p. 98).

In 2004, the high turnover rate in councillors across Queensland at the March local government elections was attributed in part to the demands of the job, and to the volatility caused by greater media and public interest in council issues. Of the 744 sitting councillors who stood for re-election, one fifth, or 142, lost their seats. New candidates won 393 seats, an increase of 8 per cent in the election of new councillors compared with the 2000 election (LGAQ, 2004)¹.

Should the news media be credited as co-authors of these outcomes? Does the reporting of elections represent “the point at which the press probably has its greatest impact on the democratic process” (Pearce, 1999, p. 6)? Conley and Lamble say the view that media have political influence is supported by a poll of United States voters showing that regular newspaper readers are far more likely to vote than those who rely on television (Conley & Lamble, 2006, p. 26). But free-to-air television is the first source of national political information and analysis for most people (41 per cent) in Australia, according to a poll conducted in 2005 by Roy Morgan Research. Newspapers were the next most popular source of political information (27 per cent), followed by radio (13 per cent) and the internet (9 per cent) (Morgan, 2005).

Media and democracy

Writers have long debated the proposition that the availability of a diversity of ideas (functional democracy) depends on diversity of media ownership

(see, for example, Bowman, 1988; Cunningham & Turner, 1997; Schultz, 1994). There is the view that the media, particularly because of their public service role, should be an industry of competition among rival groups for audiences and the subsequent appearance of divergent points of view (Fox, 1997). Similar arguments resurfaced earlier this year with the release of the Federal Government's proposed changes to Australia's media ownership laws. Australia already has one of the most concentrated media landscapes in the world. Four major media groups own 80 per cent of newspaper titles (MEAA, 2005). Four companies (News Corporation, John Fairfax Holdings, Rural Press and APN News and Media) control 29 of 36 regional daily newspapers. All but four of 39 non-metropolitan television licences are in the hands of three networks (WIN Corporation, Southern Cross Broadcasting and Prime Television). In mid-2005, three networks (Macquarie Regional Radioworks, Broadcast Operations and Grant Broadcasters) owned 132 of 215 regional commercial radio licences (Communications Law Centre, 2006b).

In regional areas, the proposed overhaul of media laws would allow a minimum of four commercial media groups to operate in a single market. Cross-media restrictions which prevent an operator from owning television, radio and newspaper interests in the one market would go, under changes outlined by Communications Minister Helen Coonan (Murphy, 2006). But the Nationals' Paul Neville, who chairs the Coalition's backbench committee on communications, says his party will "focus on ensuring 'competition, diversity and localism'" to protect regional services. He wants "separate editorial policies in regional areas for various media organisations' to stop a television station in, for instance, Bundaberg from simply lifting the editorial content of a local newspaper or radio station" (Lewis, 2006, p. 1). Senator Coonan argues the changes could create more diversity. "What I think we have to recognise is that the whole landscape for media has changed – people now get news and diversity from hundreds, if not thousands, of unmediated additional sources," she said (2006, p. 1).

Speculation about media buy-outs (and concentration of ownership) under complete deregulation predicts regional media assets will be targeted first – from within and outside (McCullough & Marx, 2006). Regional media power players have already put up their hands for more of the pie. WIN Television (Nine Network's regional affiliate) "has previously said it wants to grow through acquisition", while Southern Cross Broadcasting (owner of the Ten Network's regional affiliates) "is considered a prime takeover target as it has no majority owner" (Schulze, 2006, p. 1).

Rural Press has 70 per cent of the market in NSW and about 40 per cent in Victoria. Chief executive Brian McCarthy says the company "would have an open mind about potential mergers or takeovers" (Shoebridge, 2006, p. 50). As Australasia's largest radio broadcaster, Tony O'Reilly's APN News and Media's assets include the Mix-FM radio network. APN also publishes 23 daily

and more than 100 non-daily newspapers across Australia and New Zealand, with about 60 titles in regional Queensland and northern New South Wales. Chief executive Brendan Hopkins told ABC News: “We’d love to expand further in radio and we’d love to expand further in regional press if that’s appropriate.” (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005, p. 1)

Another regional operator, the McPherson Media group (publisher of 13 newspapers in Victoria and southern NSW), sees changes to media ownership laws as a way to expand into electronic media. According to joint managing director Ross McPherson: “Digital television offers a huge opportunity in reclaiming some diversity of news, local debate and discussion.” (Lawson, 2005, p. 1)

Aggregation in the late 1980s forced the closure of many television newsrooms in regional areas. There are still concerns that local content levels remain inadequate (2005). Research commissioned by the former Australian Broadcasting Authority found “a steep decline in the capacity [of local media] to cover regional news and current affairs due to the disbandment of local news teams and the greater reliance on centralised news sources” (Brand & Pearson, 2001, pp. 270-271). For example, in the city of Toowoomba in southern inland Queensland, since 1998 “local news” on one commercial radio station has emanated from a newsroom two hours away by road at the Gold Coast. Recent research by the Communications Law Centre also points to very few sources of local news in regional centres (those studied were Wollongong, Townsville, Launceston and Toowoomba) and residents “angry at the poor quality and lack of coverage of major events” (Communications Law Centre, 2006a, p. 1). The centre’s report finds fault with Senator Coonan’s “four-to-a-market” diversity test as a safeguard against further consolidation of regional media if the cross-media rules are removed:

[The] diversity test has no way of distinguishing between a low-rating radio station with little local news and the local newspaper. The Minister’s test would allow significant consolidation in all four locations studied. ... [It] simply counts the number of players in the market, [and] cannot judge which media sources are valued by people in regional areas. Some mergers ... could result in one uniform view on local events. (2006a, pp. 1-2)

In the context of renewed debate about media ownership and diversity of opinion, divergent views about the media’s role in the political process, and concerns about local content in regional media, this paper explores the connection between local news media and their communities. It examines the extent to which voters in the Toowoomba City Council local authority area used local media as information sources during a local election campaign. The findings will be compared with those of Ester and McAllister (2001), who surveyed voters in two Central Queensland samples – in the city of Rockhampton and the

rest of the region². Their study of voter habits suggested that at times of local government elections “a substantial number of voters use strategies to ... avoid the [mainstream] media”, preferring instead “non-mainstream media sources and ... informal information networks to inform their votes” (2001, p. 29).

Toowoomba’s local media and council candidates

Toowoomba’s 93,000 residents have access to local print and broadcast media which exhibit varying degrees of commitment to local news coverage. They include: *The Chronicle*, published Monday to Saturday and owned by APN News and Media; three commercial television stations but only one, WIN Television, that broadcasts half an hour of regional news Monday to Friday; three commercial AM band radio stations (the most popular is 4GR, owned by Macquarie Bank, while 4AK and 4WK are controlled by Broadcast Operations); regional ABC radio; FM commercial radio (CFM, the most popular, is owned by Macquarie Bank) and community radio stations.

Council candidates in Toowoomba were reported to have spent between \$4000 and \$20,000 to get their names before the voters (Searle, 2004, p. 3). There were 33 contenders for eight councillor positions representing the whole city and three mayoral candidates. Several candidates had minimal coverage in the local news media; many promoted themselves. Among the more novel approaches was a “rap” advertisement from a sitting councillor, broadcast on CFM, which targets 18-to-39-year-olds. The candidate was re-elected. Her advertisement won a Commercial Radio Queensland “Goldie Award” for the best station-created commercial in a non-metropolitan area. Between news media coverage and advertising campaigns in various media, council candidates must have thought there was a receptive audience for their messages.

Methodology

The technique of stratified random sampling, which has the potential for increasing representativeness (Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1997), was used to select a sample from the 59,894 voters enrolled for the 2004 local government election and living in the Toowoomba City Council local government area (LGAQ, 2004). The Toowoomba voter population was divided into subpopulations (strata), according to the total number of votes registered at each of the 25 polling booths in 15 suburbs in March 2004 (Toowoomba City Council, 2004), and random samples were drawn from each of these strata. Postal, pre-poll, mobile booths and visitor votes were not included in the tally. Elements (voters) were drawn from each stratum (suburb) on a proportional basis to achieve a stratified random sample of 3000 Toowoomba voters. For example, where the total number of votes recorded in a suburb represented 19 per cent of all votes, the sample of 3000 included 570 individuals from this stratum (suburb).

The method for gathering data was a self-administered mail survey, distributed to households by letterbox drops on June 22, 2005, for reply-paid return within two months. It consisted of an introductory letter and a questionnaire. One question sought to canvass voters' preferred information sources in the lead up to the March 2004 local government election. Choices listed were: local television, local newspaper, local radio or internet (that is, local mainstream media); "other sources" (that is, brochures, letterbox drops or leaflets; how-to-vote cards; acquaintances and word-of-mouth; direct contact with candidate(s); and none of the above (that is, neither mainstream media nor "other sources").

Respondents who nominated "other sources" as their main source of information were asked to indicate which source they most used for information (that is, brochures, letterbox drops or leaflets; how-to-vote cards; acquaintances and word-of-mouth; or direct contact with candidate(s)). A further question asked voters to elaborate on their use of local mainstream media by indicating how often (that is, "regularly" through to "never"), they used talkback radio, radio news, the internet, television news and the newspaper to learn something about the candidates and the election. Two demographic questions about the respondents' gender and age were included to allow analysis of differences among respondents.

After a reminder letter was sent in July, 512 completed questionnaires were returned by the cut-off date, yielding a response rate of 17 per cent. Response rates for mail surveys are traditionally among the lowest, as researchers have little control in this type of survey research (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). We argue that a 17 per cent response rate does not compromise the validity of our findings or the strength of inferences that are limited to the population who responded to the survey questionnaire. This paper reports only on the preferences of the survey respondents for informing their vote and does not claim to represent the Toowoomba voter population.

Results – voters' questions

Across the sample, the local newspaper was the most used source for information about the Toowoomba City Council election, as Table 1 shows. This finding is in line with Ester and McAllister's (2001) survey of Central Queensland voters, in which the majority of respondents nominated the newspaper as the most-used medium for information about local elections. However, 32 per cent of voters in our sample bypassed the remaining traditional media and turned to "other sources" for information about the Toowoomba City Council poll. In contrast, Central Queensland voters elevated television (22 per cent) to second place. Between them, local television and radio were most-used by less than 20 per cent of respondents, while the internet barely registered as a principal information source (0.4 per cent).

Table 1: Local sources of “most information” about the Toowoomba City Council election

Toowoomba			CQ study#	
Media	Frequency	Percentage		Percentage
Television	51	10.6		21.5
Newspaper	222	45.9		42.8
Radio	39	8.1		7.3
Internet	2	0.4		n/a
Other sources	155	32.1		14.9
None of the above	14	2.9	Don't use media	13.5
Total	483*	100		100

Ester and McAllister's (2001) sample totalled 1109 Central Queensland voters.

* Of 512 Toowoomba respondents, 29 nominated more than one source for most of their information. These responses were not counted.

Use of alternative media

More than two-thirds of respondents who elaborated on their use of “other sources” turned to brochures, letterbox drops or leaflets to gain information about the Toowoomba election, as shown in Table 2. Acquaintances and word-of-mouth were next. Little separated direct contact with candidates and the use of how-to-vote cards as sources of information. Compared with Ester and McAllister's findings, our respondents were more likely to use how-to-vote cards and less likely to seek direct contact with the candidate(s) to inform their vote.

Table 2: Use of “other sources” of information about the Toowoomba City Council election campaign

Toowoomba			CQ study#	
Other sources	Freq.	%	Other sources	%
Brochures, letterbox drops or leaflets	100	69.4	Brochures, pamphlets, letterbox drops and leaflets	64.5
How-to-vote cards	8	5.6	How-to-vote cards	1.7
Acquaintances and word-of-mouth	29	20.1	Local networks and word-of-mouth	19.8
Direct contact with candidate(s)	7	4.9	Contact with candidate	14.0
			Electronic	0.0
Total	144*	100		100

Gender, age and media use

Statistical analysis shows no significant preference by gender for “other sources” of information about the Toowoomba election³. One third of all female respondents (107) used “other sources”, compared with 25 per cent of all male respondents (46). Little separates men and women in the proportion of respondents who did not use mainstream or alternative media for information (six, or 3 per cent, of all males, and eight, or 2.5 per cent, of all females).

There was no significant difference by age in the use of mainstream media for election information⁴. Two-thirds (68 per cent) of all respondents aged 45 years and above used mainstream media to inform their vote, compared with 60 per cent of those aged 44 years or under. Age was not a significant indicator with regard to the use of “other sources” for election information⁵. Just over 29 per cent of all respondents aged 45 and above preferred non-mainstream media for their election information, compared with 37 per cent of respondents aged 44 years and below.

Ester and McAllister found an “unexpectedly high” proportion of Central Queensland women used other sources of information such as word of mouth or direct contact with candidates to inform their vote (2001, p. 35). They also reported that age was not a significant indicator of mainstream media use. However, more than 55 per cent of Central Queensland male respondents did not use the media at all for local elections. In contrast, in Toowoomba, 3 per cent of men did not use any media, and male respondents were more likely than females to use mainstream sources of information (70 per cent of males compared with 62 per cent of females).

In line with their media use, Toowoomba respondents indicated a clear preference for the local newspaper, with 47 per cent saying it was the source they used “regularly” to learn something about the election and the candidates⁶. Then followed television news (24 per cent), radio news (14 per cent), radio talkback (11 per cent) and the internet (2 per cent). Forty-three per cent of respondents said they “sometimes” used television news to learn about the election and candidates, compared with 35 per cent for radio news. An overwhelming majority of respondents (341, or 87 per cent) said they “never” used the internet, and 41 per cent of respondents said they “never” used radio talkback for information.

Statistical analysis shows no significant preference by gender for use of the local newspaper to inform voters’ decisionmaking⁷. Just over 45 per cent of women (139 respondents) and 49 per cent of men (84 respondents) “regularly” used the local newspaper to learn something about the election and the candidates. Women (25 per cent) were more regular users of television news than were men (20 per cent).

As noted, voters in our sample used a variety of information sources when

deciding who to support at a local government election. They tended to rely most on the local newspaper, *The Chronicle*, and sources outside the mainstream media, as well as television, radio and the internet. The narrow margin between *The Chronicle* and “other sources” of information could reflect a number of factors. The paper’s circulation fell by 1126, to 24,972, between June 2003 and December 2004 (Australian Press Council, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2006). Reader numbers continue to slide (Kirkpatrick, 2006), in turn raising questions about the strong link that is supposed to exist between Australian regional newspapers and the communities they serve (Communications Law Centre, 2006b; Killiby, 1994). In 2004, in a bid to stem the decline in circulation and reader disengagement with its newspapers, including *The Chronicle*, APN News and Media committed to an editorial training program including the “Readers First” project. Ewart (2005) says the project focuses on content and journalistic culture, and has three aims: “To increase circulation and advertising revenue; to make APN newspapers more responsive to and reflective of readers; and to change the way APN journalists think about and do their jobs.” (2005, p. 3)

Another explanation for the relegation of Toowoomba’s mainstream media as information sources for voters could be a lack of public engagement with either local council candidates or local issues. Research in the US in the 1990s found that rather than being apathetic about public affairs, people were alienated because they felt “pushed out” of the political process by powerful special interests – including the news media (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 2003). The voters we sampled may be sceptical about the relationship between local mainstream media and candidates. The media are too close to politicians, according to 56 per cent of respondents to a national poll; and only 18 per cent of Australians believe the media do a good job of covering elections without bias (Morgan, 2005).

Our respondents have different attitudes towards information sources based on their age. For more than one-third (38 per cent) of voters aged 18 to 24, “other sources” (including brochures, letter box drops, leaflets, how-to-vote cards, acquaintances and direct contact with candidates) provide the most information. “Other sources” tie with the local newspaper as the information source most used by voters aged 25 to 34. All other demographic groups turn most frequently to the local newspaper ahead of alternative media or other mainstream news sources such as television and radio. As age increases, use of television decreases. The reverse is the case for radio, with its heaviest users in the 65 and over demographic.

The internet is the first choice for political news and analysis for 9 per cent of Australians (Morgan, 2005). Our findings suggested it was not a tool for engaging the voters in our study. Both men and women avoided it, with 83 per cent of men and 88 per cent of women saying they “never” used the internet to learn about the election and the candidates. Among the few respondents who

“regularly” used the internet, there is a clear and unexpected preference from those aged 35 and above (77.8 per cent). Young people (18 to 24 years) accounted for just a fifth of regular users. Given the current take-up of broadband, at a reported rate of 2000 customers a day (Lehmann & Lewis, 2006), more voters may use the internet for local election news in 2008.

Candidates can reach our sampled voters across all demographics using one main alternative to mainstream media. Perhaps this result reflects declining public interest in mainstream media election coverage. Little difference exists between genders in our sampled voters in their first and second non-mainstream media preferences.

Brochures are the most used information source (69 per cent) for respondents who get their information about candidates from non-mainstream media. They are equally preferred by men and women. While a fifth of men and women turn to acquaintances and word of mouth for information about candidates, the heaviest users (44 per cent) are aged 25 to 34 years. One fifth of young people (18 to 24) rely on direct contact with candidates. Women more than men obtain candidate information from how-to-vote cards, while men are more likely than women to get information from direct contact with candidates.

Conclusions

Voters in our study used a wide variety of sources for information about the Toowoomba City Council election. Between them, the local traditional media were the most popular sources (used by 66 per cent of respondents). Yet almost one-third of our voters bypassed “the central arena of election campaigning” (Haswell, 1999, pp. 165-166), preferring instead to learn about the candidates from brochures, pamphlets, leaflets and informal social networks.

This finding suggests that candidates for local council elections should examine their campaign strategies. Instead of relying on one traditional mainstream media source to get their messages to voters, candidates may need to produce multiple messages for mainstream and alternative media. While our study shows the internet is not yet a commonly used source of election information, this may change by the next local government elections in 2008. In the US, the internet is the number one source of daily news for 18-to-34-year-olds. “Increasingly, weblogs, or ‘blogs’, are the information source of choice for this age group.” (Samuel, 2006, p. 222) Blogs, along with brochures and leaflets, offer candidates a means of circumventing the Fourth Estate’s scrutiny and controlling their messages to voters.

Ester and McAllister (2001) suggest a lack of diversity in the mainstream media is behind electors’ preferences for a range of information, much of it outside the mainstream media. Diversity of media ownership was not a primary concern for the Toowoomba participants in the Communications Law Centre’s

study of local media in regional Australia. In the main, people did not know or care who owned their local media. But they were worried about any reduction in the number of sources of local content, and they were angry about the quality of local journalism and lack of commitment to coverage of major local events (Communications Law Centre, 2006b).

The one-third of voters in our study who bypassed mainstream information sources may have been protesting against the amount and standard of coverage of local government news. Or perhaps they were apathetic. Either way, this finding raises questions about the news media's traditional roles "as gatekeepers over what the public knows" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006, p. 1) and watchdogs of governments and their actions. Editors and journalists in Toowoomba's mainstream media may need to re-evaluate their commitment to and ways of telling the community about local politics.

Research examining Toowoomba voters' perceptions of the quality, balance and fairness of election coverage could indicate their satisfaction or disenchantment with local media's performance. Details of voters' perceptions of media influence on their vote would add to the literature on the media-politics nexus. Interviews with local journalists could address McGregor et al's contention that "shrinking newsrooms and changed commercial imperatives are changing the dynamics of newsgathering about local politics" (2002, p. 112) – denying local communities awareness and understanding of local government issues, processes and personalities.

Notes

1. Queensland has 125 local authorities. Since 1991, with the introduction of one-vote, one-value, 54 councils have reduced their numbers of councillors, and 66 councils have abolished electoral divisions instead of re-drawing their boundaries to comply with the new regulations (LGAQ, 2004).

2. The Central Queensland study took in a wide catchment area that is home to an estimated 103,000 voters, compared with Toowoomba's voter population of 60,000 people.

3. Chi square analysis shows the difference by gender in use of "other sources" was not significant, $X^2(1) = 0.941$, $p = 0.332$.

4. The difference by age in use of mainstream media was not significant, $X^2(1) = 0.428$, $p = 0.5139$.

5. The difference by age in use of “other sources” was not significant, $X^2(1) = 0.785$, $p = 0.376$.

6. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they used each mainstream medium to learn something about the election and the candidates. They were asked to make one selection, for each medium, from “regularly”, “sometimes”, “hardly ever” and “never”. For example, of the 483 respondents who elaborated on newspaper use, 46.6 per cent said they “regularly” used it; 35 per cent said “sometimes”, 9.5 per cent said “hardly ever” and 8.9 per cent said “never”.

7. The difference by gender in the frequency of use of the local newspaper was not significant, $X^2(1) = 0.153$, $p = 0.696$.

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