

# UNDER THE FACADE OF JOURNALISM:

How News Corp used Fear,  
Manipulation and Division  
to Campaign Against the  
Indigenous Voice to Parliament

**Murdoch Referendum**

**Accountability Project: Final Report**

Dr Victoria Fielding

November 2023

Australians for a Murdoch Royal Commission commissioned this research to hold News Corp accountable for their coverage of the Voice referendum.

The project was funded by more than 900 everyday people who are dedicated to the fight for a better media landscape.

# CONTENTS

Foreword from Larissa Baldwin-Roberts	3	<b>1) POLITICAL CAMPAIGN: HOW NEWS CORP RAN A 'NO' CAMPAIGN</b>	<b>11</b>	Albo's Voice: "Prime Minister Anthony Albanese should resign"	28
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>			Omission of 'Yes' campaigners	30
Key Findings	6	Commentary as campaigning: News Corp staff against the Voice	13	Negative coverage of Corporations, Organisations and Celebrities campaigning for 'Yes'	31
The role of news media in elections and referenda	8	Commentators as political campaigners	14	'Bullies', 'Racist' and 'Wealthy Elite': How News Corp characterised the 'Yes' Campaign	32
Methodology	9	Blurring the lines between fact and opinion	15	<b>3) MANIPULATION AND DIVISION: NEWS CORP'S USE OF MISINFORMATION AND RACIAL HATRED</b>	<b>33</b>
Bias is just the tip of the iceberg	9	News Corp commentary in the 'anger-tainment' ecosystem	17	News Corp's role in legitimising more radical disinformation	34
		News Corp cannot be relied on for accurate, informative and fair reporting	18	'No' campaigners point to News Corp misinformation	35
		Social media reach of 'Yes' versus 'No' reporting	20	Social media users and faceless campaigners take conspiracy theory to extremes	36
		<b>2) FEAR: THE ARGUMENTS NEWS CORP USED TO CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE VOICE</b>	<b>21</b>	The role of News Corp in the anti-Voice media ecosystem	38
		Privileging and extending arguments from the official No Campaign	22	Racial Division: Inside News Corp's claim that the Voice gives First Nations people "special privileges"	39
		"The Voice is divisive"	23	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>41</b>
		"The Voice is too powerful"	23		
		"The Voice won't help Aboriginal people"	25		
		"There are no details about the Voice"	26		
		Yes campaigners under attack	27		

# FOREWORD BY LARISSA BALDWIN-ROBERTS

**When I first sat down to read this report, I didn't imagine there would be anything in here that could shock me.**

I've been organising in Aboriginal communities for more than 15 years. I'm also now the CEO of GetUp - one of Australia's biggest progressive organisations and one that has a long and proud history of going head-to-head with the Murdoch Press.

Between these two roles, I've experienced more than most when it comes to News Corp's worst behaviour. Time and time again, I've seen the way they incite and weaponise hatred towards First Nations people - always at its most vitriolic when we are organised and having impact.

From the moment the Voice referendum was called, I knew we needed to brace ourselves.

I knew First Nations communities would be attacked and vilified across News Corp's front pages. I knew every racist mouthpiece in this country would come out of the woodwork for an 'interview' on *Sky News*.

**And, of course, I knew Murdoch's many 'news' outlets would remain in lock-step with Peter Dutton's No campaign.**

Yet, despite being prepared for all of this, there are things in the Referendum and this research that shocked me.

There are two points in particular that I want to highlight for those of you reading this report.

The first is the complexity and nuance of the ways News Corp stokes fear and hatred towards First Nations people.

During the Referendum campaign, there were predictably loud and egregious examples of racially-charged content: editorial lines about how First Nations people should be 'grateful' for colonisation; repeatedly platforming Tony Abbott to tell us all how sick he is of sitting through Welcome to Country; broadcasting Andrew Bolt's relentless attacks on our history and culture.

But, as this report shows, the ways News Corp attacks First Nations people isn't always loud and it isn't always overt. Sometimes it's even silent.

Failing to include a plurality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in nation-wide coverage during a referendum was a racially-charged attack. Systematically misrepresenting the scale of support for the Voice in First Nations communities was a racially-charged attack.

They platformed figureheads of the racist no campaign like Jacinta Price and Warren Mundine who were given airtime to fuel lies about our communities.




The second point in this research that I want to highlight for those of you reading this are the findings about the way News Corp commentary and misinformation bleeds into the broader digital ecosystem.

Of course, News Corp has never adhered to the usual journalistic standards of truth, accuracy and impartiality. But what this report shows us about the way News Corp's misinformation reverberates online is chilling.

It shows us that in 2023 the lines between traditional and social media are more blurred than ever. Sadly, our current media regulators - which have always been inadequate - are utterly unfit to meet the challenges of this new digital landscape.

We will never know how the Voice referendum may have played out differently had our political leaders had the courage to take News Corp on years ago.



I am not just talking about thirteen weeks preceding the vote which are analysed in this report. I am talking about how our society might be different had News Corp not spent decades using their enormous platform to fuel racism towards First Nations people.

I cannot answer this question with any certainty. But what I can say with certainty is that the fight for First Nations justice continues regardless of the referendum outcome.

First Nations communities will continue fighting for land rights, water rights, and to protect the cultural heritage of the oldest living culture on earth.

We will never stop fighting to stop our people from dying at the hands of the police, and for justice for 516 First Nations people who've died in custody since 1991.

Our communities will persist in our fight for truth-telling and Treaty.

But, unfortunately, another thing I can say with certainty is that these fights will be made immeasurably harder by the Murdoch Press.

**For as long as our political leaders are too scared to hold News Corp accountable, the fight for First Nations justice, along with every initiative to make our society a better place, will be stymied.**

Since the Referendum we've already seen the far right feeling emboldened, from racism about our communities to peddling climate change misinformation.

Fighting for a better media landscape is baked into GetUp's DNA. Our movement knows that a better, more diverse media landscape would mean a brighter future across every issue we work on, from income inequality to climate justice.

I want to see the next generation of First Nations leaders grow up hearing our stories of strength and seeing our faces in the mainstream media. I want them to have the opportunity to hear from a diversity of First Nations voices in major newspapers, not just those select few who have been sanctioned by News Corp's editors.

And, most importantly, I want black kids to look at our leaders being celebrated and platformed in the media and think: I want that to be me one day.

But, for as long as the Murdoch Press is allowed to retain its toxic stranglehold over our media landscape, I fear the experience those kids will have reading the news in this country is likely to be a much darker one.

It's time for governments in this country to take a stand against the hatred that the Murdoch Press spread across our democracy and communities.

But governments only do what we demand of them so we need our movement stronger and fighting back against the lies of the Murdoch Press.

*Larissa is a proud Widjambul Wai-bal woman from the Bundjalung Nations and GetUp's CEO.*

# INTRODUCTION

**In May 2023, the Australian Financial Review<sup>1</sup> reported that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese met with News Corp executives and senior editors 'in a bid to convince the publisher that it should back the Indigenous Voice to parliament'.**

The article described how Albanese's office saw News Corp's support as 'crucial', due to the agenda setting influence of their coverage on 2GB radio station and online newspaper the *Daily Mail*.

It was apparently already clear that News Corp commentators Peta Credlin, Andrew Bolt and Janet Albrechtsen were opposing the Voice, but:

“The Yes campaign will hope the strongest lines opposing the Voice will come from News Corp's opinion writers, rather than filter into stories in the news pages and broadcasts.”

An unnamed senior News Corp employee also told the Australian Financial Review that “there was a sense internally that the company did not want to be “on the wrong side of history”” on the Voice.

The Prime Minister's meeting with News Corp suggests it is well established in the Australian political landscape that News

Corp takes positions in democratic debates, and that the organisation has a significant influence on the media landscape more broadly.

The 'Yes' campaign's hope of anti-Voice coverage being confined to opinion writers also suggests commentary was viewed as a niche aspect of News Corp content, auxiliary to its main business of delivering fact-based reporting.

However, this research finds that opinion-based commentary was in fact the dominant feature of News Corp's Voice coverage, making up the majority of the word count and minutes across the four outlets analysed.

News Corp's voluminous commentary, often backed up by agenda-driven reporting, was found to represent an overt political campaign against the Voice. Australia's most powerful media company used its unrivalled platform to run a campaign based on fear, manipulation, and division.

'Yes' campaigner Noel Pearson<sup>2</sup> said during the referendum he would “leave it to the historians to tell us about how the media covered this campaign”.

This report details News Corp's behaviour throughout the Voice referendum campaign. We will leave it to the reader to decide which side of history News Corp chose to be on.

<sup>1</sup> 21 May 2023, Mark Di Stefano and Tom McIlroy, Australian Financial Review, PM privately met Murdoch editors to woo them on Voice, <https://www.afr.com/companies/media-and-marketing/pm-privately-met-murdoch-editors-to-woo-them-on-voice-20230519-p5d9rz>

<sup>2</sup> 30 July 2023, Noel Pearson, quoted by Sophie Elsworth, The Australian, Key voice architect Megan Davis criticises media for coverage of the voice referendum.

# KEY FINDINGS

This is a summary of the key findings from this report. More detail on each of these findings, including graphs, can be found on the corresponding page numbers listed.

1

**News Corp's coverage of the Voice constituted an overt political campaign in favour of a 'No' vote. Evidence to support this finding includes:**

- News Corp produced a greater volume of commentary (opinion) than it did reporting (news) about the Voice. Across the print publications, commentary and op-eds made up 54% of Voice coverage and on *Sky News* commentary made up 68% of content. *More detail can be found on page 13.*
- The distinction between commentary and reporting was frequently blurred in a manner that disguised commentary as legitimate journalism. *More detail can be found on page 16.*
- Ninety-five percent of arguments made by News Corp staff were in favour of 'No'. *More detail can be found on page 14.*
- News Corp's Voice commentary was found to have very low standards of accuracy and verification. *More detail can be found on page 17.*

2

**The most frequently used 'No' arguments from News Corp were consistent with those of the official 'No' campaign:**

- The four 'No' arguments most frequently used by News Corp against the Voice can be categorised into four main themes: the Voice is divisive, the Voice is too powerful, the Voice won't help Indigenous people, and there are no details. *More detail can be found on page 23.*
- These same 'No' arguments were found<sup>3</sup> to be amongst the top reasons people voted 'No'. *More detail can be found on page 12.*
- Research from Accent Research has shown<sup>4</sup> the people who read *The Australian*, and tabloids including the *Herald Sun* or the *Daily Telegraph* voted 'No' at a rate of 67%, and people who included *Sky News* as a main news source at a rate of 79%. *More detail can be found on page 12.*

3

**News Corp's coverage played a singular role in the broader anti-Voice misinformation ecosystem, with *Sky News* being responsible for the most egregious examples.**

- *Sky News* misinformation about the length of the Uluru Statement was cited as a 'source' on unauthorised campaign

material featuring extreme disinformation such as claiming a 'Yes' vote would result in homes being seized. *More detail can be found on page 38.*

- *Sky News*' most radical and racially charged content frequently goes viral on YouTube, being seen by hundreds of thousands of people. *More detail can be found on page 18.*
- *Sky News* routinely platformed guests who espoused outlandish misinformation, with no fact checking or contextualisation from hosts. *More detail can be found on page 17.*

4

**News Corp's Voice coverage was extremely biased in favour of the 'No' campaign and this was especially egregious on *Sky News* and in the tabloid papers:**

- Across the four outlets examined, arguments were 68% in favour of 'No'. If *The Australian*, which was the most balanced outlet, is excluded, then 76% of words were 'No' arguments. *More detail can be found on page 10.*
- News Corp's anti-Voice bias was largely driven by the sheer volume of commentary that was produced in comparison to reporting. *More detail can be found on page 13.*

<sup>3,4</sup> 16 October, 2023, An Octopus Group Accent Research Report, Understanding voter behaviour at the Voice referendum: A first look, <https://www.accent-research.com/voice>

- ‘Yes’ campaigners were subjected to extensive negative coverage, which was in stark contrast to ‘No’ campaigners who were routinely platformed and praised. *More detail can be found on page 28.*

## 5

### News Corp’s anti-Voice campaign appeared to have dual agendas: defeating the Voice at the referendum and using this defeat to undermine Anthony Albanese’s Prime Ministership:

- Prime Minister Albanese was the most included and mentioned person in News Corp’s Voice coverage by a large margin. *More detail can be found on page 29.*
- This determination to make Prime Minister Albanese the face of the ‘Yes’ campaign effectively omitted the contributions of First Nations activists. The Prime Minister featured in more content than Noel Pearson, Megan Davis, Dean Parkin, Marcia Langton and Thomas Mayo combined. *More detail can be found on page 29.*
- In the aftermath of the referendum, News Corp has repeatedly called for Prime Minister Albanese to step down. *More detail can be found on page 30.*



“ We in the media must ask if we are truly honouring a world worth living in. Too often we are the poison in the bloodstream of our society. I fear the media does not have the love or the language to speak to the gentle spirits of our land.”

Stan Grant<sup>5</sup>

On October 14 2023, approximately 60% of Australians voted 'No' in a referendum which asked voters whether they wanted to enshrine Indigenous recognition in the Australian constitution in the form of a Voice to Parliament. The Voice to Parliament was to be an advisory body which would have given First Nations people an opportunity to advise parliament about policies impacting their communities.

The concept of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament grew from decades of First Nations activism and from many years of consultation between Indigenous people and Australian governments. In 2017, Indigenous leaders held a National Constitutional Convention at Uluru – the Uluru Dialogues – and delivered the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

This statement invited Australians to walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people toward a better future. The Voice was to be one step on this journey towards reconciliation.

During his election acceptance speech in May 2022, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese committed to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart by holding a referendum to enshrine the Voice in the constitution. In March 2023, Albanese announced the referendum would be held that year.

## THE ROLE OF NEWS CORP IN ELECTIONS AND REFERENDA

**During elections and referenda, news organisations have great power. In Australia, this great power is largely concentrated in the hands of one media company: Murdoch-owned News Corp.**

News Corp is Australia's largest and most influential organisation in a highly concentrated media landscape. They are the 'unchallenged dominant player' in Australia's national newspaper market, owning a 59% share by readership<sup>6</sup>.

News Corp's *Sky News* broadcast channel is not only watched by Foxtel subscribers but is also syndicated free-to-air in regional Australia through the WIN Television network and has an enormous digital audience via its YouTube channel.

This research explores News Corp's coverage of the Voice referendum and also highlights News Corp's role in the media landscape more broadly.

News media gives voice to different interests and ideas, providing audiences with valuable information they need to effectively engage in democratic processes. News media also play an important democratic role as watchdogs by holding powerful groups and interests to account and scrutinising their behaviour.

In relation to the Voice referendum, an ideal pluralistic news media system would give equal opportunity to the 'Yes' and 'No' advocates to make their case to the Australian people.

Balance does not just mean including different voices in equal proportion. It also means treating them impartially, equitably and holding them to the same standards of truth and accountability.

This equitable treatment should include fair and reasonable scrutiny of the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns – including people and arguments – to ensure they are not misleading the public.

<sup>5</sup> 22 May 2023, Stan Grant, ABC News, VIDEO: Stan Grant makes statement before stepping away as Q+A host, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-22/stan-grant-makes-statement-on-qanda/102379574>  
<sup>6</sup> 2021, Benedetta Brevini and Michael Ward, GetUp's Who Controls Our Media Report 2021, <https://www.getup.org.au/campaigns/abc-media-campaigns/share-the-media-diversity-report/who-controls-our-media-the-new-report-commissioned-by-getup>



# METHODOLOGY

**This report contains findings from the *Murdoch Referendum Accountability Project* for thirteen weeks of analysis. The project analysed News Corp articles mentioning 'the Voice' published by *The Australian*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun* online or print newspapers, and videos posted on the *Sky News* YouTube channel between 17 July and the day of the referendum, 14 October, 2023.**

In total 1,613 pieces were analysed, which is 90% of articles from the print publications and 58% of *Sky News* videos. Video selection was randomised by prioritising 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. The sample of newspaper articles excluded those with cursory mentions of the Voice.

Each piece of content was analysed using a multi-layered coding framework to determine the

number of words used to represent views from different sources, arguments that align with the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns, and the way that the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns were characterised.

This intricate method provides quantification of the elements of coverage by number of words, delivering a full and meaningful picture of News Corp's coverage of the Voice referendum.

The number of media items published, and the sample analysed is shown in Table 1.

Media monitoring was undertaken by four media experts, including project leader Dr Victoria Fielding and research assistants Dr Catherine Son, Dr Alexander Beare and Dr Robert Boucaut.

Dr Victoria Fielding is a Lecturer in Strategic Communication at the University of Adelaide. Dr Fielding's research focuses on media coverage of political, social and industrial contestation.

	Published (excluding duplicates)	Sample analysed
<i>The Australian</i>	654	580
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	267	244
<i>Herald Sun</i>	223	203
<i>Sky News</i>	1,002	586
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,146</b>	<b>1,613</b>

**Table 1:** Content published, and sample analysed, 17 July - 14 October, 2023.

# BIAS IS JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

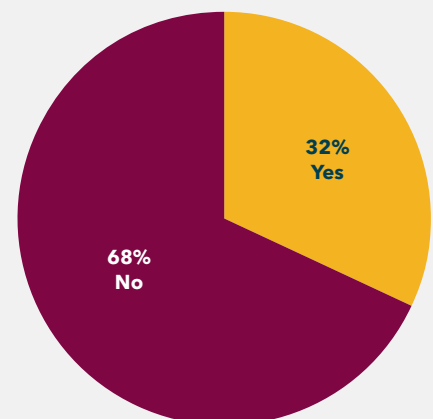
**News Corp is well known for their right-wing editorial positions and there was never any real doubt that their coverage of the Voice referendum would favour the 'No' campaign.**

However, this analysis demonstrates that News Corp's behaviour during the referendum amounted to far more than just a biased editorial position: News Corp ran a fully fledged scare campaign designed to spread misinformation, confusion and fear about the Voice.

Rather than reporting about the Voice referendum impartially as a news organisation is expected to do, News Corp privileged 'No' campaign arguments and people and frequently presented 'Yes' arguments and people negatively.

Where arguments were platformed, 68% of words were 'No' arguments and 32% 'Yes' (Figure 1). It is notable that *The Australian* was the most balanced of the four outlets. If *The Australian* is excluded from this calculation, 76% of words were 'No' arguments and 24% 'Yes'.

## TOTAL ARGUMENTS BY WORDS



**Figure 1:** Percentage 'Yes' and 'No' arguments by number of words, July 17 - October 14 2023, across all outlets, newspaper articles from *Australian* (580), *Herald Sun* (203) and *Daily Telegraph* (244) and *Sky News* videos (586).

The research insights presented in this report show that News Corp's behaviour amounted to a concerted effort to destroy public support for the Voice, and with it, Anthony Albanese's political credibility.

The assessment that News Corp engaged in active political campaigning against the Voice is based on evidence that:

- News Corp produced a greater volume of commentary (opinion) than it did reporting (journalism) about the Voice.
- News Corp's editorial content was heavily biased in favour of the 'No' campaign.
- News Corp's arguments against the Voice were almost entirely aligned with key messages from the 'No' campaign.
- News Corp frequently published and broadcast anti-Voice misinformation and racially charged commentary, both from News Corp staff and from external 'No' campaigners.
- News Corp's 'No' campaign was particularly evident in its commentary. Although commentary is notionally understood as the sharing of opinions, the one-sided and aggressive nature of News Corp commentary was found to represent a political campaign against the Voice.

This campaigning not only amplified the 'No' campaign's messages, but extended 'No' arguments to extremes, using misinformation along with racially charged language and arguments.

A lonely supporter of the Voice at News Corp throughout the referendum was Chris Kenny, Associate Editor of National Affairs at *The Australian* and *Sky News* host. Kenny regularly criticised the 'No' campaign.

“ If we put aside the deceptive scare campaigns from the No side, which pretends the voice will have real power rather than merely an advisory platform, there is an even uglier aspect to the voice opposition.

The campaign has increasingly morphed into an opportunity to vent grievances against any aspect of Indigenous people's place in our society... This has become a grab-bag of anti-Indigenous grievance, which makes it the worst manifestation of politics this nation has seen in living memory.”

*Chris Kenny, The Australian, September 23 2023*

News Corp's coverage platformed the most racially charged and disingenuous elements from the 'No' campaign, including misrepresenting the Voice's power and questioning the appropriateness of acknowledging Indigenous people's cultural place in Australia.

Such arguments were broadcast through the privileging of 'No' campaigners like Liberal Party Opposition Leader Peter Dutton and Country Liberal Party Senator Jacinta Yangapi Nampijinpa Price, and were also extensively promoted and extended by News Corp writers and *Sky News* hosts.

Furthermore, News Corp not only promoted the 'No' campaign but played a unique role in extending and lending credibility to the 'No' campaign's arguments in the public sphere.

**In this respect, News Corp were not just biased towards the 'No' campaign. News Corp used its considerable power and reach to oppose the Voice as part of the 'No' campaign.**

The subsequent sections of this report describe how News Corp's political campaign of fear, manipulation and division about the Voice manifested, within three key findings:

### **POLITICAL CAMPAIGN - How News Corp ran a 'No' Campaign:**

News Corp's campaigning style of commentary was the dominant type of content, more voluminous and impactful than reporting. This campaign represented a clear News Corp agenda to undermine the Voice, as well as Labor Party Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, by framing the Voice as "Albanese's Voice". The campaign also opposed Indigenous people's recognition, rights, policies and funding aimed at closing the gap between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people.

### **FEAR - The arguments News Corp used to campaign against the Voice:**

'No' arguments and voices were presented favourably, whereas 'Yes' campaign arguments and voices were presented negatively. Campaign style commentary and some reporting was used to present five key themes in opposition to the Voice which culminated in a fear campaign of confusion and contradiction about the Voice.

### **MANIPULATION AND DIVISION - News Corp's use of misinformation and racial hatred:**

Some campaigning and reporting used extremist rhetoric against the Voice, arguments which were often underpinned by misinformation and racial hatred. This extremist rhetoric acted as a legitimising bridge between the 'No' campaign and even more extreme forms of manipulative and divisive disinformation and racial hatred circulating on social media.

# POLITICAL CAMPAIGN: How News Corp ran a 'No' Campaign

**Australia's broadcasting regulator, the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) reported in June 2022<sup>7</sup> that media is increasingly melding news with opinion, including in a hybrid 'infotainment' format.**

This blurring has been found in ACMA research<sup>8</sup> to make it difficult for audiences to distinguish between news and commentary, with four out of five Australians struggling to differentiate between fact and opinion in news and current affairs reporting. ACMA's report<sup>9</sup> also found that 85% of Australians are concerned about whether news is being presented in a balanced and impartial way.

News Corp's Voice coverage had a clear agenda to create fear, manipulate understanding of the Voice, and to stoke racial division to defeat the 'Yes' campaign in the referendum. This campaign also appeared to have the goal of undermining Prime Minister Albanese's political capital by blaming the failure of the referendum on him.

As pointed out by former Liberal leader and professor at the ANU Crawford School of Public Policy, John Hewson<sup>10</sup>, News Corp had a clear agenda, acting as Opposition Leader Peter Dutton's "media arm" in their opposition to the Voice:

“Dutton's media arm, the Murdoch press, has driven his agenda before, during and now after the referendum, culminating with the call for Albanese to stand down on the night of the result. This outrageous suggestion, made on *Sky News's* referendum panel, was very poor journalism.

It was also blatant hypocrisy, blaming Albanese for creating the division that hosts such as Andrew Bolt, Peta Credlin, Paul Murray and Rowan Dean had worked so hard to ensure.”

Opinion polling research by Accent Research<sup>11</sup> released after the referendum found News Corp audiences were more likely to vote 'No' than the general population.

This research reported that people who selected *Sky News* as one of their top five sources of news and information were intending to vote 'No' by a margin of 79%. Those who named *The Australian* or daily tabloids as their information sources, which includes the *Herald Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph*, were voting 'No' at a rate of 67%.

This research also asked respondents what their three most important reasons for voting 'No' were. The most commonly cited 'most important' reasons in order were:

1. It will divide Australia (82% included this as one of their reasons).
2. It won't do anything to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
3. There are more important issues.
4. It will give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders too much power.
5. I don't understand it.

These reasons for voting 'No' were found to match the key arguments of 'No' campaigners, and were the primary arguments News Corp used against the Voice.

<sup>7</sup> June 2022, ACMA - What audiences want - Audience expectations for content safeguards - A position paper for professional content providers, <https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2022-06/report/what-audiences-want-audience-expectations-content-safeguards>

<sup>8</sup> January 2020, ACMA - Attitudes to news today Impartiality and commercial influence, <https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2020-01/report/australians-and-news-impartiality-and-commercial-influence>

<sup>9</sup> June 2022, ACMA - What audiences want - Audience expectations for content safeguards - A position paper for professional content providers, <https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2022-06/report/what-audiences-want-audience-expectations-content-safeguards>

<sup>10</sup> 21 October 2023, John Hewson, Beyond the referendum, *The Saturday Paper*, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/comment/topic/2023/10/21/beyond-the-referendum>

<sup>11</sup> 16 October, 2023, An Octopus Group Accent Research Report, Understanding voter behaviour at the Voice referendum: A first look, <https://www.accent-research.com/voice>

News Corp's campaign of fear, manipulation and division was predominantly driven by commentators who effectively functioned as campaigners. Much of News Corp's reporting also reinforced the more extreme narratives used in campaigning commentary.

Crucially, commentary and external op-eds were found to be more voluminous by word count or minutes than news reporting content. This is an important finding given that News Corp is traditionally considered to be a news organisation that also platforms some commentary. However, in the case of the Voice referendum, the majority of News Corp's coverage was found to be presenting opinions, with the majority of those opinions actively campaigning for a 'No' vote.

Furthermore, across its reporting, News Corp failed to adequately include useful information about what the Voice was, the benefits it could have and the problems it aimed to address.

On the whole, News Corp journalists also failed to hold 'No' campaigners to account for the myriad inconsistencies in arguments against the Voice, and in some cases, overt misinformation. Much reporting was used to platform 'No' arguments and campaigners, as well as the campaigning of News Corp commentators.

This critique is of News Corp's reporting as a whole, and there were some standout instances of high quality, rigorous reporting. However, these examples of high quality journalism were in the minority.

Table 2 shows commentary and op-eds made up the majority of News Corp content based on the following categories:

- **Reporting:** Reporting is considered to be journalists presenting facts about the referendum, including sourcing comments from 'Yes' and 'No' advocates, attending events, and presenting coverage of key referendum moments. The journalist's views or opinions are not revealed.
- **Commentary:** Commentary or opinion is traditionally viewed as the publishing or broadcasting of 'views'. However, News Corp

commentary is much closer to political campaigning, including overt directions on how to vote. News Corp's commentary authors or hosts advocated in their vast majority for their readers or viewers to 'vote no'.

- **External Op-Eds:** External op-eds were authored for the three newspapers by people involved in or advocating for the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns who were not employed by News Corp as regular commentators or columnists. This included op-eds by 'Yes' and 'No' campaigners, including politicians, experts and supporters.
- **Other Videos:** Other videos are those without editorial input from journalists or hosts, such as question time in parliament, National Press Club footage, or live press conferences. These videos were excluded from analysis.

Newspapers	Articles/Videos	Words	Percentage Words
<b>Commentary</b>	436	380,190	43%
<b>External Op-Ed</b>	100	92,774	11%
<b>Reporting</b>	587	410,687	46%
Sky News	Videos	Time (Minutes)	Percentage Minutes
<b>Commentary</b>	615	3371	68%
<b>Reporting</b>	316	1216	24%
<b>Other Videos</b>	80	389	8%

**Table 2:** Newspaper articles and Sky News videos categorised as reporting, commentary/op-eds or other videos, 17 July - 14 October 2023

# COMMENTARY AS CAMPAIGNING: NEWS CORP STAFF AGAINST THE VOICE

**News Corp’s voluminous commentary, which took the form of a political campaign, is responsible for the one-sidedness of their Voice coverage.**

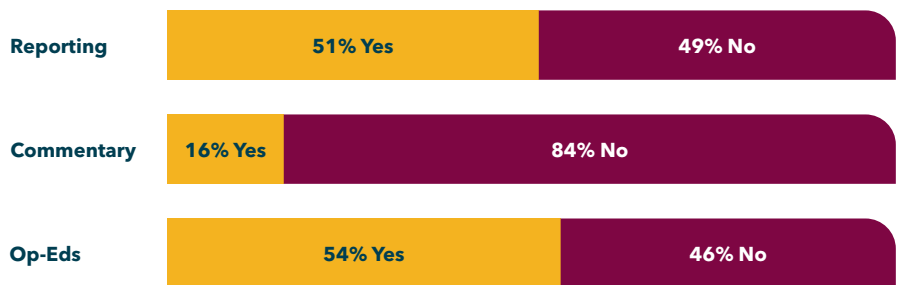
As per Figure 2, ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ arguments in reporting content and external op-eds were balanced, platforming both campaigns in fairly equal measure (51% ‘Yes’ words in reporting and 54% in op-eds). The commentary content, conversely, is extremely one-sided, privileging the ‘No’ campaign arguments in 84% of words.

Crucially, commentary or campaigning content, and op-eds, made up a far greater proportion of argumentative content than reporting. This is because commentary content is used by News Corp to persuade readers and viewers towards a particular position on the Voice.

Although reporters include sources who make arguments, news reports do not include as much argumentation content as commentary pieces, again contributing to the dominance of ‘No’ arguments amongst all News Corp coverage.

Another way of viewing the one-sidedness of News Corp’s Voice coverage is to categorise ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ arguments into three categories of content:

## PROPORTION OF ‘YES’ AND ‘NO’ ARGUMENTS IN REPORTING, COMMENTARY AND OP-EDS

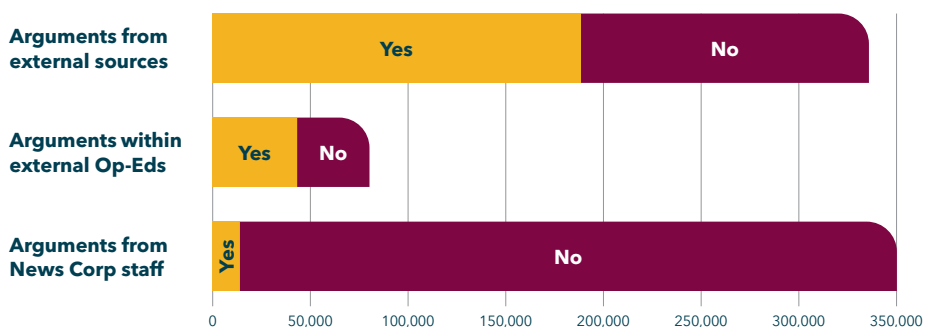


**Figure 2:** Proportion of ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ Arguments in Reporting, Commentary and Op-Eds by number of words, July 17 - October 14 2023, across all outlets, newspaper articles from Australian (580), Herald Sun (203) and Daily Telegraph (244) and Sky News videos (586)

1. News Corp authors and hosts presenting arguments for or against the Voice.
2. Voices external to News Corp being quoted as sources in reporting or commentary in the context of presenting arguments for or against the Voice.
3. Op-ed authors external to News Corp authoring pieces advocating for or against the Voice.

As can be seen in Figure 3, ‘Yes’ arguments by number of words are almost entirely contributed by voices external to News Corp through being included as sources, or authoring op-eds. Conversely, ‘No’ arguments came from all three types of content: ‘No’ voices being quoted; authoring op-eds; and in the majority of ‘No’ arguments - from News Corp voices themselves campaigning against the Voice.

## COMPARING ‘YES’ AND ‘NO’ ARGUMENTS BY WORDS FROM NEWS CORP STAFF, EXTERNAL OP-EDS AND SOURCES



**Figure 3:** ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ arguments by number of words for external sources, external op-ed writers and internal News Corp staff, July 17 - October 14 2023, across all outlets, newspaper articles from Australian (580), Herald Sun (203) and Daily Telegraph (244) and Sky News videos (586).

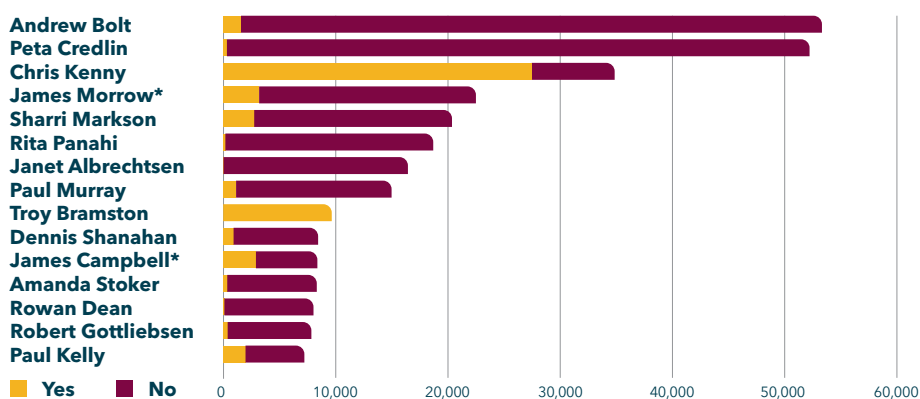
# COMMENTATORS AS POLITICAL CAMPAIGNERS

The most prolific commentators about the Voice were Andrew Bolt, Peta Credlin and Chris Kenny, who host *Sky News* shows and write for *News Corp* newspapers.

As shown in Figure 4, of the top fifteen most prolific commentators as measured by number of argument words, only two supported the Voice; Chris Kenny and Troy Bramston. All the other commentators were extremely one-sided in their advocacy against the Voice.

Two of the prolific commentators were James Morrow and James Campbell, who both commentate and produce journalism at *News Corp*. They have been included on the commentary graph to reflect their clear opposition to the Voice, a position reflected in the one-sidedness of their reporting.

## COMPARING 'YES' AND 'NO' ARGUMENTS FOR 15 TOP COMMENTATORS



**Figure 4:** Words reflecting 'Yes' and 'No' arguments, for the fifteen most prolific commentators (authors and hosts), July 17 - October 14 2023, newspaper articles from *Australian* (580), *Herald Sun* (203) and *Daily Telegraph* (244) and *Sky News* videos (586). James Morrow and James Campbell do both reporting and commentary.



“ The answer is clear. Vote no to Canberra’s racist and divisive voice.”

Cori Bernardi, *Sky News*, September 17 2023

“ I’m hopeful the no vote will get up... if your friends are voting ‘yes’, try and convince them right up to the very death. That’s how important it is for the country.”

Teena McQueen, *Sky News* Contributor, hosted by Caleb Bond, September 27 2023

“ Australians are being lied to by their Prime Minister and their government. It’s a disgrace. Vote no.”

Rowan Dean, *Sky News*, July 30 2023

“ Now I want it [the Voice] to be put up, I want it to fail and fail badly so it’s put away hopefully forever and a day.”

Peta Credlin, *Sky News*, July 24 2023

“ So please vote no for the sake of the children if not for yourself.”

Andrew Bolt, *Sky News*, August 23 2023

It is noteworthy that Chris Kenny and Troy Bramston often used their opportunities to advocate for the Voice to criticise ‘No’ campaigners for contradictory arguments and for misinformation. Despite these critiques, *News Corp*’s ‘No’ commentators continued their contradiction and misinformation in aid of the ‘No’ campaign.

The overtly one-sided representation of ‘No’ arguments at *News Corp* through campaigning styles of commentary undermined the public’s access to a diversity of views and arguments about the Voice during the referendum.

The impact of *News Corp*’s bias and overt campaigning through commentary is significant given their unmatched scale in the Australian news media landscape.

# BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN FACT AND OPINION

---

**This report differentiates between reporting and commentary through identifying content written or broadcast by journalists versus commentators or opinion writers. This delineation, however, is often ambiguous at News Corp because there is a frequent melding of reporting with commentary.**

Conventionally, news media organisations explicitly differentiate between content that is ‘news’ and content that is ‘opinion’. News Corp, however, sanctions the blending of commentary with reporting through their editorial policy which 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.”<sup>12</sup>

Writing about the *Herald Sun*’s campaigning against the Victorian Labor government during the 2022 election, media academic Denis Muller<sup>13</sup> wrote:

“One of the main democratic functions of the media is to provide the public with a bedrock of reliable information on which to make political, economic and social choices. They are deprived of that bedrock when media platforms distort reality or mix up news with commentary, something the *Herald Sun* has turned into an anti-democratic art form.”

News Corp’s melding of campaign-like commentary with news impacts the accuracy, quality and fairness of the information they present to audiences, along with the audience’s ability to differentiate between fact and opinion. This manifests in several ways.

Firstly, News Corp staff regularly step between the role of journalist and commentator, making it difficult for the audience to know whether they are presenting factual news or opinion laden commentary.

For example, James Morrow is a commentator at *Sky News* and opinion writer for the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph*, where he overtly opposed the Voice.

At the same time, he is presented as a journalist at the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* in the role of National Affairs Editor.

Another example of melding between commentary and news is when commentators co-author articles with journalists. For instance, *The Australian*’s National Affairs Editor and Canberra Bureau chief, Joe Kelly, co-authored a piece titled “Pearson a bully, misogynist: Price” with high profile commentator at *The Australian*, Janet Albrechtsen (October 14, 2023).

Secondly, content produced by News Corp commentators often resembles news reporting. One reason for this is that commentators appropriate journalistic terminology by presenting their content as investigative journalism. For example, commentators James Morrow and Peta Credlin co-authored a piece framed as journalism for the *Herald Sun*, which starts with the passage:

“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.”

James Morrow and Peta Credlin,  
*Herald Sun*, October 6 2023.

<sup>12</sup> 30 June 2023, Denis Muller, Australian Journalism Review, Commentary: News Corp’s policy on the separation of news and comment contradicts a core press council principle, <https://jeraa.org.au/commentary-news-corps-policy-on-the-separation-of-news-and-comment-contradicts-a-core-press-council-principle/>

<sup>13</sup> 23 November 2022, Denis Muller, The Age, Credibility suffers as election coverage lurches into political fantasy, propaganda, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/election-coverage-lurches-into-political-fantasy-propaganda-20221121-p5bzvg.html>

Another way that News Corp commentary looks like journalism is when commentators interview guests such as politicians and Voice campaigners. Typically, journalists position an interview as an opportunity to scrutinise their interviewee, which is an important element of watchdog journalism.

However, News Corp commentators almost exclusively hosted 'No' advocates and, rather than scrutinising them, commentators provided a platform to advocate that viewers vote 'No'. These external 'No' campaigners worked alongside News Corp's own campaigners, contributing to News Corp's 'No' campaign.

The final element of the melding of campaign-like commentary with reporting is that News Corp commentators work outside of usual news reporting pillars of verification and accuracy. In this sense, the idea that a News Corp commentator is presenting 'opinions' rather than 'news' acts as an alibi for them to unaccountably say or write anything, no matter how demonstrably false.

Furthermore, this lack of accountability extends to commentators' guests, giving them a platform to manipulate truth.

An interview between *Sky News* host Andrew Bolt and Nationals MP Barnaby Joyce about treaties and the Voice is an example of this. In this passage, they argue the Voice gives Aboriginal people "special rights" and present demonstrably false information claiming the Voice could veto parliamentary decisions by overriding the majority will of Australians:

**“ Barnaby Joyce:** *“The moment you move away from that and start defining people as to a greater right and a lesser right you’re completely changing the complexion of Australia...”*

**Andrew Bolt:** *“So, when you say it completely changes the nature of democracy...”*

**Barnaby Joyce:** *“...of course, absolutely, one hundred percent...”*

**Andrew Bolt:** *“...if we have a debate right now, we can’t decide what to do, put up to a vote. If 51, 50 plus one, of the people want this, it happens. But here we’ve got a model where if three percent of the people say no, they can stop the other 97.”*

*Andrew Bolt, Sky News, August 3 2023*

It is important to note that whether presenting news reporting in its most basic factual form or commentary, News Corp is presenting *information* to audiences: information they use when making decisions about the way they vote.

News Corp's Voice coverage was used as a political campaign, driven by commentary as well as melded commentary and reporting.

This campaign was underpinned by scaremongering, as well as manipulated information which sometimes took the form of misinformation, confusion, contradiction and misrepresentation of the Voice. This campaign was found to undermine the public's access to quality, accurate information during the referendum.



News Corp failed to use its Voice referendum coverage to underpin a healthy democracy, and instead degraded public debate.

In considering these findings, we must also recognise News Corp's unrivalled position as the dominant player in the Australian media market.



# NEWS CORP COMMENTARY IN THE 'ANGER-TAINMENT' ECOSYSTEM

**Analysis of Sky News YouTube views and likes reveals that commentary better suits social media platform algorithms than reporting, and therefore the commentary reaches a much larger audience through digital channels.**

As per Table 3, Sky News commentary videos have an average of 28,541 views per video, and 689 likes. This is approximately five times the views and likes of reporting videos.

	Number of videos	Total Views	Average Views	Total Likes	Average Likes
<b>Commentary</b>	615	17,552,628	28,541	423,757	689
<b>Reporting</b>	316	1,891,127	5,985	41,797	132
<b>Other</b>	80	456,823	5,710	13,442	168

**Table 3:** Total and average views and likes for 1,011 YouTube Sky News Voice videos, 17 July - 14 October 2023.

The top five videos by views (Table 4) also shows that some Sky News content reaches a much larger than average audience.

The titles of these videos demonstrate that aggressively negative, conflict driven and politically extreme content is most likely to go viral.

The top five Sky News videos from the period examined include blatant campaigning against the Voice, racially charged attacks on Aboriginal people such as Indigenous Senator Lidia Thorpe, critiques of the worthiness of Indigenous spending, and challenges to the veracity of Aboriginal people's identity and heritage.

Host	Title	Views	Likes
<b>Andrew Bolt, Paul Murray and Caroline De Russo</b>	The disastrous demise of Lidia Thorpe	994,248	16,810
<b>Rowan Dean</b>	'Incoherent nonsense': Sky News hosts bursts [sic] out laughing at bizarre Voice debate on Q&A	579,015	11,520
<b>Peta Credlin</b>	Kamahl was 'spot on' with \$40 billion Indigenous spending claim	357,958	7,761
<b>Sharri Markson</b>	The three reasons why John Howard is against the Voice to Parliament	314,061	6,168
<b>Andrew Bolt</b>	'Almost no one checks': Claims nearly 'a third' of people claiming to be Aboriginal aren't	297,615	4,670

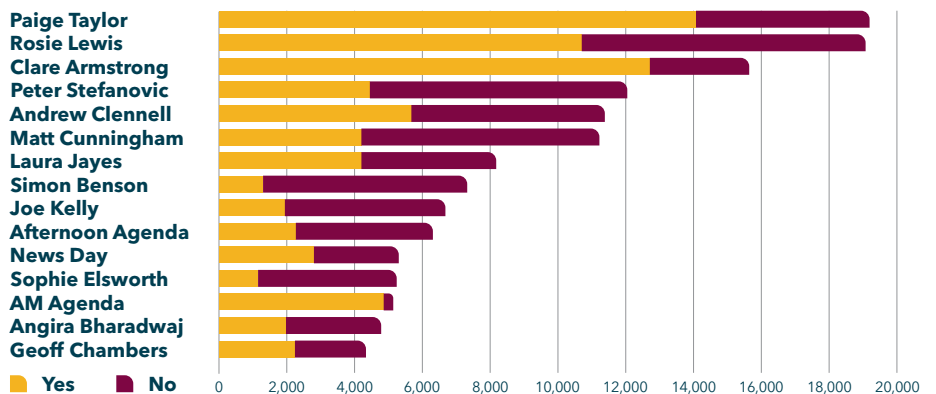
**Table 4:** Top five Voice videos by number of views on Sky News YouTube channel, 17 July - 14 October.

# NEWS CORP CANNOT BE RELIED ON FOR ACCURATE, INFORMATIVE AND FAIR REPORTING

Although there was some excellent reporting about the Voice at News Corp, this reporting was the exception, not the rule. News Corp’s reporting lacked watchdog rigour as it did little to hold ‘No’ campaigners accountable. Reporting also did not adequately investigate and inform audiences about the potential benefits of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

As per Figure 5, these reporters presented mostly balanced coverage of arguments for and against the Voice, with reporting overall found to be 51% ‘Yes’ arguments by words and 49% ‘No’ arguments.

## COMPARING ‘YES’ AND ‘NO’ ARGUMENTS FOR 15 TOP REPORTERS



**Figure 5:** Words reflecting ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ arguments, for the fifteen most prolific reporters (authors and hosts), July 17 – October 14 2023, newspaper articles from *Australian* (580), *Herald Sun* (203) and *Daily Telegraph* (244) and *Sky News* videos (586).

Reporting, however, contained less arguments overall than commentary, with 34% of argument words found in reporting and 66% in commentary and op-eds.

Amongst the prolific reporters about the Voice, particularly Paige Taylor, Rosie Lewis and Clare Armstrong, there was stand-out coverage. These reporters produced quality journalism about the referendum campaigns and investigations into the potential consequences and outcomes of the Voice as a form of Indigenous recognition.

The following examples show how these reporters went behind the scenes of the referendum to deliver audiences important information and worked to hold campaigners on both sides to account.

“Torres Strait Islanders would choose 16 “local voices” – one for each island – and they would sit down with the local council and the Queensland and commonwealth governments four times a year to discuss progress towards shared goals in health, housing, education and other important local matters, according to Noel Pearson’s vision for the Indigenous voice to parliament.”  
*Paige Taylor, The Australian, August 10 2023*

“The No campaign against an Indigenous voice to parliament is standing by Gary Johns despite growing calls for him to resign or be sacked over a series of comments and proposals that include blood tests for Aboriginal welfare recipients and a public holiday celebrating intermarriage between black and white Australians.”  
*Rosie Lewis, The Australian, July 25 2023*

“Once synonymous with drugs, crime and violence, the turnaround of the Sydney suburb of Redfern has been hailed as the perfect example of what more Indigenous communities would be able to achieve when given a say on matters that affect [sic] them through a Voice.”

*Clare Armstrong, Daily Telegraph, October 10 2023*



These examples of quality reporting, however, were not indicative of News Corp reporting overall. Outside of the three most prolific reporters, other News Corp journalists rarely provided audiences with information about:

- How the Voice model could be set up and how it could advise parliament.
- The types of policies that the Voice could give practical advice about and expert insights into why the Voice could have practical benefits in Aboriginal communities.
- The gap between life outcomes of Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal people which the Voice was designed to help address.
- The way the Voice could reduce spending by making policies more efficient and effective.
- Views about the Voice from Aboriginal people not in the ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ campaign.
- Aboriginal people’s experiences of dispossession, massacres, stolen generations, discrimination, and ongoing trauma experienced post colonisation.

This information was important to the ‘Yes’ campaign’s arguments justifying the value of and the need for the Voice. Their absence in most News Corp reporting and commentary effectively omitted key information and thus disadvantaged the ‘Yes’ campaign.

Importantly, when reporting did rarely touch on these topics, it had no impact on other News Corp reporting and commentary campaigning against the Voice. For example, despite Paige Taylor reporting about ‘Yes’ campaigner

Noel Pearson’s vision for the Voice model, other News Corp staff ignored such information and, in their vast majority, continued to say that there were no details of how the Voice might be implemented.

The final details of the Voice were to be decided by parliament; however, there was much material available to reporters about how Voice advocates envisioned it might work, had News Corp chosen to report this.

Furthermore, quality reporting should not just include coverage of the ‘No’ and ‘Yes’ campaigns, but should also involve watchdog journalism, requiring journalists to scrutinise both campaigns’ conduct to hold them to account. Where the ‘Yes’ campaign was constantly criticised by News Corp, the ‘No’ campaign received very little scrutiny from reporters.

Therefore, despite there being some quality News Corp reporting identified in this analysis, the majority of reporting platformed ‘No’ arguments without scrutiny and did not challenge or interrogate their arguments. Alongside the asymmetric platforming of ‘No’ arguments in News Corp commentary, watchdog journalism was also imbalanced.

This imbalance favoured the ‘No’ campaign, leaving them unaccountable, particularly when it came to numerous inconsistencies and misrepresentations amongst their arguments, as discussed below.

# SOCIAL MEDIA REACH OF 'YES' VERSUS 'NO' REPORTING

**Another insight into the role of reporting in driving News Corp's 'No' campaign is the wildly different virality of Sky News reporting videos. Videos using 'No' arguments and themes dramatically outperformed those that reported positive coverage of events or arguments for the 'Yes' campaign.**

The titles of *Sky News*'s five most popular videos reporting about the referendum are shown in Table 5.

As the titles of these videos show, *Sky News*'s best performing reporting content was heavily in favour of the 'No' campaign, mirroring the most viral commentary videos.

The five least watched *Sky News* reporting videos on YouTube, conversely, are all positive reporting for the 'Yes' campaign or critical of the No campaign (Table 6).

These figures could be interpreted by arguing News Corp's one-sidedness towards the 'No' campaign is designed to cater to their audience's pre-existing opposition to the Voice.

However, regardless of News Corp's audiences' pre-existing views on the Voice, News Corp has a responsibility as a news organisation to present 'Yes' and 'No' arguments and people equitably, fairly and accurately whether in reporting or commentary.

The results of this research demonstrate that News Corp failed in their responsibility to inform a healthy democratic debate. Instead, News Corp used their power and influence to generate support for the 'No' campaign.

Host/Show	Title	Views	Likes
Peter Stefanovic	Australians 'unhappy' with Anthony Albanese over Voice to Parliament	58,681	1,290
Peter Stefanovic	Tony Abbott 'getting sick' of Welcome to Country acknowledgements	56,835	2,088
Afternoon Agenda	Marcia Langton 'not helping' the Voice's cause after 'disaster' video emerges	46,421	923
Laura Jayes	Calls for people to 'calm down' after reports of a No volunteer being assaulted	41,232	830
News Night	Albanese is confronted by farmers at the Tamworth 2023 Bush Summit	37,605	840

**Table 5:** Top five Voice reporter videos by number of views on *Sky News* YouTube channel, 17 July - 14 October.

Host/Show	Title	Views	Likes
News Day	'Disappointing' the Coalition continues to 'distort' information about the Voice	562	1
Afternoon Agenda	Community campaign for a Voice to Parliament to 'rev up'	543	5
Peter Stefanovic	'Yes' Voice campaigners targeting Liberal-held marginal seats in Sydney	524	3
AM Agenda	Yes campaign 'need to win the suburbs' to secure Voice victory	512	6
Laura Jayes	Albanese the 'headline speaker' at Yes campaign launch	452	2

**Table 6:** Five least viewed Voice reporter videos on *Sky News* YouTube channel, 17 July - 14 October.

# FEAR:

## The arguments News Corp used to campaign against the Voice

### News Corp's campaign of fear, manipulation and division against the Voice had two clear functions:

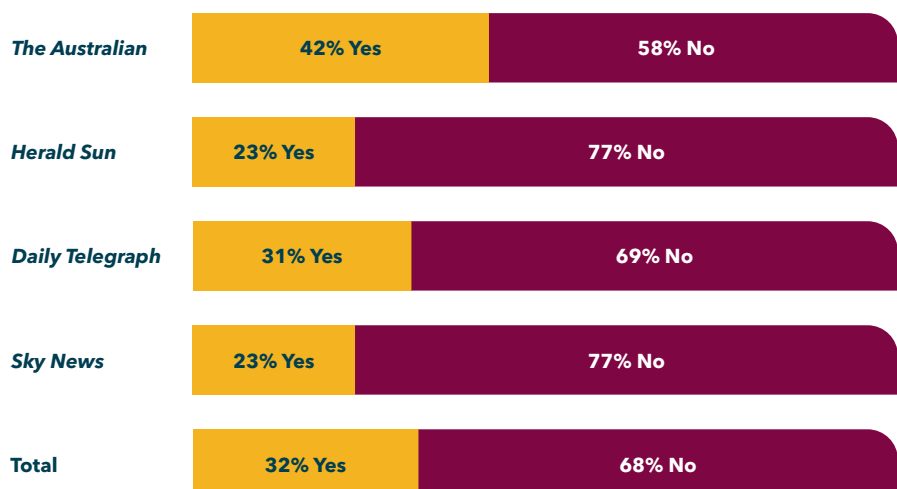
The first was to platform, reinforce and extend the 'No' campaign's key arguments against the Voice by creating fear and doubt about it being divisive, too powerful, risky, and it not helping Aboriginal people.

The second was to cast 'Yes' advocates, particularly Prime Minister Albanese, in a negative light. Although the majority of attacks by word count were directed at Prime Minister Albanese, it is important to note that many of the attacks on Indigenous 'Yes' campaigners were especially vicious.

The percentage of arguments by number of words representing 'Yes' and 'No' positions by outlet is shown in Figure 6.

- Across all four outlets, 68% of words were 'No' arguments, and 32% 'Yes'.
- *The Australian* was the most balanced with 58% 'No' and 42% 'Yes'.
- *The Daily Telegraph* was the second most balanced with 69% 'No' arguments and 31% 'Yes'.
- The *Herald Sun* and *Sky News* were the least balanced, each with 77% 'No' arguments and just 23% 'Yes'.

### PERCENTAGE OF WORDS FOR YES AND NO ARGUMENTS BY OUTLETS



**Figure 6:** Percentage of words for 'Yes' and 'No' arguments by outlets and total, July 17 - October 14 2023, newspaper articles from *Australian* (580), *Herald Sun* (203) and *Daily Telegraph* (244) and *Sky News* videos (586).

# PRIVILEGING AND EXTENDING ARGUMENTS FROM THE OFFICIAL NO CAMPAIGN

## News Corp's campaign against the Voice presented their audience with as many arguments as possible against enshrining the Voice in the constitution.

Sixty-five percent of 'No' argument words were found to fit four different lines of attack against the Voice, each playing their part in a campaign of fear about the consequences of the Voice, overtly amplifying and extending the arguments used by the 'No' campaign:

- The Voice is divisive - 22%
- The Voice is too powerful - 19%
- The Voice won't help Aboriginal people - 16%
- There are no details about the Voice - 7%

An example of 'No' campaigner, Opposition Leader Peter Dutton, combining these themes into one sentence is this quote, framed as his 'final pitch to voters... urging against enshrining a Voice':

“ This thing is permanent, it's divisive, it hasn't been properly explained and it's not going to provide the practical outcomes that we want to see for all Indigenous Australians.”

*Peter Dutton quoted by Clare Armstrong, Daily Telegraph, October 14 2023*

When combined, the overarching 'No' campaign narrative was a fear campaign rife with contradiction and confusion. As one of the few News Corp commentators supporting the Voice, Troy Bramston wrote:

“ The No case is confused and inconsistent, and offers no coherent alternative that would allow Indigenous Australians to advise policymakers and take responsibility for helping to close the gap on education, employment, health, housing, justice and safety outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.”

*Troy Bramston, August 21 2023*

This contradiction and confusion defined News Corp's campaign against the Voice:

- The Voice was at the same time too powerful and would not do anything.
- Despite these consequences and outcomes apparently being well known, conversely there was no detail about how the Voice would work.
- First Nations people were characterised as not needing the Voice, either because colonisation had no negative impacts on them, or because they already receive too much funding to close the gap, or their disadvantage was their own fault.
- The gap between First Nations people and non-Indigenous people's life outcomes, although sometimes acknowledged, was also never framed as dividing Australians. Instead, the Voice - a measure aimed at addressing the gap - was characterised as itself divisive.

Each of these argument themes were used by both 'No' campaigners external to News Corp, and News Corp voices themselves. Each theme is further explored below, with examples of their use. The use of misinformation and racial hatred in underpinning these themes is discussed in the third major finding.

## “THE VOICE IS DIVISIVE”

---

**“Vote no to the Voice of division” was used as one of the most recognisable slogans of the official ‘No’ campaign. This was also the most used argument against the Voice at News Corp; the Voice was characterised as ‘divisive’ in 22% of ‘No’ arguments.**

The accusation that the Voice ‘divides’ Australia has its basis in a fear campaign that suggests non-Aboriginal people would lose something and the country would be damaged by the Voice. A ‘No’ vote through this lens was purportedly going to ‘unify’ Australia.

This argument was particularly reinforced in discussions of opinion polling as it became clear that the majority ‘Yes’ support from polls at the beginning of the campaign was eroding. Polls that were negative for the ‘Yes’ campaign were used to describe Australia as ‘divided’ over the Voice, to reinforce the notion that the referendum itself was inherently ‘divisive’.

Within this theme, the Voice – an advisory body – was also characterised as divisive because it was described as enshrining race in the constitution, despite race already being written into the constitution.

This constitutional enshrining was argued to give Aboriginal people special rights or privileges not afforded to non-Aboriginal people, thus dividing the country based on race. In this vein, commentator Andrew Bolt regularly referred to the Voice as “racist”.

Other related ‘No’ arguments that fit within the division theme were accusations that the Voice threatened democracy, was “un-Australian”, offensive to migrants, racially discriminates, shames non-Aboriginal Australians about their history, erases white culture, and that other acknowledgements and celebrations of Aboriginal culture such as Welcome to Country ceremonies were also divisive.

Here are examples of the “the Voice is divisive” theme:

“ I have always thought the Voice was an act of constitutional self-harm. Why would we have thought for a moment that it was a good idea to give just one group of people a special say over how all of us are governed based on their ancestry.”

*Peta Credlin, Sky News, October 9 2023*

“ If the referendum fails, equality will be the single idea that did most to defeat the proposal to set up a race-based body in the Constitution with special rights not accorded to non-Indigenous Australians.”

*Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, October 11 2023*

The accusation that the Voice “divides” was also linked to more extreme accusations that First Nations people already gain special privileges, and that the Voice will give them more. This is further discussed under the heading ‘Racial Division’.

## “THE VOICE IS TOO POWERFUL”

---

**Another key theme used in opposition to the Voice in 19% of News Corp ‘No’ arguments was the fear campaign suggesting the Voice was more than an advisory body.**

This argument was particularly premised on the threat that the Voice would be a trojan horse for more radical advocacy in the form of a treaty and reparations, where non-Australians would be forced to “pay the rent” for historic wrongs done to Aboriginal people.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart characterised the Voice as the first step of reconciliation, referred to in the statement as ‘Makarrata’, with the Voice proposed to eventually be followed by Treaty and Truth Telling which would investigate the historical injustices faced by Aboriginal people.

The threat of a 'Treaty', however, was used by News Corp voices to suggest that the Voice would "open the door" to activism by Aboriginal people which Australians had not been consulted about. This also implied that the First Nations architects of the Voice had a hidden agenda, which the Prime Minister was also conspiring to hide from the Australian people.

Within this argument, policies unrelated to the Voice, such as the Western Australian government's Indigenous heritage laws, were presented as evidence of what would occur if the Voice was successful.

“ Ms Price added that growing concerns in Western Australia, where a new Aboriginal Heritage Act means that any property larger than 1100 square metres will be forced to pay for Aboriginal Heritage Surveys before doing any work on their land, was a taste of things to come.

“WA is what is coming (nationally),” Ms Price said. “The Voice is the foot in the door and the Prime Minister cannot deny that there will be a continuation of demands on the rest of Australia by activists and individuals seeking to make the most of the opportunity.”  
*James Morrow & Angira Bharadwaj, Daily Telegraph, July 19 2023*

This example also demonstrates how commentary melds with reporting at News Corp, reinforcing their 'No' campaign arguments in a style presented as journalism.

Another element of this fear-based argument was the threat that a Voice enshrined in the constitution was more powerful than a Voice legislated by parliament.

Despite many eminent constitutional experts advising that the Voice was constitutionally safe, and that the only difference between a constitutionally enshrined Voice and a legislated one was its permanency, News Corp privileged a range of voices, including lawyers, who threatened that there were inherent "risks" in a constitutional Voice.

This example shows how the threat of the Voice in the constitution was framed as risky, subject to the power of the High Court, and likely to slow down parliament through radical advocacy:

“ I also discussed how, subject to the High Court, the voice body could clog the entire process of Australian government and in that way be able to fulfil the radical aims of the Uluru statement.”  
*Robert Gottliebsen, The Australian, August 12 2023*

The counter-argument, that the Voice was not risky, was given very little coverage by News Corp, despite there being many opportunities. A week before the referendum, over 70 university law academics wrote an open letter<sup>14</sup> to 'clarify some of the issues that are causing confusion about the proposed constitutional change', and to confirm that 'the vast majority of expert legal opinion agrees that this amendment is not constitutionally risky'.

More overt forms of this argument suggested that not only was the Voice not an advisory body, but that it had the same power as parliament, and thus could veto or usurp Australian people's democratic will. For example, Andrew Bolt regularly referred to the Voice as an 'Aboriginal parliament'.

“ It is not what the Prime Minister has told us. It is not an advisory body.”  
*Peta Credlin, Herald Sun, October 14 2023*

“ Who in the Yes camp did most to kill Labor's Voice, an advisory parliament just for the Aboriginal race and cemented into our constitution?”  
*Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun, October 5 2023*

<sup>14</sup> 6 October 2023, Madi Chwasta and Raf Epstein, ABC News, More than 70 university law academics say Voice 'not constitutionally risky' in letter to Australian public, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-06/open-letter-constitutional-law-university-voice-to-parliament/102937352>



## “THE VOICE WON’T HELP ABORIGINAL PEOPLE”

### Another ‘No’ campaign argument that made up 16% of News Corp’s ‘No’ argument words was the suggestion that the Voice would not help Aboriginal people.

Related to this was the idea that the Voice did not come from grassroots First Nations people, but came from “elites”, referencing political elites, depicting the Voice as bureaucratic waste. The accusation that the Voice came from “elites” was also an inference that it came from inner-city Aboriginal “elites” who were not connected to First Nations communities, particularly regional and remote communities.

This argument was made particularly misleading when it came to accusations that First Nations people did not support the Voice. Two polls conducted prior to the referendum found over eighty percent of Aboriginal people supported the Voice<sup>15</sup>. Despite this, News Corp voices regularly argued the opposite. Here are two examples, with the first showing how potent this message was found to be by the ‘No’ campaign.

“ Focus group research by the No campaign found that when Australians were told not all Indigenous voters supported the voice, a number of people who indicated a soft Yes vote switched to No. Of the six groups of soft Yes voters the No campaign spoke to, nine of 10 voters shifted to No.”

*Geoff Chambers, The Australian, August 13 2023*



“ ...the moment you tell people who know nothing about this, James, that there are Indigenous Australians who are saying no to the voice, game set and match, it’s all over.

What? What right have we as non-indigenous people to tell indigenous people? Oh, we know what’s best for you. That’s what they accuse the colonials of doing. So it’s game. It’s slam dunk for me at that point.”

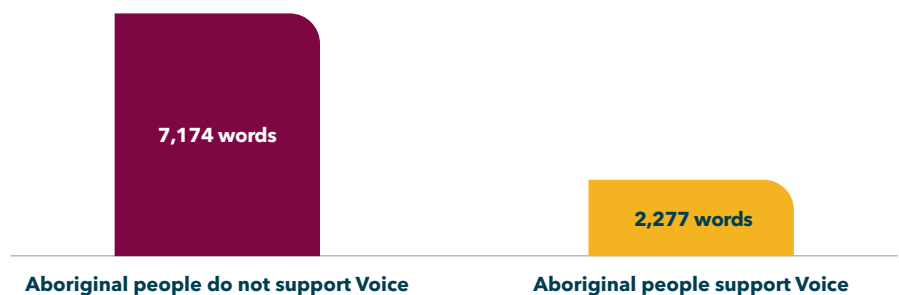
*Rowan Dean, Sky News, September 24 2023*

The fact that the majority of First Nations people supported the Voice was a key argument of the ‘Yes’ campaign, as was the fact that the Voice came from First Nations leaders who represented their grassroots communities at the Uluru Dialogues.

This ‘Yes’ argument, however, was platformed far less often at News Corp than the argument that some First Nations people did not support the Voice, as per Figure 7.

This omission of information is especially egregious in light of booth-level analysis demonstrating that the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal people did indeed vote ‘Yes’ for the Voice<sup>16</sup>.

## COMPARING ARGUMENTS ABOUT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE’S SUPPORT FOR VOICE



**Figure 7:** Comparing arguments about whether Aboriginal people support the Voice by number of words, July 17 – October 14 2023, newspaper articles from Australian (580), *Herald Sun* (203) and *Daily Telegraph* (244) and *Sky News* videos (586).

<sup>15</sup> August 2023, RMIT ABC Fact Check, ABC News, Anthony Albanese says surveys show between 80 and 90 percent of Indigenous Australians support the Voice. Is that correct?, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-02/factcheck-indigenous-australians-support-for-the-voice/102673042>

<sup>16</sup> 15 October 2023, Shane Wright, Sydney Morning Herald, Booth by booth, Indigenous Australians backed the Voice, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/booth-by-booth-indigenous-australians-backed-the-voice-20231015-p5ecc7.htm>

Other elements of this argument were used to not only depict the Voice as ineffectual, but to also link it to other themes by suggesting the Voice would have too much power, and that it would be divisive by giving First Nations people something that other Australians do not receive. These features include:

- The Voice would have no practical benefit.
- Aboriginal people were not more in need of the Voice than non-Aboriginal people.
- Aboriginal people are only disadvantaged because they don't work hard enough, and the Voice won't fix that.
- Aboriginal people are not experiencing ongoing negative impacts of colonisation, and, in some cases, are better off because of colonisation.
- Too much public funding is spent on Aboriginal people already, and the Voice will just cost even more, with the implication being that these funds are wasted.

“ Blaineley nailed the Uluru statement's true sentiment with his blunt statement. It “is militant. It offers no sentence of respect or gratitude to the Australian people”.

Those first settlers and the waves of migrants since January 1788 deserve praise for creating the modern Australia whose taxpayers now pay more than \$40bn a year to descendants of the prehistoric people eking out a Stone Age living on this continent 235 years ago.”

*Piers Akerman, Daily Telegraph, September 10 2023*



“ No one's taking responsibility. That's the problem here. Not more advice, not more money. \$40 billion is spent by Australian taxpayers to close the gap every single year.”

*Peta Credlin, Herald Sun, October 14 2023*

#### “THERE ARE NO DETAILS ABOUT THE VOICE” - 7%

The final argument platformed by News Corp in 7% of 'No' argument words was the claim that there were no details about how the Voice would work. This mirrored the 'No' campaign's much used slogan: “If you don't know, vote no”.

This argument was used variously to claim that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese did not know what the details of the Voice would be or that Albanese did know the details, but was being evasive in providing them.

This idea linked to the argument that the Voice had a hidden agenda, and that it would be far more powerful than an advisory body.

Like many other aspects of News Corp's 'No' arguments, the \$40 billion per year reference was used to mislead audiences. A report by the Lowitja Institute found 82% of this figure was spent on services all Australians receive, including public schools, hospitals, aged care services and prisons<sup>17</sup>.

“ But support for the voice is now crashing according to the polls and it's because of two main reasons. Firstly, the government didn't work out details about how people would be appointed to the advisory body before it announced the referendum and even now Linda Burney says that questions about who and how the voice members will be chosen will all be nipped out later on after the votes have been cast.”

*Sharri Markson, Sky News, July 25 2023*

What this quote alludes to is that the government and the 'Yes' campaign argued that once the Voice was enshrined in the constitution, it would be up to the parliament, including prominent members of the 'No' campaign, to design how it would be implemented.

<sup>17</sup> 28 September 2023, David Crowe, Sydney Morning Herald, Report calls out 'mistruths' on \$40b spend on Indigenous Australians, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/report-calls-out-mistruths-on-40b-spend-on-indigenous-australians-20230928-p5e8fl.html>

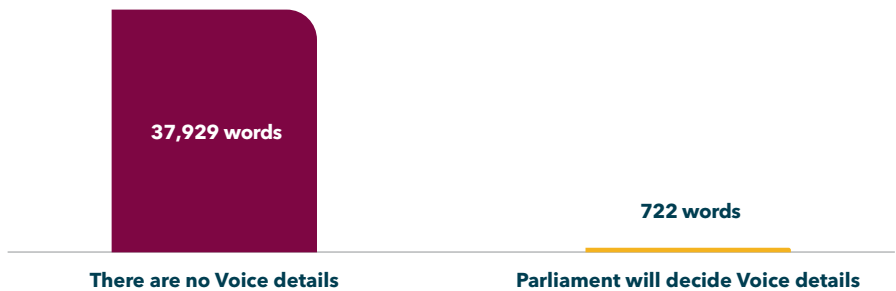
The parliament's role in developing the Voice model was barely included in News Corp coverage, including commentary and campaigning. As per Figure 8, the argument that there are no details was used in over 37,000 words, as compared to less than 800 words discussing the parliament's role in developing the Voice details.

Despite claiming to not know how the Voice would work, News Corp's 'No' campaign asserted that not only were details known, but that those details showed the Voice was powerful, ineffective and divisive, and would have a detrimental impact on non-Indigenous Australians in a range of ways.

The inherent contradictions and inconsistencies amongst these arguments were, of course, never explored.

There were also occasions where News Corp commentators, in contradiction of their own arguments, claimed to know full well how the Voice would work, and critiqued the model:

## COMPARING ARGUMENTS ABOUT VOICE DETAILS



**Figure 8:** Comparing arguments about whether Aboriginal people want a Voice by number of words, July 17 – October 14 2023, newspaper articles from *Australian* (580), *Herald Sun* (203) and *Daily Telegraph* (244) and *Sky News* videos (586).



“...and create a Voice of 24 selected – not elected – activists to tell Parliament and public servants what to do, with the power of the High Court behind them.”

*Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun, September 20 2023*

This type of coverage showed that where details were to be decided later, News Corp would characterise lack of detail as the problem. Yet, when potential details were discussed, the details themselves became more fodder for the scare campaign.

## YES CAMPAIGNERS UNDER ATTACK

**'Yes' advocate and Uluru Dialogues member Megan Davis was quoted in *The Australian* complaining that Voice media coverage was too focused on politicians:**

“All (people) are hearing is Albo, Jacinta, Dutton, politician, politician, politician.”

*Megan Davis, quoted in Sophie Elsworth, The Australian, July 30 2023*

Davis was right that these political figures were dominating News Corp's Voice coverage. However, they were not all treated equally.

Where 'No' campaigners were presented positively in reporting and commentary, 'Yes' campaigners were portrayed negatively, and in many instances, aggressively so.

'Yes' advocates who came under attack included the Prime Minister, First Nations' Voice campaigners and architects, and various organisations, corporations and celebrities who supported the Voice.

# ALBO'S VOICE: "PRIME MINISTER ANTHONY ALBANESE SHOULD RESIGN"

“After the referendum, Prime Minister Albanese was asked on ABC radio “What damage has this done for you politically?”.

Albanese responded: “Well, it was never about me. It was about whether we’d recognise the First Australians in our Constitution”.

Alongside the ‘No’ arguments discussed above, 35% of ‘No’ arguments were found to portray ‘Yes’ campaigners negatively, arguing that they were misleading, were hiding details of the Voice, were untrustworthy, and were being unfair or mean to ‘No’ campaigners.

This negative depiction was particularly focused on Prime Minister Albanese, inferring the Voice referendum was “Albanese’s”, “Labor’s” or “the government’s”

referendum, and blaming him for everything they claimed was problematic about it.

As shown in Figure 9, the Prime Minister was the most included (quoted or paraphrased) and

mentioned (talked about) person throughout News Corp’s referendum coverage. Albanese was included in 19% of content and mentioned in a further 33%. This meant Albanese appeared in 52% of News Corp articles about the Voice.

## PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES/VIDEOS INCLUDING OR MENTIONING VOICES - TOP TEN

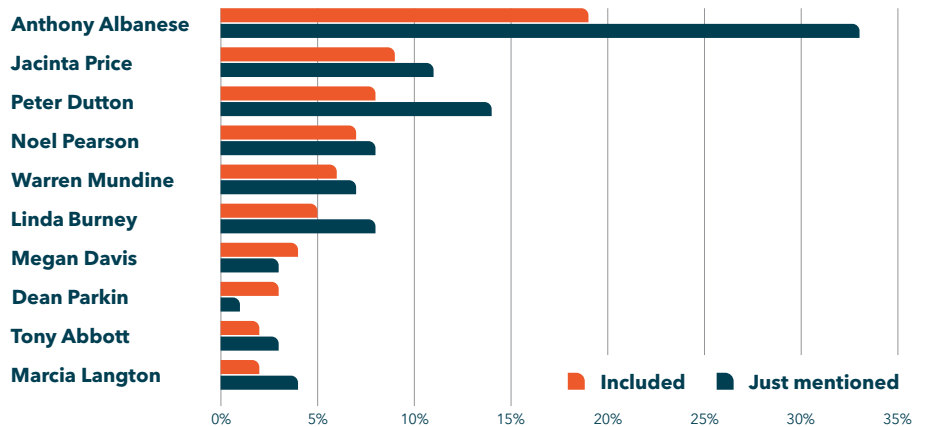


Figure 9: Percentage of articles and videos either including voices or just mentioning them, July 17 - October 14 2023, newspaper articles from Australian (580), Herald Sun (203) and Daily Telegraph (244) and Sky News videos (586).

The second, third, fifth and ninth most included voices were ‘No’ campaigners Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians Jacinta Price, Opposition Leader Peter Dutton, Indigenous businessman and commentator Warren Mundine, and former Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

These ‘No’ campaigners were granted positive coverage to make their case to News Corp audiences. They also received glowing praise from News Corp commentators who regularly hosted them as guests.

‘No’ campaigners also received little to no scrutiny from News Corp reporters about their conduct during the referendum. The prominence given to Indigenous ‘No’ campaigners Price and Mundine also gave audiences the impression that the majority of Aboriginal people did not support the Voice.

<sup>18</sup> 31 October 2023, Prime Minister of Australia, Radio Interview - ABC Wide Bay Breakfast with David Dosett, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/radio-interview-abc-wide-bay-breakfast-david-dosett>

On the other hand, voices from the 'Yes' campaign were framed negatively in most News Corp coverage.

Prime Minister Albanese was framed negatively by being blamed for:

- Dividing Australia with the referendum and the Voice proposition.
- Being responsible for and deceitful about the amount of power the Voice would have.
- The Voice design not having practical benefit and costing too much.
- There not being any details of how the Voice would work.

These accusations were used to reinforce the 'No' arguments discussed above.

Albanese's political fortunes were also characterised as tied to the Voice result, and he was blamed for not doing enough to secure Peter Dutton's bipartisan support to give the Voice a better chance at success.

News Corp campaigners from the early days of the referendum framed the Voice as the possible end of 'Albanese's honeymoon' as Prime Minister:

“ Anthony Albanese just had his worst week as PM. Losing the Fadden by-election last weekend confirms his honeymoon is over and he's in danger. Voters are switching off his crusades. Defeat on his Voice to Parliament seems next, and then he'll be fighting for his government's life.”

*Andrew Bolt, Daily Telegraph, July 17 2023*

When the 'Yes' campaign did not succeed, this result was blamed on Albanese and framed not only as proof that his honeymoon was over, but met with suggestions that he should resign as Prime Minister.

“ Barring a miracle turnaround, both sides now expect the referendum to fail, which gives Anthony Albanese, the man who kicked it off, a week to think about what he wants to say next Saturday to help heal the wound he has inflicted.”

*James Campbell, Herald Sun, October 8 2023*

“ Prime Minister Anthony Albanese should resign.

A Prime Minister who drags the nation through an estimated \$450m race-based referendum, and loses badly, should be seriously considering his position.”

*James Macpherson, Sky News, October 17 2023*

“ Thank God Australians voted against this racist Voice, but the damage is still done and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese should resign.”

*Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun, October 14 2023*

# OMISSION OF 'YES' CAMPAIGNERS

---

**By framing the Voice and the referendum campaign as belonging to Albanese, News Corp gave less coverage and attention to First Nations campaigners from the 'Yes' campaign.**

Two who received mostly positive coverage were Yes23 campaigners Noel Pearson and Dean Parkin, although particularly for Parkin, Campaign Director for Yes23, his coverage was sparse.

The other three most included 'Yes' campaigners - all women - Minister for Indigenous Australians Linda Burney, Professor Megan Davis, and Professor Marcia Langton, received mostly negative coverage.

The most aggressive negative coverage of Aboriginal 'Yes' campaigners occurred when they were critical of the 'No' campaign. A particularly negative week preceded *The Australian* reporting on September 12 that Marcia Langton had been recorded at a public event accusing the 'No' campaign of racism.

Initially, *The Australian* accused Langton of calling 'No' voters racist. Their article was updated later, without apology, to reflect the fact Langton referred to the 'No' campaigners as racist, not voters<sup>19</sup>. After this report, News Corp newspapers and *Sky News* slammed Marcia Langton, quoting her public address so extensively that she was the second most included voice across News Corp coverage that week.

After the referendum, 'Yes' campaigner Thomas Mayo<sup>20</sup> wrote in the *Saturday Paper*:

“ The racist vitriol we felt was at a level not seen for decades in Australia. Indigenous advocates for the Voice could not speak out about the abuse without some sections of the media, whose audiences we needed to persuade, falsely claiming that we were calling all “No” voters racist. Even if only in the way the headlines were worded.”

---

Through this negative portrayal of 'Yes' campaigners, the historic passage of the Voice through the Uluru Dialogues and the voices of its architects, were lost amongst the News Corp campaign. Instead, News Corp framed the Voice as an initiative of the Labor government, and Anthony Albanese himself.

By presenting the Voice as a Labor Party policy, News Corp in effect erased the voices of First Nations people who collectively worked together to bring the Voice proposal to the government. When those voices did speak, they were repeatedly attacked.

<sup>19</sup> 13 September 2023, Josh Butler, *The Guardian*, Marcia Langton to seek legal advice over Dutton post quoting 'absolutely not true' voice headline, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/13/marcia-langton-to-seek-legal-advice-over-dutton-post-quoting-absolutely-not-true-voice-headline>

<sup>20</sup> 21 October 2023, Thomas Mayo, *Saturday Paper*, Analysis: The movement that follows the Voice, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/indigenous-affairs/2023/10/21/analysis-the-movement-that-follows-the-voice>

# NEGATIVE COVERAGE OF CORPORATIONS, ORGANISATIONS AND CELEBRITIES CAMPAIGNING FOR 'YES'

Throughout the referendum, News Corp was critical of organisations and celebrities who came out in support of the 'Yes' campaign.

The number of words used to criticise these organisations and people are shown in Table 7.

Here is an example of the way Indigenous Olympian Cathy Freeman was criticised when she publicly supported the 'Yes' campaign.



“ If Cathy Freeman announced she had a tip to make us run faster, I'd be all ears and running shoes... That she's famous for running isn't an obvious qualification for telling us to change our Constitution to forever divide ourselves by race.”

Andrew Bolt, *Herald Sun*, September 20 2023

Yes Supporter	Number of critical words
Qantas / Alan Joyce	7,072
Former PM Malcolm Turnbull	4,521
Singer John Farnham	4,403
Journalist Ray Martin	2,268
Australian Football League (AFL)	2,783
Olympian Cathy Freeman	1,204
Wesfarmers / Michael Chaney	1,002
Former AFL footballer Adam Goodes	895
Mitcham Council, South Australia	715
Rapper MC Hammer	542
ANZ Bank	466

**Table 7:** Yes supporters who were criticised and attacked in News Corp coverage by number of words, all outlets 17 July - 14 October, 2023

These attacks were also used to argue that the 'Yes' campaign was supported and funded by "elites", fitting with their claim that the Voice did not have the grassroots support of First Nations people.

This also aligned with the depiction of the Voice being Albanese's Voice, or Canberra's Voice, and the claim that it would not help grassroots Aboriginal people. Here is an example.

“ If the no vote prevails it would be a proud moment for Australia. It would be a rejection of toxic race politics and attempts to divide us by ethnicity.

It would be a rejection of victimhood culture and the bigotry of low expectations and it would be a triumph of a genuine grassroots campaign against the powerful wealthy elite.”

Rita Panahi, *Sky News*, October 13 2023

# 'BULLIES', 'RACIST' AND 'WEALTHY ELITE': HOW NEWS CORP CHARACTERISED THE YES CAMPAIGN

**The outcome of the 'Yes' campaign's negative coverage - directed at people and arguments - was that the most commonly used characterisation in News Corp reporting was 'Yes' as villains.**

Figure 10 shows the percentage of characterisations of 'Yes' and 'No' voices, as a total percentage of words where characterisations were used.

People were characterised as "victims" when something bad was described as happening to them, "villains" when they were depicted as doing something negative, or "heroes" when they were framed as doing something positive.

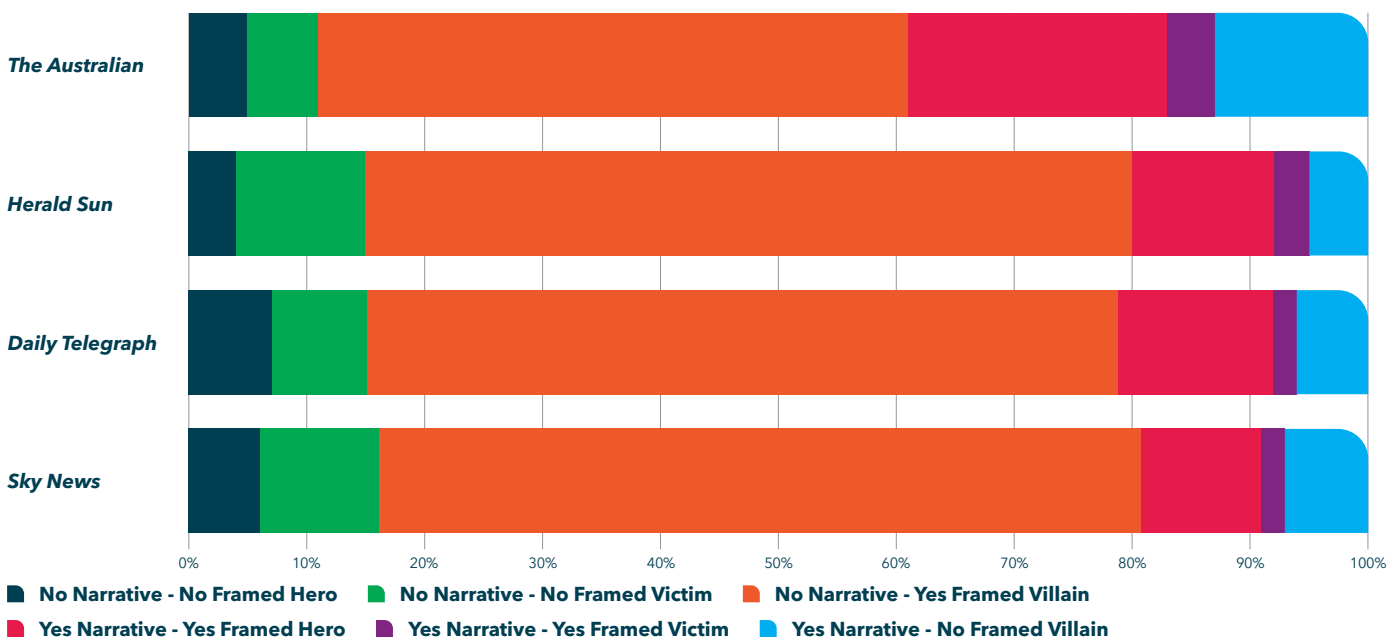
'Yes' were framed as villains in 58% of content across the four outlets.

When these characterisations are grouped by the narrative they fit into, the 'No' narrative is used in 72% of words ('No' narrative includes 'Yes' as villain, 'No' as victim, and 'No' as hero).

The 'Yes' narrative is used in 28% of words ('Yes' narrative included 'No' as villain, 'Yes' as victim, and 'Yes' as hero).

This analysis gives another insight into the one-sidedness and framing of the News Corp campaign against the Voice.

## PERCENTAGE OF WORDS USED TO CHARACTERISE YES AND NO CAMPS



**Figure 10:** Percentage of words used to characterise 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns, July 17 - October 14 2023, newspaper articles from Australian (580), Herald Sun (203) and Daily Telegraph (244) and Sky News videos (586).



# MANIPULATION AND DIVISION: News Corp's use of misinformation and racial hatred

**There is much discussion in society about the role of misinformation (misleading information), disinformation (deliberately misleading information), and hateful content.**

Much of this discussion focuses on deceptive and hateful information created by high profile online conspiracy theorists or anonymous users that is shared on social media. This report demonstrates that more attention needs to be paid to mainstream media outlets like News Corp to understand how they contribute to the ways that information is manipulated to create conflict and division.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese lamented the role of misinformation and disinformation in undermining voters' ability to consider the referendum questions. As reported by Jess Malcolm and Rosie Lewis in *The Australian* days before the referendum (October 10 2023):

“ Mr Albanese has repeatedly blasted misinformation he said was being peddled by the No campaign to wreck the referendum and confuse voters. He said misinformation and disinformation were preventing voters from considering the “very simple” referendum question before them. He has pointed to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories when asked why the voice was losing support, including among Labor voters.”

The day after the referendum, National Indigenous Television (NITV) host John Paul Jenke<sup>21</sup> spoke on ABC's *Insiders* panel about the role of misinformation in the 'No' campaign.

“ ... misinformation played a big part in this, I think we can't estimate that. The feedback that we were getting from Western Sydney was that you know the fear of 'I'm going to lose my house if The Voice gets up, I'm going to lose my house, it's giving them extra rights that I don't have' and that really played a part... So they [the 'No' campaign] let the bush fire out, we've got to admit they let the bush fire burn away and create smoke to cloud the issue. They never went back and corrected it to have this respectful debate on the facts...”

News Corp played a unique part in the 'No' campaign's fear-based manipulation of information about the Voice. News Corp's Voice coverage was found to extend the 'No' campaign's arguments against the Voice to more extreme positions.

These extreme positions were often reliant on misinformation and racial division. They presented accusations about the Voice, 'Yes' campaigners, and First Nations people that the 'No' campaigners could not say themselves without causing controversy.

This misinformation and racial hatred legitimised and emboldened outlandish false narratives, contributing to more extreme disinformation and resentment towards Aboriginal people, which spread like wildfire on social media and amongst faceless campaigners for the 'No' campaign.

News Corp thus acted as a bridge between the 'No' campaign's opposition to the Voice and extreme forms of disinformation and racism in the public sphere. This bridge inflamed the 'No' arguments, contributing to fear and confusion about what the Voice entailed and its supposed consequences for non-Aboriginal Australians.

<sup>21</sup> 15 October 2023, John Paul Jenke on ABC *Insiders*, Voice Referendum Special - Richard Marles and Julian Leeser.

# NEWS CORP'S ROLE IN LEGITIMISING MORE RADICAL DISINFORMATION

**John Paul Jenke said voters he spoke to in Western Sydney were concerned the Voice would lead to them losing their houses. News Corp contributed to the legitimisation of extremist disinformation and conspiracy theories about the Voice, including the accusation that Aboriginal people would take people's homes and lands through seeking compensation or reparations for past traumas.**

News Corp's bridging between misleading 'No' campaign arguments and more extreme forms of disinformation on social media is explored using the example of *Sky News*' conspiracy theory about the length of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Peta Credlin ignited the idea that the Uluru Statement was actually 26 pages long at the start of August. Credlin claimed that these supposedly hidden pages revealed the true agenda of the Uluru Dialogues authors, revealing:

“...plenty of stuff in there about treaties, compensation and a whole lot of stuff that they're not being upfront about” which “just leads voters to think it feels more and more tricky as the days go on.”

*Peta Credlin, Sky News, August 2 2023*

Framing these so-called revelations as the result of journalistic investigation, akin to an exposé, Credlin wrote:

“ I suspect many Australians aren't even aware that the Uluru Statement isn't the simple one-pager that has been widely circulated but a far more comprehensive document that runs to 26 pages, and it's an eye-opener because the whole tenor of the Statement from the Heart, and of the 13 meetings leading up to it, is of anger, grievance, separatism and the need to undo, as far as possible, the past 240 years of Australian history.”

*Peta Credlin, The Australian, August 3 2023*

This misinformation about the length of the Uluru Statement was not just used to confuse voters about what the Voice was, but also supported News Corp's scare campaign.

It suggested the Voice was more than an advisory body; it was really a powerful trojan horse for more radical advocacy that would have scary consequences for non-Aboriginal Australians.

RMIT ABC Fact Check<sup>22</sup> reported that three of the Uluru Statement's authors, Noel Pearson, Pat Anderson AO and Professor Megan Davis confirmed that the statement was one page. RMIT ABC Fact Check also confirmed that '25 pages of background information and excerpts of regional dialogues that informed [it]' which Credlin was claiming were part of the statement, have been publicly available for years.

<sup>22</sup> 11 August 2023, RMIT ABC Fact Check, ABC News, Is the Uluru Statement from the Heart one page, or 26? Here are the facts, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-11/fact-check-uluuru-statement-one-page-26/102714792>

## 'NO' CAMPAIGNERS POINT TO NEWS CORP MISINFORMATION

---

**Despite fact-checking confirming the Uluru Statement was one-page in length, 'No' campaigner Jacinta Price continued promoting this misinformation. On August 8, using Sky News' manipulated representation of the document, Price appeared on Sky News and called on the Prime Minister to "come clean" about the Uluru Statement, implying Albanese was hiding something.**

This is a clear example of News Corp's campaign against the Voice being picked up by 'No' campaigners in a political attack on their Voice opponents, specifically Prime Minister Albanese.

Where the 'No' campaign had previously been claiming the Voice was not just an advisory body, they now had what they called "evidence" that the Voice would lead to much more radical policies, policies they claimed the government was hiding.

Crucially, 'No' campaigners did not need to publicly refer to the specifics of these so-called hidden, scary policies, or even drop hints like Sky News did towards treaties and compensation. News Corp was filling in those blanks for them.

Furthermore, although the 'No' campaign were careful not to make threats about compensations and reparations publicly, they were using similar language in phone call campaigning.

As reported by Paul Sakkal<sup>23</sup> in *The Sydney Morning Herald/The Age*, volunteers making phone calls for the 'No' campaign group Advance were instructed to use "fear and doubt rather than facts".

Callers were told not to tell voters they were calling on behalf of the 'No' campaign, and to "raise reports of financial compensation to Indigenous Australians if the Voice referendum were to succeed". The script also encouraged phone callers to say:

“ I've also heard that some of the people who helped design the Voice proposal are campaigning to abolish Australia Day and want to use the Voice to push for compensation and reparations through a treaty. All of these things raised a few questions in my mind and made me wonder if there was more to it all than meets the eye.”

News Corp's airing of allegations about the supposedly longer Uluru Statement lent credibility to manipulative threats about the risk of Indigenous reparations. These insinuations helped the 'No' campaign confuse and scare voters about the consequences of the Voice referendum succeeding.

'No' campaigners at News Corp and in the 'No' campaign continued to refer to the "longer" Uluru Statement throughout the referendum, reinforcing and perpetuating the fear of unknown radical consequences from the Voice, including the accusation that the Prime Minister was being dishonest. For instance:

“ With apologies to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Uluru Dialogue co-chair Professor Megan Davis, ABC presenter Leigh Sales, and countless others who have sought to gaslight the Australian people about the implications of the Voice to Parliament, it actually does matter how many words are in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.”

*James Morrow, Daily Telegraph, September 5 2023*

Another example was in the *Herald Sun's* editorial against the Voice the day before the referendum, which mentioned the conspiracy theory in the context of "possible reparations":

“ Was the Voice a single idea on one page or, as became apparent, the first stage of a process of treaties, truth-telling and possible reparations?”

*Editorial, Herald Sun, October 13 2023*

<sup>23</sup> 12 September 2023, Paul Sakkal, *The Age*, No campaign's 'fear, doubt' strategy revealed, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/no-campaign-s-fear-doubt-strategy-revealed-20230910-p5e3fu.html?btis=>

'No' campaigner Liberal Party Senator Michaelia Cash even accused the Prime Minister of spreading misinformation by saying the Uluru Statement is one page:

“ Senator Cash told *The Australian* there was “little in the PM’s claims which is supported by the facts” and Mr Albanese was unable to rule out issues that the voice would advise on.

“If anyone is dealing in misinformation, it is the Prime Minister himself,” she said. “He certainly cannot rule out issues the voice will advise on and it is clear that the Uluru statement contained much more material than the single page he claims.”

Jess Malcolm and Rosie Lewis,  
*The Australian*, October 10 2023



## **SOCIAL MEDIA USERS AND FACELESS CAMPAIGNERS TAKE CONSPIRACY THEORY TO EXTREMES**

**News Corp’s conspiracy theory about the length of the Uluru Statement also contributed to the legitimisation of much more extreme versions of this conspiracy circulating on social media and in unauthorised campaign materials distributed to voters.**

Much like a slippery slope, News Corp planted the idea with their audience that there were more consequences from the Voice advisory body than met the eye. Social media users - some with large followings - made outlandish accusations about what these consequences were.

In an investigation by ABC journalist Pat McGrath<sup>24</sup> conspiracy theorist Nicola Charles was found to have posted a Facebook video in August which warned that the “Voice to Parliament is the first stage of a UN invasion of Australia”.

In this video, which was viewed more than 500,000 times, Charles said:

“ When the UN soldiers, peacekeepers, police acting on behalf of the Aboriginal tribes turn up and take ownership and jurisdiction over your property, they’ll have it because you said yes.”

The conspiracy about a UN invasion of Australia had already been circulating online before the referendum but was tied to the Voice during the campaign, threatening that a ‘Yes’ result would bring it about.

<sup>24</sup> 5 October 2022, Pat McGrath, ABC News, VIDEO: Voice to Parliament misinformation runs amok on social media, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-05/voice-to-parliament-misinformation-runs-amok-on-social-media/102941206>

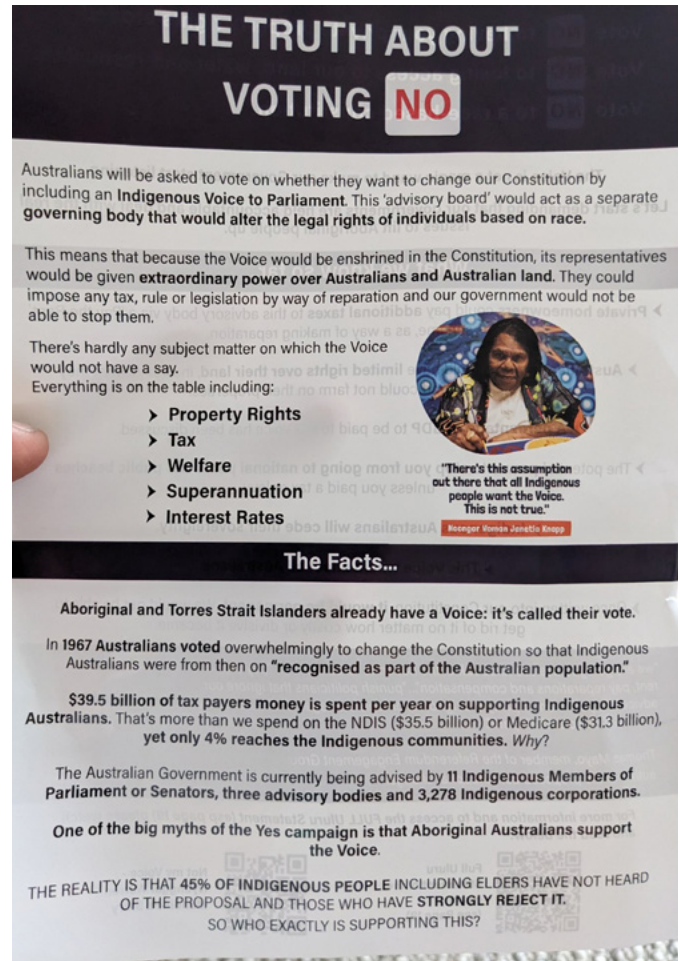
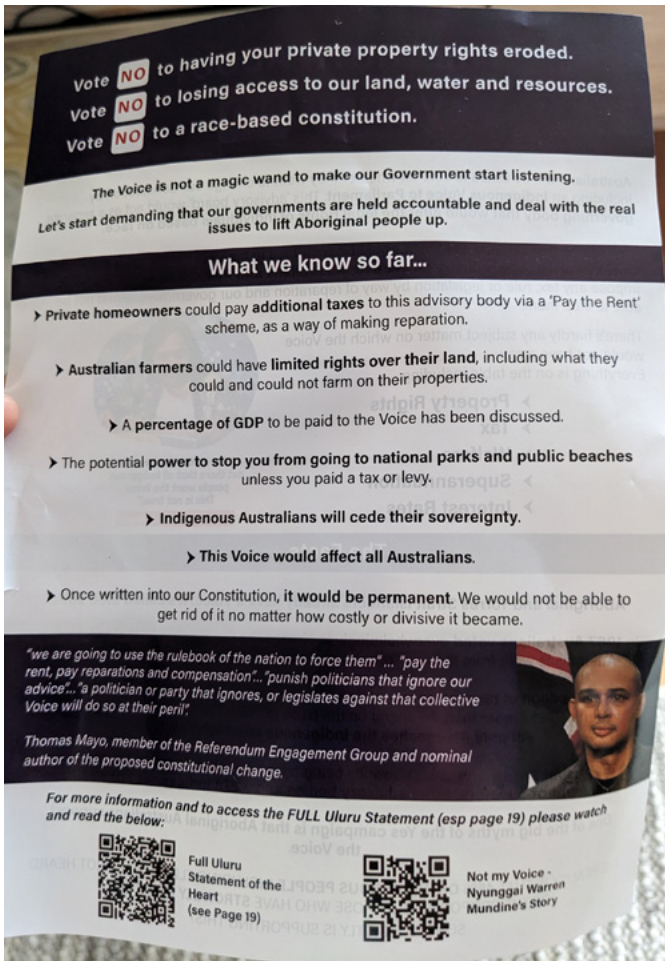


Figure 11: Unauthorised pamphlet supporting 'No' campaign shared by @DaveMilbo on X, September 19 2023, <https://x.com/DaveMilbo/status/1703992148511822262?s=20>

McGrath also reported that this conspiracy was given a mainstream platform on *Sky News* when former Liberal MP, Nicolle Flint, said:

“ The Human Rights Commission has been trying to get Australian governments to legislate the declaration. Now there are 46 separate articles and the ones that everyone at home should be very concerned about are the ones that suggest there should be a separate Indigenous nation within Australia, separate Indigenous government, separate Indigenous economy, rules law, institutions.”

Flint’s conspiratorial comments are an excellent example of how guests on *Sky News* are not held accountable for making demonstrably false statements.

RMIT ABC Fact Check journalist Esther Chan, said these conspiracies became popular “because a lot of people are worried about what is going to happen if the Voice succeeds”.

People were worried about what the Voice would mean for them because there was a fear campaign of manipulation feeding them misinformation about the consequences of an Aboriginal advisory body.

A Guardian investigation<sup>25</sup> also found unauthorised ‘No’ campaigners created flyers threatening ‘the voice will lead

to people losing “all ownership of land”. The pamphlet shown in Figure 11 claims the Voice will erode private property rights and will lead to people losing access to “our land, water and resources”.

**At the base of this pamphlet is a QR code that directs people to a Sky News website hosting the supposed hidden pages of the Uluru Statement, implying this conspiracy proves the more extreme allegations on the flyer are real.**

<sup>25</sup> 22 September 2023, Ariel Bogle and Josh Taylor, *The Guardian*, Voice pamphlets: false claims and conspiracy theories distributed across Australia, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/21/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-referendum-fake-pamphlets>

## THE ROLE OF NEWS CORP IN THE ANTI-VOICE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

---

**When News Corp platformed manipulated information about the Uluru Statement, it was not done in isolation. It bolstered 'No' campaign arguments and gave credibility to extreme fear campaigns by making threats that the advisory body was not what it seemed.**

People trust what they hear or read in mainstream media outlets. When audiences are manipulated by News Corp, they are primed to believe more extreme conspiracies circulating in the community.

Extreme conspiracies back up 'No' campaign's fear-based arguments.



# RACIAL DIVISION: INSIDE NEWS CORP'S CLAIM THAT THE VOICE GIVES FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE "SPECIAL PRIVILEGES"

**Accent Research's<sup>26</sup> analysis of referendum voter perspectives found 53% of Australians believe Aboriginal people are discriminated against, 32% believe either Indigenous people face the same discrimination as white Australians, or none at all, and 15% believe 'White Australians are more discriminated against than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders'.**

Amongst this 15% who think White people are victims of racial discrimination, 100% voted 'No' to the Voice. Conversely, of the 53% who think Aboriginal people are discriminated against more than white people, 91% voted 'Yes'. This research demonstrates that attitudes to racial discrimination had a large impact on voting intention.

Recall that this research also found *Sky News* and News Corp newspaper readers were more likely than the general population to vote 'No', and thus also overlap with the cohort of people who reject the factual notion that Aboriginal people are victims of racial discrimination.

Amongst the plethora of 'No' arguments platformed by News Corp, there were many instances of content that set out to create resentment and hatred towards Indigenous Australians through the accusation that the Voice 'divided by race' and that it did so in a way that gave Aboriginal people special privileges not available to non-Aboriginal Australians.

This content was used to underpin the 'No' fear campaign that accused the Voice of being "divisive". It was also used to reject the idea that Aboriginal people have suffered disadvantage and discrimination since colonisation, thus arguing the Voice was not needed.

One way this manifested at News Corp was through coverage of issues quite separate to the Voice which were framed as related through the inference that Aboriginal people already have too many special privileges which are "divisive", and that the Voice would give them more.

This example again shows how reporting was used to further News Corp's 'No' campaign arguments:

“ Indigenous Australians and First Nations people from across the globe are being offered ticket discounts of up to \$170 under new “Mob Tix” concessions launched by the nation’s elite ballet, musical, arts, cultural and sporting bodies and institutions.”

*Geoff Chambers and Rhiannon Down, The Australian, 12 September 2023*

“ In Victoria, a “truth telling inquiry” of exactly the sort Australians could expect nationally if the Voice gets up, has called for what boils down to a separate justice system for Aboriginal citizens.”

*James Morrow, Daily Telegraph, 19 September 2023*

Andrew Bolt took the accusations of special privileges further by inferring that the Voice would benefit Aboriginal people at the expense of non-Aboriginal people, and that these rewards were so great that Aboriginal people fake their Aboriginal cultural heritage to gain special privileges.

Bolt's *Sky News* video titled: *'Almost no one checks': Claims nearly 'a third' of people claiming to be Aboriginal aren't* (July 26 2023) has over 300,000 YouTube views. Another of Bolt's *Sky News* videos titled: *Indigenous groups becoming increasingly angry 'fake Aboriginals' are taking jobs, grants* has 183,000 views (August 9 2023).

<sup>26</sup> 16 October 2023, An Octopus Group Accent Research Report, Understanding voter behaviour at the Voice referendum: A first look, <https://www.accent-research.com/voice>

Yet another racially charged element of commentary from ‘No’ voices were discussions of whether British colonisation was positive for Aboriginal people, with the implication being that Aboriginal people did not need “special privileges” since they’re not suffering ill effects of colonisation. Here are two examples:



“ Even had John Howard yes but coming out and saying and this made headlines around the world that the British colonising this land and positive the best thing that could have happened and that is just a statement of fact. It’s not just opinion.

Because unless you genuinely believe that Australia was going to be undiscovered, this massive, and it was just going to be left alone by the rest of the world, the fact that it was the British as opposed to others colonising it. And you look at what we have built in 200 odd years, how, uh prosperous, peaceful, what sort of a uniquely uh blessed country we have, that is something to be celebrated.”

Rita Panahi, *Sky News*, July 30 2023

“ Little wonder then that so many now bow to strange gods: what surer evidence of collective madness could there be than the many thousands of inner-city lefties, who, having denounced Australia’s founding fathers as murderers, daily “pay their respects” to past Indigenous elders who rained violence on women and children?

Convinced, like the European romantics of the 19th century, that their own civilisation is rotten to the core, our cultural elites have found its replacement among rose-coloured visions of noble savagery.”

Henry Ergas, *The Australian*,  
September 21 2023

This News Corp narrative was particularly emphasised when ‘No’ campaigner Jacinta Price said in a speech at the National Press Club<sup>27</sup> on 14 September that Indigenous bodies were trying to “demonise colonial settlement in its entirety and nurture a national self-loathing about the foundations of modern Australian achievement”.

Asked by a Guardian reporter if she thought Indigenous people were suffering from colonisation, Price said:

“ No. A positive impact, absolutely. I mean, now we have running water, readily available food.”

Although these comments caused controversy for Price outside of News Corp, and were described by ‘Yes’ campaigner Minister Linda Burney<sup>28</sup> as “a betrayal”, News Corp voices applauded Price.

Andrew Bolt called Price’s speech a “critical turning point in race relations in this country”, saying:

“ So you now see the choice put starkly between two women of Aboriginal background, Marcia Langton of the race industry and Jacinta Nampijinpa Price who says reject division by race. Now it’s time for you to choose on October 14 and make that really our real Australia Day, our future together and never apart.”

Andrew Bolt, *Sky News*,  
September 14 2023

News Corp used their rhetoric about racial division to foment and embolden resentment towards Aboriginal people by characterising them as undeserving, as already receiving “special privileges”, and as not worthy of receiving any more. These ideas took the ‘No’ arguments made by ‘No’ campaigners to more extreme positions and fed the fear campaign in opposition to the Voice.

Just like conspiracy theories based on misinformation were legitimised by News Corp, narratives of racial resentment and division were given credibility, condoning and emboldening such views in society.

The ongoing impacts of this divisive content in creating and spreading more hatred and discrimination towards First Nations people will stay with Australia for a long time.

<sup>27</sup> 14 September 2023, Josh Butler, *The Guardian*, Unpacking five key claims from Jacinta Price’s National Press Club address on the voice, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/14/unpacking-five-key-claims-from-jacinta-prices-national-press-club-address-on-the-voice>.

<sup>28</sup> 14 September 2023, Josh Butler and Lorena Allam, *The Guardian*, ‘A betrayal’: Burney condemns Price claim colonisation had no ongoing negative impacts, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/14/jacinta-nampijinpa-price-says-colonisation-had-no-negative-impacts-on-indigenous-australians>



# CONCLUSION: HOLDING NEWS CORP ACCOUNTABLE TO BUILD A BETTER MEDIA LANDSCAPE

---

## **The defeat of the Voice to Parliament was a dark moment in Australian politics.**

This loss cannot, of course, be attributed to the actions of News Corp alone. However, given the findings of this report, it also cannot be denied that Australia's most powerful media company effectively functioned as part of the 'No' campaign, playing a significant and singular role.

Under the facade of journalism, News Corp published more opinion than it did factual reporting about the Voice to Parliament. This radical, ideologically-driven commentary amounted to a sustained scare campaign that catalysed and legitimised a range of mis- and disinformation.

Such overt political campaigning during a referendum would be concerning coming from any outlet masquerading as a legitimate news source. However, given News Corp's unrivalled scale in the Australian media landscape, this behaviour amounts to a violation of our democracy.

No company, even one with an unimpeachable record of balance and adherence to journalistic standards, should own the majority of a country's media. News Corp has demonstrated time and time again how deeply unfit it is to carry such a heavy responsibility.

The Australian people deserve a diverse, thriving media landscape. We deserve to hear from a plurality of outlets that are committed to and capable of holding our most powerful people and institutions to account.

Our media should celebrate and platform the stories and perspectives of marginalised communities - not vilify and bully those brave enough to advocate for progress.

For as long as News Corp is allowed to continue to dominate our media landscape and operate with political and regulatory impunity, this vision of a thriving media landscape can be little more than a pipedream.

Given the enormous extent of News Corp's power and political influence, a Murdoch Royal Commission is the clearest path towards repairing Australian media.

A Murdoch Royal Commission would sit independent of government, establishing a crucial degree of protection from News Corp's well documented bullying and intimidation tactics.

It would also have the power to hold public hearings, summon witnesses under oath, and compel the production of evidence, including corporate documents.

Only an inquiry with such powers and independence from government will be able to hold News Corp accountable and make the recommendations for media reform this country so desperately needs.

The findings of this particular report represent just thirteen weeks of evidence and analysis during this historic referendum. However, News Corp's machinery operates 365 days a year.

This was not the first time News Corp behaved as a political campaigner and, until we see major media reform, it will not be the last.

## **It is time for a Murdoch Royal Commission.**

AUSTRALIA  
MURDOCH  
UNIVERSITY  
COMMUNITY



AUSTRALIANS FOR A  
**MURDOCH**  
**ROYAL**  
**COMMISSION**

