Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Communication Research and Practice

ISSN: 2204-1451 (Print) 2206-3374 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcrp20

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To cite this article: Caryn Coatney (24 Jun 2025): Beyond the fast and the furious: news coverage of the Robodebt scandal, Communication Research and Practice, DOI: 10.1080/22041451.2025.2523656

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2025.2523656

Published online: 24 Jun 2025.

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE
https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2025.2523656

Beyond the fast and the furious: news coverage of the Robodebt scandal

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ABSTRACT

This article explores journalists' techniques of purposeful pausing during Australia's political scandal, Robodebt. It draws on conceptions of journalism as a time-conscious, interpretive community to conduct a qualitative analysis of the scandal news coverage and journalists' published comments about their reporting. This study focuses on the journalistic representations about the changing news pace, pausing and peak times during the disintegration of the welfare debt-recovery scheme that led to Federal Court challenges, a royal commission and $1.8 billion dollar payout to victims. Contemporary media coverage of scandals has often been known for churning out sensationalised clickbait, spin and insider commentaries that appear disconnected from the public. This study finds that journalists increasingly affirmed the value of reflective inquiry, disrupted stereotyped spin and spent time to publicise self-criticism about ethical lapses in the watchdog role during the seemingly slow days and frenzied firestorms of the scandal reporting.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 24 January 2025
Accepted 19 June 2025

KEYWORDS
Media-government relations; political journalism; scandal reporting; Robodebt

Introduction

Changing conceptions of time have a strong influence on the ways that contemporary journalists report on political scandals in Australia. Journalists have become known as the leading members of a stopwatch culture with a need for speed to report on events that will always appear relevant to public audiences (Ricketson, 2010). Faster news cycles have sped up the tempo of reporting in the Canberra Parliamentary Press Gallery and journalism organisations, once known for taking extensive time to investigate the political upheavals during their formerly quiet, overnight graveyard shifts (Dickie, 1988; Simons & Strangio, 2018). Across the hyper-concentrated 24/7 platforms, media identities still take time to develop close relations with both the leading and opposition MPs. The familiar interactions have contributed to journalists' abilities to provide intense coverage of scandals during the peak times of audience clicks and rating (Hess & Waller, 2017; Meese & Hurcombe, 2022; Tiffen, 2000). In contrast, Australian politicians and political advisers have been known to influence or spin the news by releasing their messages about

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contentious issues during assumed media downtimes such as weekends and holidays (McKnight, 2015; Megalogenis, 2021).

Australian political journalists have also been recognised as an interpretive community who need to take time to discuss their professional boundaries including their news topics and ways of reporting (Brookes, 2019; Zelizer, 1993). Journalists' boundary work has frequently centred on powerful rhetoric about their role as watchdogs who serve the public good rather than discussing self-criticism about ethical lapses (Haas, 2006). Rich scholarly work has shown journalists' need for 'proper time' (Ball, 2016), when they can avoid 'flitting from one issue to the next' (Ricketson, 2010) and 'the traps' of crisis reporting (Lee & Bottomley, 2010) by temporarily disconnecting from 24/7 burnout (Bélair-Gagnon, Bossio, Holton, & Molyneux, 2022). This article contributes to this important literature about journalists' conceptions of time, the pace of news and the value of pausing during the accelerated media cycle that is influenced by spin, click-driven scandals and political advisers' assumptions about reporters' deadlines.

This is the first study of journalists' news coverage, discussions and reflections about Australia's escalating Robodebt scandal during the media peak times and supposedly slow news seasons between 2015 and 2024. Introduced by the former Coalition Government, Robodebt is a popular colloquialism for an automated debt-recovery system that sparked a storm of protests by digital activists who rapidly formed a networked community on social media (Bruns, Kasianenko, Suresh, Dehghan, & Vodden, 2024). The nation's social security provider, Centrelink, automatically issued debt notices to about 470,000 Australians who were suspected of receiving overpayments in government welfare aid. The system became known as 'laughably mathematically illiterate' by using a faulty algorithm that miscalculated the alleged debtors' assumed earnings (Carney, 2023). The scheme was recognised as unique because the scandal revelations led to two test cases in the Federal Court and a royal commission. The federal government was ordered to spend $1.8 billion in the court settlement to repay the victims affected by the scheme, which had initially cost another $600 million to implement until it was scrapped (Goldenfein, 2024; Thompson, Samson, & Kurnia, 2024). The subsequent royal commission found that the scheme had been neither fair nor legal (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023a). The royal commissioner, Catherine Holmes, also referred to the media's 'patchy' coverage of the inquiry; however, she praised a *Guardian Australia* digital journalist and a *Saturday Paper* press reporter for their social media commentaries, which she described as an important public service about the day-to-day hearings (Guardian Australia, 2023).

The royal commissioner's remarks suggested a need for the watchdog functions traditionally associated with Australia's legacy press that will ideally hold power to account. The watchdog role is under threat as journalism organisations prioritise breaking news and sensational clickbait that does not allow time for reporters to pause and reflect on the professional practices that are necessary for the news exposés of social injustices (Carson, 2014; Fisher, Nolan, McGuinness, & Park, 2022). As an interpretive community, journalists have preferred to retell stories of their reporting triumphs (Haas, 2006; Zelizer, 1993). Australian political journalists have at times been involved in paradigm repair when they have initiated collegial discussions in response to a shared challenge and reasserted the value of the watchdog role in democracy (Brookes, 2019).

Using the concept of interpretive communities (Zelizer, 1993), this study sought to answer the research question: Which themes do journalists portray in their reporting about techniques of pausing, reflecting and working during their news coverage of the Robodebt scheme from 2015 to 2024? This study conducts a qualitative, textual analysis of the reporting and argues that journalists became involved in a growing interpretive community that challenged official misconceptions about the pace of news, deadlines and click-driven content. As this study finds, journalists increasingly disrupted the government's promotional media drops or announcements. They spent more time to investigate the scheme during supposedly slow news seasons such as weekends and summer holidays. They progressively evaluated their initial reporting and citizens' increasing exposés of a political scandal. This study demonstrates that journalists increasingly engaged in rare self-criticism and boundary work to redefine traditional assumptions about their pace of news, including the supposed peak times and slow seasons, by asserting their need for watchful, purposive news investigations.

Reinterpreting the pace of news

Time has become a central, defining element to determine what is news (Harro-Loit & Josephi, 2019). Australian journalists' views about what is immediate and what they consider to be a long time span have changed dramatically within the digitised landscape. The industry changes have had a profound effect on the nation's political journalism that was dominated by two major organisations, News Limited and Fairfax (now part of Nine), during the rapid uptake of Internet technologies in the 1990s (Meese & Hurcombe, 2022). Since then, the entry of digital newsrooms has included Sky News that has targeted politicians and opinion makers with changing news updates on continually rolling deadlines (Young, 2009). Relatively recent journalism entrants include the print *Saturday Paper* with long-form, narrative reporting. According to Simons and Strangio (2018), deadlines have become constant amid an atmosphere of cacophony in the press gallery. As the then political journalist Katharine Murphy explained: '[i]t's sort of like there's a kind of a mad orchestra conductor appearing up the front, and then another conductor pushes them off and takes over' (27). Meese and Hurcombe (2022) note that the legacy print and broadcasting companies now dominate Australian digital news platforms, although the elite, insider reporting style can alienate younger audiences.

The accelerated 24/7 cycle has led to growing newsroom-driven demands for sensational scoops, insider gossip and savvy analysis at faster paces. The gossipy style has not only influenced the press gallery's online commentaries but also legacy organisations that have been recognised for watchdog journalism (Bruns, 2012). The then news anchor of the ABC's investigative *7.30 Report*, O'Brien (2005, p. 72) commented:

> if you're sitting at home in the lounge room, I don't blame you at times if you're left dazed and confused by a story that races you through the political merry-go-round with rapid-fire voice-over, a succession of clipped grabs and a jumble of imagery.

The contemporary explosion of trained advisers has also influenced politicians' soundbites or spin that appear in breaking news. McKnight (2015) defines spin as the advice provided by professional advisers to shape political messages in the media for promoting their own interests. O'Brien (2005, p. 72) observes, 'Over the years I've watched the

process of the incredible shrinking sound bite. If we try really hard these days, we can get a politician's comment down to a single word'. Carefully crafted soundbites have kept the press gallery abuzz, but have also led to scholarly critiques that reporters function as a herd inside a Canberra-centred bubble that focuses on political elites such as party leaders (Brookes, 2019; Bruns & Nuernbergk, 2019). Simons and Strangio (2018, p. 54) remark that '[s]imply waltzing on' has become a prevailing attitude among press gallery reporters that do not have time to reflect and resolve ethical dilemmas.

Growing scholarly works show the value of journalistic reflection amid the constant political commentaries, looming deadlines and media spin. According to Bossio (2007), the rapid circulation of media messages can create spaces where 'slippages of meaning, silences or organisational restraints allow for alternative representations to be presented'. The alternative media representations can allow for more in-depth reporting that discusses the supposedly hidden messages behind insider jokes, stereotyped dog whistles and political winks that can accompany media spin. For example, news reporting can be effective when critiquing politicians' actions and challenging discriminatory discourses or dog whistles that pander to stereotypes. As Brookes (2019) finds, the press gallery still draws on rhetoric about a newspaper watchdog role that supposedly influences other media programming including the nightly televised news. For example, Brookes quotes a gallery press reporter's assertion: 'I always find it interesting when people talk about, you know, online's taking over and that sort of thing because . . . so many times you'd watch the 6:00 news and go "well that was page five, that was page three"' (p. 327). The discussions suggest journalists' central, agenda-setting role that Guardian Australia editor Taylor (2020a, p. 17) identifies as being able 'to report politics as an exercise that matters deeply to people's lives, not as some kind of amusing, or horrifying, parlour game'.

Journalism scholars have shown there is a need for opportunities that allow journalists to reflect and reinvent 24/7 journalism. As Ricketson (2010) explains, 'we need to understand that flitting from one issue to the next without ever pausing to plumb their depths becomes a way of avoiding rather than engaging in the society that journalism can and should serve'. Bélair-Gagnon, Bossio, Holton, and Molyneux (2022) assert news organisations' need to provide forms of disconnection that allow space for developing 'skills and practices that better ensure safe, sustainable, and productive online connection'. These scholarly views support slow journalism and its emphasis on taking the time for deeper investigations of original news subjects (Le Masurier, 2014). Slow journalism refers to a less hurried pace of news work as well as temporary breaks when newsrooms can be in a 'full summer holiday mode' (Cheng, 2021, p. 886).

Although total digital disconnection is unlikely, journalists have been able to find times to come together as a profession and discuss their everyday work (Bélair-Gagnon, Bossio, Holton, & Molyneux, 2022). As an interpretive community, they can uphold their professional watchdog ideals (Zelizer, 1993). In some cases, their discussions can lead to paradigm repair as they reassert the ethical boundaries of their community after receiving a critique by another profession (Vos & Moore, 2020). Local journalists can also agree to broaden their political reporting beyond a Canberra-centred bubble (Barnes, Dugmore, English, Natoli, & Stephens, 2022).

Journalists have faced escalating challenges to their rhetorical claims of being a central watchdog for exposing the backstage politics that affect the public good.

The widely publicised Robodebt scandal has become a prime example that has shown the power of civil society – rather than journalism – to expose injustice in a fast-paced, crowd-sourced environment (McMillan, 2017; van Krieken, 2024). The case also relates to Tiffen's (2000) notion of a major political scandal which is caused by justified outrage over a serious and damaging incident. Activist volunteers rapidly sourced and shared victims' distressing stories on social media and their website #NotMyDebt (Hearn, 2022). Bruns, Kasianenko, Suresh, Dehghan, and Vodden (2024) found that Twitter activists would critique the ABC's live coverage of the royal commission hearings. The rushed administration of the program ultimately contributed to a deterioration of social trust in democratic governance and media reliability (Bruns, 2023; Kao, 2024).

Method

This conceptual discussion leads to this study's research question about which themes do journalists portray in their news discussions about their techniques of pausing, reflecting and working during Robodebt? Data for this study comes from a Factiva search of news articles and an investigation of the related government communications. The time frame ranged from the scheme's introduction in 2015 until an Australian Public Service Commission taskforce's findings in September 2024 about the governmental code of conduct breaches. The initial Factiva search centred on keywords about Robodebt and journalism. This search focused on the legacy news companies that still dominate online reporting (Meese & Hurcombe, 2022). The search was extended to the related broadcast and online reporting mentioned in the legacy news articles that focused on journalists' coverage of Robodebt. This search generated 500 articles and videos published by Australian print, broadcast and online-only news organisations. The government communications mainly came from the royal commission hearings including former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's WhatsApp messages and the recollections of the then Human Services Minister Alan Tudge's media adviser about the scheme. The news articles were subjected to a close reading and qualitative content analysis to identify the turning points in journalists' coverage of the scheme (Zelizer, 1993, p. 24).

The study's qualitative analysis focused on metajournalistic discourse – public expressions by journalists about the meaning of the news and the journalism practices that produced them (Carlson, 2016). The evaluation of journalists' public expressions draws on Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) inductive, iterative approach. This approach involved looking for evaluative comments about journalism, then a close reading and identifying broad themes. The themes included journalism as a watchdog on power; the ethical avoidance of stereotyping and exploiting vulnerable people for media gain; and journalists' function as purposive agents through research, freedom of inquiry and reflection. The articles and video transcripts were read line by line with a focus on pausing techniques established in the journalism literature. The pausing techniques included newsrooms being in a slow holiday mode (Cheng, 2021); journalists' temporary disconnections from 24/7 reporting; and taking time to investigate official messages to present alternative news representations (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022; Bossio, 2007).

Findings and discussion

Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the sample of news items and the related government communications. The themes emphasised the growing value of purposive reflection, the need to disrupt media spin and engage in more professional self-criticism. Together, these themes allow for identifying how Australian political journalists actively pursue, portray and present the relatively new techniques of pausing in the digital news cycle to challenge traditional assumptions about their pace of news and click-driven spin.

The slow news summer

Journalists increasingly asserted the public value of a calmer pace of news to allow time for fact-checking the government promotions about a fast-changing, money-saving scheme. In a retrospective piece, *Guardian Australia* reporter Chris Knaus recollected his conversation with a whistleblower about the scheme's introduction during the summer of 2016, which he described as 'a time when the news cycle slows down' (Cassidy & Cordell, 2023). The pause in the news cycle contrasted with the government soundbites about a faster system that led to 'a huge leap' in welfare debt notices and symbolised 'a tough welfare cop on the beat . . . to stop those cheats' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015, p. 6727; Tudge, 2016). The government promotions included a media drop in *The Australian* and *A Current Affair* that aired Human Services Minister Alan Tudge's public warning to alleged debtors: 'We'll find you. We'll track you down and you will have to repay those debts and you may end up in prison' (A Current Affair, 2023; Martin, 2016).

The ABC's investigative team for youth audiences, *Hack*, reported that they had started investigating citizen complaints about receiving accusatory debt notices. *Hack's* digital article (2016) included news interviews with former and current university students as well as a popular Reddit activists' thread exposing the challenges of contacting the Centrelink hotline. Online technology reporter James Purtill remarked, 'The problems also expose Centrelink to accusations of bullying – of recklessly naming debts and hoping members of the public will pay up instead of going through an arduous review process'. The initial *Guardian Australia* and *Hack* investigations distinguished their teams' investigations from a prevalent reporting style that can alienate youth audiences, which Meese and Hurcombe (2022, p. 161) have called 'parliamentary insiderism' (Knaus, 2016; Purtill, 2016).

A *Guardian Australia* commentator and university legal academic, Darren O'Donovan, recalled that some other news organisations appeared indifferent towards the early publicised complaints about the scheme. He commented (O'Donovan, 2023) that 'robodebt was designated as a "welfare" or "summer" story by editors'. *The Sydney Morning Herald* journalist, Jenna Price, shared O'Donovan's stories of seeing his university students in tears as they asked for assignment extensions towards the end of 2016 because they had received terrifying debt notices (Price, 2019). Price later declared in *The Canberra Times* (Price, 2023), 'let me also apologise to Australians on behalf of my journalistic colleagues who swallowed the whole "the poor are dole bludgers and cheats" approach hook, line and sinker'. In contrast, Price praised media commentators and

bloggers such as O'Donovan who 'made sure we all knew what was going on. They would not be distracted'. The news coverage of the activist commentators suggested that their work met Lindlof's definition (Lindlof, 2002) of a successful media practice that is recognised by professional members of an interpretive community. Journalists at the ABC, *Guardian Australia* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* engaged in paradigm repair that reasserted the need for journalistic watchfulness to protect vulnerable citizens. Their news reflections also served to suggest Bossio's (2007) observations about dog-whistling or stereotyped political messages when there are 'slippages of meaning' and silences that allow for alternative media representations. Journalists progressively challenged the dog-whistling soundbites about so-called welfare cheats.

The alternative news discourses can gradually undermine the dominant discourses about stereotyped views in the media. Tudge's office initially tried to downplay the negative news reporting as coming from the 'left-wing media' as they called the ABC, *The Age, The Guardian*, *The Saturday Paper* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023b, 2023c). News reflections later appeared in *The Australian* about the government's media drops for the newspaper. *The Australian's* journalist, Holly Hales, reported that the government was publicising only the scheme's achievements. Hales (2023, p. 7) also quoted Tudge's admission to the royal commission: 'I had it recommended to me that this would be a good story to get out to show what the government is doing'. *The Australian's* then freedom of information editor, Michael McKinnon, acknowledged that '[c]osy relationships and secrecy' contributed to the scheme's implementation (McKinnon, 2023). The news organisation's candid comments suggested Haas' view (2006) of rare and genuine news media self-criticism when journalists comment on the processes that shape the coverage of an issue.

Nine's *A Current Affair* news team also reflected on their decision to televise Tudge's warning about jailing debtors. *A Current Affair* reporter Pippa Bradshaw (2022) reported on a royal commission revelation that welfare fraud comprised only 0.1% of the Robodebt cases at the time of the televised interview. During the royal commission hearings, Tudge explained that he had selected the primetime program to air his warning because of the show's impact, but he also acknowledged he should have clarified his media statement. After the broadcast interview, *A Current Affair* (2017, 2018) increasingly aired programs about 'innocent people in the firing line' that featured sensational headlines such as 'Centrelink Scare Tactics' and 'Robo-Debt Sham?' Reporter Dimitry Clancey interviewed a local radio host who declared his phones were 'running hot' and he asked on-air, 'Is the government concerned about the mental welfare of vulnerable Australians? That's the broader question here' (A Current Affair, 2017). Public policy professor Richard Mulgan (2020) commented in *The Canberra Times* that the tabloid television show was increasingly showing an 'outraged and sympathetic portrayal of innocent victims'. The growing news reflections suggested that rival journalists were engaging in paradigm repair to try to rectify their professional standards and distinguish their work from the elite insider image of Canberra-based political circles.

Disrupting spin

Journalists increasingly interrupted the government efforts to shut down negative news about the scheme. Tudge's media adviser, Rachelle Miller, recollected to the royal

commission that media interest intensified during the Christmas and New Year holidays between 2016 and 2017 (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023c). In early January 2017, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull sent an urgent WhatsApp message about a critical *Sydney Morning Herald* article to Tudge who was away on an overseas family holiday (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023b). Several days later, Social Services Minister Christian Porter messaged Turnbull that the scheme did not 'warrant a pause in the process'. At the same time, Tudge messaged Turnbull that 'we have staff leaking to abc [*sic*] . . . which we have to manage'. Miller recalled the ministerial office's view that 'the people who read these news sources were predominantly Labor or Greens voters, so we were not losing any votes, however we were concerned about the continuing media attention' (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023c). Department of Social Services secretary Campbell (2018) in a Canberra keynote speech that the media issue 'ran hot' in early January 2017. Campbell reportedly joked, 'try not to roll things out in January, because there is not much other media going on and you find . . . that's the only headline in town' (Morton, 2022). The slippages of the government's media strategy revealed an official effort to try to divert journalists' attention from the controversies.

During the royal commission, Tudge's adviser Miller recalled a ministerial strategy to run a friendlier counternarrative in *The Australian* and the tabloids (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023c). The ministerial office believed the news organisations would be interested in stories about 'the supposed "dole bludgers"' because the reader subscribers were assumed to be Coalition and swing voters. The strategy included Tudge's live televised interview on Sky News (2017) when he asserted to political reporter Laura Jayes, 'the scheme is working'. Jayes asked Tudge: 'do you admit that this has perhaps left a bit of a bad taste in people's mouths this summer'? The next day, Turnbull messaged political adviser Kerry Pinkstone who opined that: 'Tudge being MIA [missing in action] let the story run too long, but I think the interviews he has done have calmed abit [*sic*] of the noise' (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023b).

A week later, a journalist asked Turnbull (2017) at a news conference: 'Is it fair to target pensioners and the disabled with these Centrelink robo-letters after all the furore that has gone on over the past fortnight'? Turnbull replied the system was 'quite appropriate'. That evening, he messaged Tudge to ask, 'I hope I answered correctly . . . Important to have this settled down by the time we get back to parliament' (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023b). The ministerial adviser, Miller, recollected that Turnbull 'did not like the "dole-bludger" narrative . . . However, the stories were still approved by his press office' (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023c). The strategy included another media drop for *The Australian* about Centrelink recipients owing significant debts (Benson, 2017). During a related radio interview, 2GB finance news host Warren Moore commented to Tudge that the minister 'must be quite happy' with *The Australian* article (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023a). Tudge responded, 'Well, it's a very significant story'. Afterwards, royal commissioner Catherine Holmes remarked that Tudge should have disclosed on-air that his ministerial office was the source of the story because the media drop 'was not done openly' (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023a). The organisational restraints (Bossio, 2007) of a public inquiry provided opportunities for journalists to pause and reflect on the impact of a governmental media strategy on citizen lives.

Relatively new journalism organisations and bloggers can prompt journalists' introspection about the profession's reporting (Haas, 2006). For example, empathetic stories about Centrelink clients were published in the relatively recent *The Saturday Paper* and a *Sydney Morning Herald* freelancer's blog. *The Saturday Paper's* (McKenzie-Murray, 2017) investigation focused on a 28-year-old man's suicide after receiving debt notices, while blogger Andie Fox (2017) wrote a *Herald* commentary about feeling 'terrorised' by Centrelink. Later, *The Australian* reported on a government adviser's ironic reaction to *The Saturday Paper* investigation by commenting that the tragic news was 'a nice start to the weekend' (Hales, 2023, p. 7). The increasingly emotive, personalised reporting ignited a media firestorm (Lawrence, 2017).

In response, ministerial adviser Rachelle Miller released details about Fox's tax history, which she later explained as a 'last-option' move to take control of the media narrative (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023c). *Guardian Australia's* Christopher Knaus (2018) recalled that Tudge's office had distributed the personal tax information to journalists for their reporting. Miller reflected that the ministerial office was operating under 'immense pressure and stress' (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023c). The news of Fox's financial arrangements appeared in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article and she lodged complaints to the Australian Federal Police and the Information Commissioner, which ruled in 2018 that there was not a breach of privacy (Malone, 2017). The newspaper's journalist, Jenna Price, reflected (Price, 2019, p. 23): 'Anyone who did want to question it [Robodebt] could see what happened to Andie Fox, the young mother whose details were shared by the government in an attempt to discredit her. Terrifying. Vile'.

The growing journalistic self-criticism included Nine's apology on Twitter for airing an early morning bulletin about the debt-recovery system that was headlined, 'Dole Bludgers Shamed'. Nine's producer Robert McKnight (2019) remarked that Twitter warriors had complained about the story, although *Sunrise* presenter Natalie Barr corrected and subbed the news copy for the rest of the day's bulletins. Later, royal commissioner Catherine Holmes found that the intimidating government tactics shut down most of the victims' stories in the media (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023c). Journalists became increasingly involved in paradigm repair to critique the 'dole bludger' headlines during the media firestorm.

A purposive pause

Reporters shared more stories about the government's unravelling media strategy as they reported on a political scandal. As Tiffen (2000) observes, 'a constellation of conflicts' can escalate a scandal when the political opposition gets involved in a crisis to advance the rival political party's electoral advantage. Journalists reported on Opposition government services spokesman Bill Shorten's media announcement about a Robodebt class action against the Commonwealth in late 2019 (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019). News Corp's *Herald Sun* journalist Tom Minear (2022) recalled that senior legal partner Peter Gordon appeared hesitant as he approached a media pack at Parliament House. Shorten apparently told Gordon, 'he was just going to have to wing it' at the doorstop interview. The next year, the intense news coverage attracted a record audience at the time for the Federal Court's live streaming of a class action (Coorey & Pelly, 2021).

Soon afterwards, journalists criticised the timing of a government media release on a Friday afternoon that announced a $721 million refund to welfare recipients billed with false debts. *Guardian Australia* live bloggers commented, 'Friday afternoon has become a bit of a dumping ground for policy backflips and embarrassing announcements' (Henriques-Gomes, 2020). *The Australian* commentator, Peter van Onselen (2020), declared that the timing was 'the nadir of political spin' and a 'cold and ruthless calculation' that newspaper offices would perceive the story to be old news when they prepared the next weekday editions. He added: 'But let's be very clear about the Robodebt story – it is an utter disgrace . . . If this sorry episode doesn't make you cynical about the base spin of politics, nothing will'. The news critiques provided more opportunities, using Tiffen's (2000) words, to 'explore and define the exercise of power and responsibility'.

The long-running scandal provided time for journalists and news commentators to evaluate their past reporting. Industry awards gave opportunities to showcase professional high points. Walkley award winners included the ABC *7.30 Report's* Paul Farrell and Alex McDonald for exposing that the government sent debt notices to a deceased pensioner; as well as *Guardian Australia's* Henriques-Gomes for reporting the whistleblower leaks about the scheme; and *The Saturday Paper's* Rick Morton for his explanatory journalism about the royal commission. *Guardian Australia* press gallery reporter Katharine Murphy (2020) reflected, 'as a journalist, as a citizen, I care deeply about this stuff. We all need to care deeply about this stuff, because the quality of our institutions, and the processes they run on our behalf, matters'. The news organisation's editor Lenore Taylor (2020b) opined, 'Holding politicians and powerful institutions to account requires sticking with things . . . pursuing case after Kafkaesque robodebt case'. *The Australian* columnist, Robert Gottliebsen (2023), opined that a 'truth-telling whistleblower emerged in robodebt but the minister was able to snow journalists'.

The Australian's van Onselen (2021) criticised the widespread commentaries that overlooked 'the way the government approached the robodebt debacle; indeed, the way it refused to correct its mistakes soon enough. Yet these sorts of issues get swept up in wider white noise'. The digital newspaper's commentator, William Mitchell (2020), called for an end to 'accusative nomenclature – cruisers, bludgers, job snobs, lifters and leaners'. *The Canberra Times* former editor Jack Waterford bluntly asserted (Waterford, 2023a), 'the numbers of paid public relations people, marketeers, "spokespeople" and other professional spin-doctors and liars has increased by about 600 per cent'. Waterford (2023b) also welcomed the royal commission's recommendation to abandon a longstanding 'Cabinet trolley' practice of hiding embarrassing government documents and claiming that the compromising material is privileged and safe from scrutiny.

Conclusion

This study suggests the value of considering citizen exposés and blogs for encouraging journalists to develop techniques of pausing and publicising self-criticism about their news coverage of a political scandal during a media frenzy. It reveals fresh insights into Australian political journalism that has previously appeared too close to an elite Canberra bubble.

As this study finds, reporters at the ABC and *Guardian Australia* developed pausing techniques by taking time to investigate citizen views and portray their watchdog role of

standing up for the disadvantaged during a slow news summer. The pausing techniques extended to other news organisations as journalists exposed the political tactics that assumed that reporting teams would completely disconnect during weekends and holidays. This case study also demonstrates how journalists and news commentators engaged in rare publicly aired self-criticism to try to restore their ethical boundaries. They increasingly challenged the 24/7 churning of stereotyped spin in a growing effort to regain trust in their symbolic watchdog roles of protecting vulnerable citizens and seeking voices seldomly heard.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the AANZCA24 Conference organisers and reviewers for their valuable recommendations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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