

News Corp Australia’s Conservative Advocacy Against the Indigenous Voice to Parliament

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Studies of contemporary conservative media suggest that outlets like Murdoch-owned Fox News are challenging the normative standards of the liberal media model by producing content that is closer to propaganda than to news. This article builds on such scholarship by describing how News Corp Australia’s coverage of the 2023 Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum constituted conservative advocacy: They intervened in the debate as a participant speaking on behalf of powerful conservative interests, purposely marginalizing less powerful voices like those of Australian Indigenous activists. By analyzing the 7 elements of News Corp Australia’s Voice coverage that characterize conservative advocacy, this article helps to classify Western conservative news media and theorizes about its influence on democracy.

Keywords: journalism, conservative media, conservative advocacy, liberal model, democracy

Reporting for Vox, Rupar (2018) described how Fox News stars Sean Hannity and Jeanine Pirro accompanied President Trump onstage at a campaign rally before the 2018 midterm elections, urging people to vote Republican. In response to criticism, Fox News stated that it does “not condone any talent participating in campaign events” (Rupar, 2018, para. 12), suggesting that the outlet wants the legitimacy of an independent news organization. Vox producer Maza noted, however, that the problem was more than hosts appearing at campaign events: “these campaigns are now slowly infecting Fox News programming” (Vox, 2018, 00:05:22) to the point where the network is becoming “a full-blown campaign operation” (Vox, 2018, 00:02:25).

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A similar critique is offered by Muller (2023) referencing Murdoch-owned News Corp Australia's editorial policy, which enables commentary to blend with reportage. The policy states, "Comment, conjecture and opinion are acceptable in reports to provide perspective on an issue, or explain the significance of an issue, or to allow readers to recognise what the publication's standpoint is on the matter being reported" (Muller, 2023, p. 8). This policy, Muller argues, shows News Corp encourages its journalists to "promote" the views of the media organization, including "hyper-partisan campaigning without regard for truth or consequences," a "serious breach of journalistic ethics, violating core values of honesty, integrity, transparency and fairness" (Muller, 2023, pp. 12–13).

Such critiques of the hyperpartisan nature of conservative media reflect what Bard (2017) refers to as a "central contradiction" (p. 102): U.S., UK, and Australian media systems contain outlets no longer exhibiting the normative values of the liberal media model—journalistic neutrality, independence, and objectivity; yet, these outlets still claim to uphold these values.

When originally proposed, the liberal model was exemplified by U.S. media and, to a lesser extent, the British press (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Nechushtai (2018), however, proposes that the openly partisan nature of many U.S. news outlets has created a hybrid polarized liberal media system, merging the traditional liberal model with polarized pluralist elements. This hybrid model is characterized by the clear "political slants" of major broadcast outlets like Fox News and MSNBC, while traditional outlets, including CNN, CBS, NBC, and ABC, reflect the "centric" liberal tradition (Nechushtai, 2018, p. 190). Hallin (2020) says another way to understand the rise of partisan U.S. media is that liberal media systems, compatible with varying levels of political parallelism, are undergoing change.

This study agrees that elements of polarized pluralist media systems are growing in the U.S., UK, and Australian media. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) polarized pluralist media systems, found in Southern Europe, are described as exhibiting characteristics antithetical to liberal model values, including high political parallelism between media outlets and political parties or movements; a lack of agreed professional standards and regulation; and high instrumentalization, where media is used by outsiders such as politicians, social groups, or economic actors to advance their interests.

What is less clear in current scholarship, however, as argued by Bauer, Nadler, and Nelson (2022), is how to identify when a news outlet has crossed the line from traditional journalism—implied to fit the liberal model, to strategic communication or propaganda—exhibiting the hallmarks of polarized pluralist systems. Such classification, they argue, would assist scholars in critically analyzing how these outlets influence the normative standards of news media in relation to democracy, truth, and justice (Bauer et al., 2022). Knüpfer, Jackson, and Kreiss (2024) also argue that more work is needed to understand how the far right "deliberately elude classification" to hide their radical agendas, while simultaneously "appropriating" liberal norms that they intentionally undermine (p. 1).

There is also a lack of scholarship examining how individual outlets exhibiting undeclared polarized pluralistic characteristics, in a system assumed to be operating to liberal model standards, influence the health of democracy. The challenge of analyzing news outlets that exhibit contradictory normative standards is that different media systems have different expectations of journalism's democratic role. Hallin and

Mancini (2004) argue that polarized pluralist news media serve democracy through *external* pluralism, where different outlets represent a diversity of political interests and positions. Yet, liberal model standards, which underpin Western news media's democratic value, and in turn its social legitimacy, are *internal* pluralism—the independent, fair, and balanced inclusion of diverse ideas and ideologies within an outlet (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

This study argues that, whether evaluating internal or external pluralism, the standards of three well-known models of media's role in democracy—liberal, discursive, and participatory—are relevant because all expect news audiences will be served diverse, pluralistic voices representing different ideologies and interests (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014). The discursive model expects inclusion of voices with different structural power so none can dominate (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014, p. 360), and the participatory model requires incorporation of disadvantaged and marginalized citizens who can challenge power (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014). Given these claims, Western journalism's contribution to democracy can be evaluated by how fully and equitably it gives voice to a balance of diverse ideologies and interests, particularly marginalized voices challenging power.

This article contributes to the study of the evolving practices of news outlets notionally working within liberal media systems in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia by classifying outlets that exhibit polarized pluralist characteristics as exhibiting advocacy journalism. Furthermore, advocacy journalism's influence on democracy is argued to depend on whether advocacy is used to expand or diminish the number of voices heard in news media, particularly those that challenge power. Through such analysis, this article enhances understanding of how conservative news outlets challenge the primacy of the liberal model by deploying numerous strategies of conservative advocacy, including amplifying the perspectives of the powerful; attacking and excluding alternative and marginalized perspectives; melding commentary with reportage, and where commentary is more voluminous than reporting; mobilizing the audience; creating new campaign content; and delegitimizing other media.

The case study examined is News Corp's coverage of the 2023 Australian referendum to enshrine Indigenous recognition in the constitution through a Voice to Parliament. The coverage of four Australian News Corp outlets is analyzed, including the national masthead *The Australian*, similar in style and format to Murdoch's *The Wall Street Journal*; broadcast outlet Sky News, similar to Murdoch's Fox News; and capital city tabloids the *Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun*, similar to Murdoch's British tabloids.

This study was funded by Australians for a Murdoch Royal Commission, a media diversity advocacy organization established by former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and now co-chaired by former Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sharan Burrow and former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Rudd and Turnbull have both accused News Corp of behaving more like a political party than a news organization (Rudd, 2021; Turnbull, 2020). Australians for a Murdoch Royal Commission funded the Murdoch Referendum Accountability Project to enable independent researchers to analyze how equitably, fairly, and accurately News Corp covered the Indigenous Voice referendum. This project was carried out during the referendum, with results disseminated via accessible interim and final reports, demonstrating how such research can be used as a transparent form of public accountability. Such scrutiny of media diversity and accuracy resembles

other media watchdog organizations like Media Matters, which is similarly concerned by Fox News' "forays into political advocacy and misinformation" (Bauer et al., 2022, p. 23).

This Australian research is relevant to the U.S. and UK media systems, which share a liberal media tradition (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and where Murdoch is powerful. In addition to clear right-wing and neo-liberal bias (McKnight, 2003), News Corp outlets are used by Murdoch to support political causes that align with his financial and ideological interests (Hobbs & Owen, 2016). *The Australian* is regarded as a particularly powerful agenda setter, influencing reporting by Murdoch's other outlets, competitor outlets, and broader political agenda (McKnight, 2003). News Corp's power is magnified in the highly concentrated Australian media market, where News Corp owns approximately 60% of the daily print news market (Gaber & Tiffen, 2018). This compares with Murdoch's share of 32.5% in the UK (Nolan, McGuinness, Lee, Holland, & Lewis, 2024). In the United States, Murdoch owns powerful conservative news outlets like Fox News, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Post*, and various local television stations (Nechushtai, 2018). As one of the most popular U.S. news sources and a major influence on other media agendas, Fox News is considered particularly powerful (Bauer et al., 2022; Peck, 2019).

On the day of the Voice referendum in October 2023, approximately 60% of Australians voted No, defeating the proposed Indigenous advisory body. This study found four of News Corp's major outlets privileged the No campaign; analysis of 1,613 News Corp reportage and commentary pieces for 13 weeks found that approximately two-thirds of words containing an argument for or against the Voice were opposed to it. Although the media is not the only influence on the public's voting intentions during democratic contests like the Voice referendum, Gavin (2018) argues that media coverage impacts attitude formation, particularly in situations where the public has no direct experience of an issue, such as the inequity experienced by Aboriginal Australians. Furthermore, the news media's power to reinforce pre-existing attitudes or to increase ambiguity among the voting public can influence democratic outcomes, where a small percentage of people—either changing or not changing their minds—impacts the vote outcome (Gavin, 2018). Thus, although the media cannot determine democratic outcomes, it does have the power to influence them, and that power deserves scrutiny.

Conservative Media Engaged in Conservative Advocacy

There is widespread acknowledgment among scholars, journalists, and news audiences that conservative news outlets like Fox News and Australia's News Corp are not working to liberal media standards because they deliberately interpret "news" information from a partisan right-wing perspective (Aday, 2010; Bard, 2017; Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Peck, 2019; Peters, 2010). Such scholarship provides insights into how conservative media actively support or campaign for conservative political causes. For instance, News Corp Australia has been described as waging campaigns against Labor Prime Ministers (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014). In the U.S. context, Fox News and Breitbart have been depicted as: working for segments of the public (Kreiss, 2018); crusading by "imploring action" from their audiences (Peters, 2010, p. 837); informing and mobilizing Republican audiences (Hoewe, Brownell, & Wiemer, 2020); activating "viewers' partisan group identity" (Levendusky, 2013, p. 567); setting and advancing conservative agendas (Hobbs & McKnight, 2014; Hoewe et al., 2020); casting those with different views as untrustworthy, and using emotion, ridicule and ad hominem in the place of arguments (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008); using fear to garner support for conservative

ideas and to attack the opposition (Conway, Grabe, & Grievess, 2007; Hoewe et al., 2020; Kreiss, 2018; Peters, 2010; Young, 2020); and deliberately insulating their viewers from opposing perspectives (Bard, 2017; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Indeed, in establishing Fox News in 1996, Roger Ailes and Rupert Murdoch made it clear that the outlet was both a business and a political opportunity (Hoewe et al., 2020).

Conservative media’s deliberate bias has become so blatant in recent years that scholars have questioned whether Fox News, for example, has crossed the line from biased or partisan journalism to political propaganda (Bard, 2017; Bauer et al., 2022; Benkler et al., 2018). Such scholarship implies that these outlets no longer adhere to traditional liberal media standards, such as independence, neutrality, balance, and objectivity. This conservative campaigning is conceptualized here as advocacy journalism, as per Fielding’s (2023) model of journalists’ influence on democracy (Figure 1). Extending ideas such as Nechushtai’s (2018) hybrid polarized liberal model and Hallin’s (2020) liberal model encompassing variable parallelism, advocacy journalism is theorized to occur as an alternative form of journalism within liberal media systems, but contrary to liberal media standards.

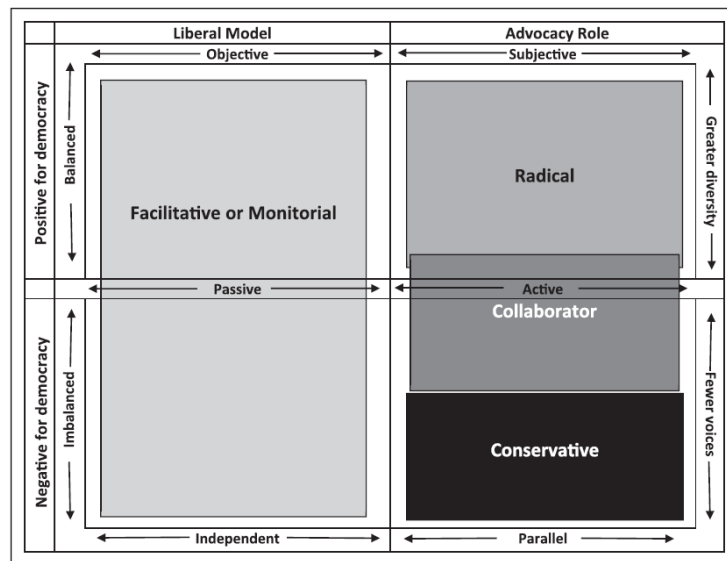


Figure 1. Model of journalists’ influence on democracy (Fielding, 2023, p. 9).

On the left of the model, continua depict the presence of professional values of journalists working to the standards of the liberal model, including objectivity, balance, passivity, and independence, values positioned as vital to journalism’s positive democratic role (Fielding, 2023). These continua allow for situations where normative values are undermined and characterize imbalanced journalism as detrimental to democracy (Fielding, 2023). The liberal model is regularly critiqued for obscuring ideological bias and reinforcing existing inequalities (Fielding, 2024). Nevertheless, it represents the normative values that journalists and audiences expect, which confer legitimacy on the media and inform healthy democratic debate (Fielding, 2023).

On the right of the model is advocacy journalism, which occurs when news producers figuratively step away from the liberal tradition's normative standards to deliberately advocate for particular positions as participants in the public sphere (Fielding, 2023). Advocacy journalism is an interventionist form of journalism where the media actively takes part in political and social life (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, & Lauerer, 2016) and where journalists subjectively and deliberately push particular perspectives by speaking on behalf of certain groups and interests (Waisbord, 2009). Media interventionism is considered a more extreme version of mediatization; where mediatization refers to a media logic that dictates how political news is presented to audiences, media interventionism occurs when journalists use their voices, interpretations, and evaluations, becoming newsmakers themselves (Strömbäck & Esser, 2009). In line with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) description of news produced in parallel to and as an instrument of political and economic interests, advocacy journalism is defined as contrary to the normative standards of the liberal model of media because it is: parallel to political interests and ideologies rather than independent; active rather than passive; subjective rather than objective; imbalanced rather than balanced; and variable in how it is used to expand or diminish the diversity of voices (Fielding, 2023).

The model proposes that advocacy journalism can be divided into three types (Fielding, 2023). Two are drawn from Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White's (2009) description of "radical advocacy," which is journalism advocating on behalf of marginalized voices, and "collaborative advocacy," which is advocacy on behalf of the state. Discussions of advocacy in journalism tend to fit the definition of radical advocacy. For instance, Waisbord (2009) proposes that advocacy journalism is used by journalists or even civil society organizations to "redress power imbalances" by promoting "perspectives that are typically under or misrepresented in the media" (p. 371).

A third type of advocacy journalism is defined by Fielding (2023) as conservative advocacy. Using the case of News Corp Australia's coverage of a high-profile 2016 industrial dispute, Fielding (2023) proposes that Murdoch's outlets engaged in conservative advocacy against the union and workers. She depicts conservative advocacy as media speaking on behalf of structurally dominant ideologies, promoting the status quo, reducing the diversity of voices, and marginalizing those who challenge power (Fielding, 2023).

As per theories about media's positive role in democracy (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014), Fielding's (2023) model provides a framework to understand the divergent influence of advocacy journalism on democracy. Importantly, this evaluation does not rely on advocacy journalism being judged by the standards of the liberal model of media. Rather, advocacy journalism's democratic influence is considered through assessment of the structural power of the voices being advocated for: Radical advocacy journalism supports democracy because it gives voice to diverse and marginalized voices; collaborative advocacy can support or hinder democracy depending on whether it increases or decreases diversity; and conservative advocacy undermines democracy because it reduces the diversity of views and marginalizes voices that challenge power (Fielding, 2023).

This model challenges studies that imply equivalency between polarized media advocates at different ends of the political spectrum. For instance, Rae (2021) conceptualizes "hyperpartisan" news sites on the left of the political spectrum—such as the Young Turks, The Canary, and Occupy Democrats—as equivalent to the right-wing site Breitbart News. Kreiss and McGregor (2024) critique such false equivalency

in the context of polarized social media platforms by arguing that polarization studies too often treat Black Lives Matter as the equivalent of the pro-Trump Stop the Steal movement. They argue that this ignores the structural inequality and power imbalance between Black Americans using social media in a democratically productive way to challenge their marginalization, as opposed to Stop the Steal using social media to undermine democracy (Kreiss & McGregor, 2024). Knüpfer et al. (2024) also suggest that researchers too often take for granted the liberal normative values of Western democracy, while failing to account for differing structural power between social groups, including—relevant to this study—groups marginalized by colonization. Fielding (2023) addresses such false equivalency by conceptualizing radical advocacy as positive for democracy when it increases diversity in news representation. In contrast, conservative advocacy that deliberately marginalizes voices that challenge power undermines news media's democratic value (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014).

The media practices identified by scholars as inimical to the liberal media model are the very strategies that constitute conservative advocacy. Conway et al.'s (2007) claim that Fox News' Bill O'Reilly's content used more overt propagandist techniques than infamous 1930s radio propagandist Father Charles Coughlin suggests that O'Reilly is a conservative advocate. Bard (2017) analyzed Fox News' coverage of healthcare reform in 2009 and 2014 and found it was more akin to propaganda than persuasion or objective journalism; Fox News distorted and manipulated the facts of the Democrats' healthcare reforms to "incite" their audiences to oppose these policies (p. 108). Benkler et al. (2018) explored the concept of networked propaganda by theorizing about the media's susceptibility to the spread of manipulative and false information. Supporting the idea that conservative advocacy does not operate in the same way as radical advocacy, they proposed that there are two American media ecosystems and warned against drawing false equivalencies between them (Benkler et al., 2018). Conservative media, led by Fox News and Breitbart, they said, are not using traditional journalistic values and methods despite claiming to and are instead engaged in a propaganda feedback loop (Benkler et al., 2018). This ecosystem melds facts with opinions to present favorable news for politicians they support and attack those they do not (Benkler et al., 2018).

Conservative media's practice of conservative advocacy can be further understood through Yang and Bennett's (2022) theories of interactive propaganda. Building on Benkler et al.'s (2018) networked propaganda thesis, Yang and Bennett (2022) argue that following Fox News' intervention in helping the Tea Party organize politically after 2009, Fox transitioned from a partisan outlet to a "hybrid organization that added political activism and audience mobilization to its mission" (p. 89). Using the case study of Trump and Fox News' platforming of Covid-19 disinformation during Trump's presidency, they say there was a symbiosis between them in collaboratively framing and "then adopting and amplifying the other's framing" (Yang & Bennett, 2022, pp. 156–157). Trump and Fox News' symbiosis resulted in the co-production of mutually beneficial content to support Trump's re-election (Yang & Bennett, 2022).

There is also evidence that conservative outlets like Fox News have been creating interactive propaganda in concert with the Republican Party long before Trump ran for president. During the 2004 U.S. election, Sherman (2014) described how Fox News worked alongside the Bush Republican campaign to deliberately promote false accusations that Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry lied about his military record as a Vietnam War Swift boat commander. Sherman (2014) said this was a departure from conservative media's enthusiastic coverage of previous Democratic scandals like the Bill Clinton and Monica

Lewinsky affair because the Clinton scandal was “at its core a real story” (p. 287). Crucially, Fox News acted as a conservative advocate for the Bush campaign by legitimizing the fabrication in the eyes of the voting public.

The goals and motives of conservative advocacy are illuminated by an analysis of Roger Ailes’ motives for establishing Fox News. Dickinson (2011) describes how Ailes created a new type of political campaign that advanced the agenda of the far right in three ways: it enabled the Republican Party to “bypass skeptical reporters”; camouflaged “political propaganda as independent journalism”; and waged a “partisan assault on public opinion” (para. 8). Describing conservative media as a conservative countersphere, Major (2020) argues that their goal is to “reshape the dominant public philosophy and discursive spheres” (p. 216), and Kreiss (2018) says they serve conservative political and White identity. Yang and Bennett (2022) suggest that conservative media promotes “fear, anger, division, distraction, and confusion”; these can be considered advocacy strategies aimed at meeting their broader political goals (p. 89).

Although conservative advocates work to marginalize diverse voices, outlets like Fox News position themselves as the voice of the “little guy” and claim to speak on behalf of society’s underdogs (Peck, 2019). Peck (2019) provides the example of Fox News advocating for the Tea Party movement to turn working-class Americans against the government in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, rather than against corporate America. Related to this strategy, Bebout (2019) suggests that conservative media weaponize victimhood among their audiences. This rhetorical strategy provokes aggrieved entitlement among those with relative power—such as men, White people, and Christians—by directing anger toward those fighting for more equality, such as women, non-White people, LGBTIQ people, and minority religious groups, to maintain power and privilege (Bebout, 2019).

At the same time, conservative media delegitimize their competitors as the “liberal media” by accusing them of left-wing bias (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Conway et al., 2007; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). This accusation has multiple strategic benefits: It allows conservative media to position their right-wing “truths” as more objective and therefore true (Hemmer, 2016; Peters, 2010); conservative media outlets can minimize scrutiny of right-wing politicians as unjustified bias from the “liberal media” (Benkler et al., 2018; Hemmer, 2016); and reporters working in the “liberal media” who aim for objectivity, accuracy, and independence are framed as elitist and untrustworthy (Hemmer, 2016; Peck, 2019). Just as importantly, their self-characterization as populist antiestablishment champions (Peck, 2019) obscures conservative advocates’ true purpose: the maintenance and reinforcement of existing structural inequality. Through delegitimizing the so called “elite liberal media,” conservative media are undermining the liberal model of media and its democratic purpose, while also working to legitimize their conservative advocacy approach.

Conservative media’s blending of reportage and commentary is also relevant to conservative advocacy. Conservative media are described as deliberately blending facts with opinions, strategically presenting themselves as both objective and deliberately biased by claiming that right-wing perspectives are the *only* trustworthy truth (Benkler et al., 2018; Hoewe et al., 2020). Benkler et al.’s (2018) networked propaganda model and Muller’s (2023) critique of News Corp Australia’s editorial policy highlight the blending of factual news reporting and commentary or opinion. Peters (2010) describes how Fox News host

Bill O'Reilly melded some aspects of objective journalism and a format that looks like news reporting with a more emotive style of delivery, which weaves reportage with commentary to present his own "truth." Peters (2010) suggests that this style of journalism—which evokes "journalistic authority and authenticity" (p. 845)—allows hosts like O'Reilly to present their own interpretations of issues, rather than the traditional mediating by journalists (p. 834). Fox News' slogan *Fair and Balanced* is often cited as a strategy to characterize its media content as fairer and more balanced than its competitors (Bard, 2017; Bauer et al., 2022; Young, 2020). Australia's Sky News, which uses the marketing slogan *Real News, Honest Views*, also characterizes itself as an independent, balanced, and impartial news outlet (Young, 2009). Thus, while conservative advocacy differentiates conservative media from traditional liberal outlets, these outlets paradoxically appropriate the cultural and democratic legitimacy of the liberal model by insisting on their neutrality and independence.

Although these studies do not explicitly classify such conservative media strategies as a form of conservative advocacy, they nevertheless help explain how conservative media act as advocates for conservative political and cultural policies and ideas and, in doing so, marginalize challenges to dominant groups and ideas. As Hobbs (2016) suggests, although news media can facilitate democratically valuable, pluralistic, knowledge-building discourse, it can also undermine this ideal. Analysis of News Corp Australia's conservative advocacy opposing the Indigenous Voice to Parliament presents a case study demonstrating how conservative media power is used to advocate for conservative political outcomes while marginalizing those who challenge power. This conservative advocacy is proposed to have undermined the democratic process of the Voice referendum.

Analyzing News Corp's Coverage of the Australian Voice Referendum

This study analyzed News Corp Australia's news coverage, including reportage and commentary, about the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum for 13 weeks between July 17 and the day of the referendum, October 14, 2023. The Voice referendum was initiated by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government after Indigenous activists advocated for constitutional recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians over many years. In 2017, Indigenous leaders held a First Nations National Constitutional Convention to discuss constitutional recognition (Uluru Statement, 2023). From this convention, a document named the Uluru Statement from the Heart requested the establishment of a constitutional First Nations Voice and a Makarrata Commission seeking "a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history" (Uluru Statement, 2023, para. 11). The Voice would be an advisory body composed of Indigenous leaders elected by Indigenous communities, advising parliament on policies aimed at closing the gap in life outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (Reconciliation Australia, 2024). A national referendum was required to amend the constitution to include the Voice advisory body; Australia's mandatory voting system required all adult Australians to vote (AEC, 2024). The Yes campaign advocating for the Voice was supported by the left-wing Labor Party, the Greens, and centrist independents, while the No vote was supported by most members of the conservative Liberal and National Parties.

Long-term and sustained inequality between Australia's First Nations people, who make up approximately three percent of the total population, and non-Aboriginal Australians has resulted from the

ongoing intergenerational trauma suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through British colonization of Australia (Menzies, 2019). Indigenous people were dispossessed of their land and subjected to violence, massacres, and decades of discriminatory government policies, including the forcible separation of children from their families (Behrendt, 2003). Aboriginal activists for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament were a marginalized group that challenged the status quo to influence policies impacting them.

News Corp's coverage of the Voice was analyzed because the concentrated power of the Murdoch media in Australia makes their coverage particularly influential (Gaber & Tiffen, 2018). Online and printed articles mentioning the "Voice" were sourced using the NewsBank database from the national broadsheet *The Australian*, New South Wales daily tabloid *Daily Telegraph* and Victorian daily tabloid *Herald Sun*, as well as videos posted on the Sky News YouTube channel, which originated from their broadcast news outlet. In total, 1,613 pieces were analyzed: 90% of articles from print publications and 58% of Sky News videos. A maximum of 126 pieces of content per week were analyzed to ensure that each week contributed evenly to the overall analysis. Video selection was randomized by prioritizing the shortest videos for inclusion and excluding videos that included no editorial input from Sky News, such as clips of parliament question time, live press conferences, and National Press Club speeches. Videos were watched, and their YouTube-sourced transcripts were coded. The sample of newspaper articles excluded those with cursory mentions of the Voice, and duplicates were removed. The number of media items published and the sample analyzed are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Content Published, and Sample Analyzed, July 17–October 14, 2023.

	Published (excluding duplicates)	Sample analyzed	Percentage analyzed
The Australian	654	580	89%
Daily Telegraph	267	244	91%
Herald Sun	223	203	91%
Sky News	1,002	586	58%
Total	2,146	1,613	75%

Four researchers each coded approximately one quarter of the sample, with each coder's analysis closely monitored by the lead researcher for consistency. Each piece of content was quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed using a multilayered coding framework to determine the number of words used to represent views from different sources; arguments that align with the Yes and No campaigns; people mentioned (talked about) or included (as a written quote, paraphrased, or interviewed on Sky News); and how campaigners were framed as heroes (doing something positive), villains (doing something negative), and victims (having something negative done to them). This intricate method, which resulted in the identification of 10,708 codes, quantifies the elements of coverage by word count, showing the magnitude of each code within the overall content and delivering a full and meaningful picture of News Corp's coverage of the Voice referendum.

News Corp's Advocacy Against the Indigenous Voice to Parliament

Analysis of News Corp's Voice referendum coverage across 13 weeks and four news outlets found that Australia's most powerful media organization deliberately advocated against the Yes campaign and

supported the No campaign. In doing so, News Corp marginalized Aboriginal activists for the Yes campaign, thus undermining the quality of the democratic debate.

Among 1,613 pieces of News Corp content about the Voice referendum, 68% of all words containing an argument for or against the Voice were arguments supporting the No campaign, and 32% supported Yes. The least one-sided outlet was *The Australian*, with 58% No arguments, and the most one-sided were Sky News and *Herald Sun*, each with 77% No arguments. The *Daily Telegraph* was 69% No arguments.

In line with other studies that suggest conservative media like News Corp have crossed a line from political bias to what is conceptualized here as conservative advocacy, News Corp's Voice coverage was found to not only be biased or partisan toward the No campaign but was produced intentionally to *further* No arguments. News Corp's coverage is thus proposed to have been a deliberate intervention in the Voice referendum, working in parallel with the No campaign by advocating for their audiences to vote No. This is an example of conservative advocacy (Fielding, 2023) where News Corp overtly spoke on behalf of the No campaign, advocating against the less powerful group—the Yes campaign supporting the Indigenous Voice.

The following discussion describes how News Corp utilized seven conservative advocacy strategies to co-advocate with the No campaign, including: (1) amplifying the No campaign of fear and doubt; (2) attacking marginalized Yes proponents; (3) excluding and de-emphasizing Yes arguments; (4) melding commentary with reportage to advantage the No campaign, with more commentary than reporting; (5) overtly urging their audience to vote No; (6) developing new No campaign content; and (7) deliberately delegitimizing other media by characterizing them as biased toward the Yes campaign. Although one of these strategies used in isolation might not constitute conservative advocacy, their synthesis and cumulative impact do so. Furthermore, Bard (2017) argues that persuasion has a transparency of intent that is lacking in propaganda. An important element of News Corp's conservative advocacy was its lack of transparency about intent in presenting advocacy journalism as if it were independently produced according to liberal media standards. This study thus provides a framework for judging the presence of conservative advocacy, describes how it operates, how it challenges the standards of the normative liberal media model, and how it can be used to undermine democratic debates.

Amplifying the No Campaign

A comparison of News Corp's Voice arguments by number of words (Figure 2) demonstrates that arguments against the Voice were amplified by a wide margin ahead of Yes arguments in four of six argument categories.

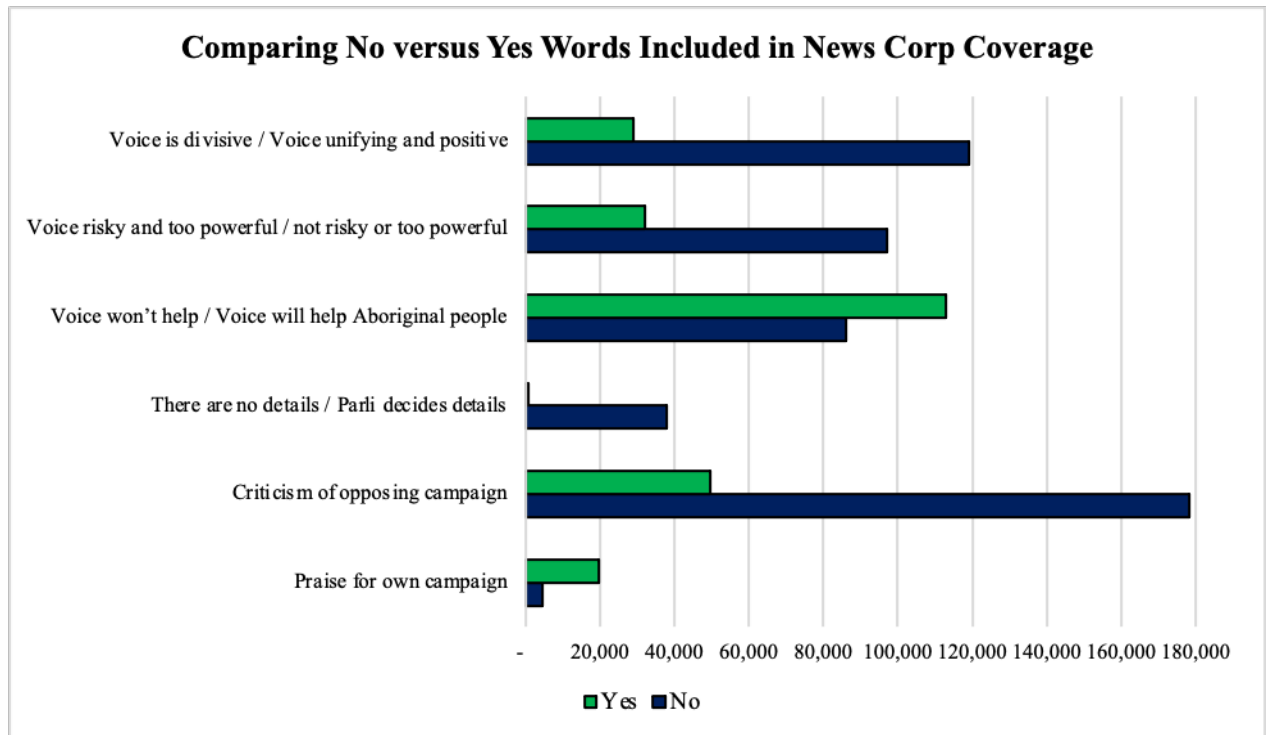


Figure 2. Number of words used in Yes/No key arguments for and against the Voice.

Sixty-five percent of News Corp's No argument words were found to emphasize four themes: the advisory body divided Australians by race; the Voice would be too powerful; the Voice will not help Aboriginal people; and that there were no details about how the Voice would work. These arguments mirrored, interacted with, and reinforced the No campaigners' anti-Voice framing, including their key slogans premised on the alleged divisive and confusing nature of the referendum proposition: "Vote no to the voice of division" (Fair Australia, 2023), and "If you don't know, vote no" (AEC, 2023). Just as other scholars have found conservative media use fear and doubt to influence viewers (Conway et al., 2007; Hoewe et al., 2020; Kreiss, 2018; Peters, 2010; Yang & Bennett, 2022), News Corp's advocacy for the No campaign invoked a narrative of fear, doubt, and confusion about the impact of the Voice on non-Indigenous Australians. The sowing of doubt about the referendum's consequences is, as suggested by Gavin (2018), a particularly influential strategy.

Attacking Yes Advocates

News Corp's remaining 35% of No arguments were used to undermine and attack Yes campaigners. Although Prime Minister Albanese was the most quoted and mentioned source across the coverage, he was also the largest target of negative framing. Other studies have similarly found that conservative media emphasize negative coverage of their opposition (Conway et al., 2007; Hoewe et al., 2020; Kreiss, 2018; Levendusky, 2013). Analysis of the characterization of Yes and No campaigners and supporters

demonstrates the negative framing of the Yes campaign, finding 72% of all characterized words fit the No campaign narrative, including framing Yes campaigners as villains (58%).

Excluding and De-emphasizing Yes Arguments

News Corp's conservative advocacy for the No campaign also excluded or de-emphasized Yes campaign arguments. As in other studies, this appears to be a deliberate strategy to insulate News Corp audiences from alternative perspectives (Bard, 2017; Hoewe et al., 2020; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). For example, Yes campaigners argued that more than 80% of Indigenous Australians wanted a Voice to Parliament; News Corp used 7,174 words to claim Indigenous Australians did not want a Voice and platformed only 2,277 arguing they did. Similarly, the Yes campaign regularly said that it was up to Parliament to decide the details of the Voice advisory body after the referendum. This argument was included in just 722 words, and the opposing argument that there were no details provided was used in 37,929 words.

Melding Commentary With Reportage

This study contributes new insights into the favoring of commentary ahead of fact-based reportage by finding that fact-based reporting by News Corp about the Voice was secondary to editorial comment. This accords with other studies that suggest that conservative media deliberately blend reportage with commentary to interpret news through a conservative lens (Benkler et al., 2018; Hoewe et al., 2020; Kreiss, 2018; Young, 2020), and that News Corp's editorial policy allows for such blending (Muller, 2023). Categorization of all 2,146 pieces of News Corp Voice content published or broadcast during the analysis period showed that 53% of newspaper articles by words were either written by News Corp commentators or were external op-eds, and 68% of Sky News broadcasts by minutes were commentary.

Additionally, News Corp's conservative advocacy melded commentary with reportage, a finding that adds to scholarship interested in how journalism and commentary blend, particularly to present right-wing truth as the most accurate truth (Benkler et al., 2018; Hoewe et al., 2020; Peters, 2010; Young, 2020). Commentary about the referendum was regularly presented as reportage when News Corp staff stepped between the roles of reporter and commentator. For instance, James Morrow advocated against the Voice as a commentator at Sky News and an opinion writer for the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph*. At the same time, he was presented as a journalist at the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* in the role of National Affairs Editor. Commentary was also melded with reportage when commentators co-authored articles with journalists. One example is *The Australian's* National Affairs Editor and Canberra Bureau chief, Joe Kelly, co-authoring a piece titled "Pearson a Bully, Misogynist: Price" with a high-profile commentator at *The Australian*, Janet Albrechtsen (Kelly & Albrechtsen, 2023). The ambiguity about whether News Corp staff are commentators or journalists can confuse audiences about whether they are being presented with opinions or facts (Muller, 2023; Young, 2020).

Similar to Peters' (2010) finding that Fox News presents comments in a format and style that resembles journalism, content produced by News Corp commentators also resembled reportage. Commentators appropriated journalistic terminology by presenting their content as investigative reports, as

when commentators James Morrow and Peta Credlin co-authored a *Herald Sun* piece that begins: "The Yes campaign for a Voice to Parliament has been caught out telling volunteers to change their messages about a possible future treaty with Aboriginal Australians depending on what kind of voter they are speaking to" (Morrow & Credlin, 2023, para. 1).

News Corp commentary also resembles reportage when commentators interview guests, such as politicians or the Voice campaigners. Like Aday's (2010) study, which found Fox News gave Bush officials favorable coverage, News Corp's commentators did not interview No campaigners as a form of watchdog journalism, but rather gave No advocates a platform to campaign. Aligning with Benkler et al.'s (2018) propaganda feedback loop and Bard's (2017) study of Fox News' health-care coverage, when No advocates were platformed by News Corp commentators, they were not held to any of the traditional journalistic standards of verification and accuracy. This allowed No campaigners to present false and manipulative accusations about the Voice, as when Sky News host Andrew Bolt and Nationals Member of Parliament Barnaby Joyce, agreed with each other in presenting demonstrably false information claiming the Voice could veto parliamentary decisions (Bolt & Joyce, 2023). In line with Knüpfer et al.'s (2024) suggestion that the far-right appropriate liberal norms while undermining them, this research shows that News Corp used the pretense of traditional liberal model journalism in their advocacy for the No campaign.

Mobilizing the Audience

News Corp staff themselves also overtly mobilized their audiences to support the No proposition. Analysis of the use of Yes and No arguments by words among commentary, external op-eds, and reporting found that News Corp staff contributed 337,601 words (96% of all News Corp staff argument words) for the No campaign, and only 14,184 (4%) in favor of the Yes campaign. Of the 15 most prolific News Corp commentators, 13 were staunchly against the Voice. These commentators included former conservative Liberal politicians Cory Bernardi and Liberal National Amanda Stoker, as well as Peta Credlin, the former chief of staff to conservative Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

Overt conservative advocacy from these commentators involved them urging their audiences to support the No campaign. For example, Rowan Dean claimed "Australians are being lied to by their prime minister and their government. It's a disgrace. Vote no" (Dean, 2023, 00:06:56); Peta Credlin made clear "I want [the Voice] to fail and fail badly so it's put away hopefully forever and a day" (Credlin, 2023, 00:00:55); Andrew Bolt told his audience "please vote no for the sake of the children if not for yourself" (Bolt, 2023, 00:05:15); and Cory Bernardi (2023) said "Vote no to Canberra's racist and divisive voice" (00:01:39). Such advocacy is an example of hyperpartisan campaigning (Muller, 2023) and aligns with Peters' (2010) suggestion that Fox News host O'Reilly crusaded by encouraging action from his audience.

Creating New No Campaign Content

News Corp's conservative advocacy against the Voice not only reinforced No campaign messages but also extended them by creating new No campaign content, specifically creating new lines of attack against the Yes campaign. Conservative advocacy thus reflects a form of media interventionism where journalists become newsmakers (Strömbäck & Esser, 2009). This finding fits with Yang and Bennett's (2022) interactive

propaganda theory and Fox News' promotion of Swift boat falsehoods (Sherman, 2014). Among numerous examples was Peta Credlin claiming the Uluru Statement was longer than one page by alleging she had discovered hidden pages, which she claimed hid the Voice's true radical agenda. Andrew Bolt also used divisive and racialized language in accusing high-profile Indigenous Australians of faking their cultural heritage to access special privileges, an allegation irrelevant to the referendum but used to turn non-Indigenous Australians against First Nations people. This attack used a narrative of weaponized victimhood (Bebout, 2019) and evoked the idea of "reverse racism" (Kreiss, 2018) by calling the Voice advisory body "racist" toward non-Aboriginal people. Since News Corp platformed and legitimized this extreme content, the official No campaigners were able to maintain a level of respectability by avoiding this controversial campaigning.

New lines of attack on the Yes campaign were also propagated by journalists through the selection of stories. This included stories with little or no relevance to the Voice referendum, though News Corp journalists worked to draw inferences between them. One such story focused on Western Australian state laws that aimed to protect significant Indigenous cultural sites, laws irrelevant to the Voice and proposed in a different jurisdiction. Another was *The Australian's* reporting that "cultural elites" were offering Indigenous Australians discounted tickets to ballet, musical, arts, cultural, and sporting events. This reporting was used to suggest that First Nations people were already granted special privileges in society and thus did not need an Aboriginal advisory body, again reflecting narratives of weaponized victimhood (Bebout, 2019).

Delegitimizing Other Media

Finally, News Corp's campaign against the Voice used the well-known conservative media strategy of accusing competitor outlets of bias toward the Yes campaign (Benkler et al., 2018). Across 13 weeks of analysis, the public broadcaster the ABC was criticized 184 times and *The Guardian* 29 times for bias toward the Yes campaign and against the No campaign. For instance, *The Australian's* media writer Sophie Elsworth (2023) said on Sky News: "you've got a largely left-leaning media in Australia that is supportive of the Voice" (00:02:53). Such criticism is an important element of News Corp's conservative advocacy because it not only undermines trust in other media but is used to claim that News Corp's reporting is more trustworthy and accurate (Hemmer, 2016; Peck, 2019; Peters, 2010).

It is important to note that some News Corp journalists did produce reportage about the Voice in the liberal tradition, which helped to inform audiences. For instance, *The Australian's* Indigenous Affairs Correspondent Paige Taylor produced quality journalism about events of the referendum and the Voice's potential consequences. This quality journalism, however, had no impact on News Corp's advocacy campaign against the Voice. For example, despite Paige Taylor reporting about Yes campaigner Noel Pearson's vision for the Voice model, other News Corp staff continued to say that there were no details about how the Voice might be implemented. News Corp's quality reporting fits with Benkler et al.'s (2018) reality check dynamic in that it aimed to be accurate and included a range of different perspectives. This reporting, however, was in the minority, with the majority more closely resembling Benkler et al.'s (2018) propaganda feedback loop by melding commentary and agenda-driven reportage. Furthermore, quality reporting may have helped News Corp maintain their façade of journalism using the traditional liberal values of objectivity and independence, when in reality the news outlets were overwhelmingly engaged in conservative advocacy.

Conclusion

Despite conservative media claiming to represent the “little guy” (Peck, 2019), News Corp’s conservative advocacy campaign against the Australian Indigenous Voice shows how conservative media power can be instrumentalized to reinforce the marginalization of groups already marginalized. Where radical advocacy journalism gives voice to those who challenge power and thus supports democracy, conservative advocacy works to marginalize voices that challenge power, and in doing so can undermine democratic debates.

Since Australia’s conservative News Corp closely resembles Murdoch’s other UK and U.S. media organizations, the findings of this study help to explain how liberal media systems contain outlets resembling those in Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) polarized pluralist system. Furthermore, despite working outside liberal standards, conservative advocates claim to adhere to them and critique their competitors for “bias,” thus appropriating the legitimizing power of liberal model journalism. This study’s classification of seven strategies of conservative advocacy helps identify its presence, characteristics, and extent in media coverage of issues and events, and potentially the overall orientation of a particular media outlet. Where, for example, studies have found that conservative media mobilizes conservative, Republican, and Trump voters (Benkler et al., 2018; Hoewe et al., 2020; Yang & Bennett, 2022) or that outlets like Fox News create propaganda to oppose policies like health care reform (Bard, 2017), the use of such strategies shows they are engaging in conservative advocacy.

Aday (2010) suggests that Fox News was such a “reliable megaphone” for the Bush administration during the Iraq War that its outlet should be relegated to occupy an alternative media status (p. 157). However, an outlet with a viewership the size of Fox News, or the concentrated power of News Corp Australia, can hardly be called anything other than mainstream. During the Voice referendum, News Corp Australia worked to shape its news content not to just *advantage* the No campaign, but as *advocates*, using its media content to work symbiotically alongside the No campaign, sharing its objective. This conservative advocacy style of journalism was used to marginalize voices that challenged power. In doing so, News Corp’s conservative advocacy against the Voice undermined the notions of journalism as pluralistic, diverse, and democratically valuable.

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