

## Finding balance on marriage equality debate a particular challenge for the media

Written by Denis Muller, Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

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Cory Bernardi's views on same-sex marriage may be crude and ignorant, but the media are nonetheless obligated to report how he uses his power. AAP/Lukas Coch

Covering the same-sex marriage debate presents the media with an acute ethical dilemma: how to give effect to people's right of free speech while taking into account truth-telling, offensiveness, and the risk of doing harm.

While this is a balance that conscientious journalists always have to strike, it is obvious from the nature of the debate so far that the same-sex marriage issue is capable of generating unusually pernicious and potentially harmful material. This marks it out as a case requiring especial vigilance.

The starting point is to separate the two basic questions that arise from the government's decision to hold a [voluntary postal plebiscite](#) .

One of these is a question of opinion: should same-sex marriage be supported or opposed? It is in relation to this that the ethical dilemmas arise.

The other is a question of fact: is the voluntary postal plebiscite methodologically defensible as a way to [obtain the opinion](#) of the voting public?

This can be disposed of swiftly. The fact is that while the plebiscite might be politically useful, it is scientifically worthless. It is what researchers call a SLOP – a [self-selecting opinion poll](#) .

It is no better than a dial-in survey about some piece of football trivia – should Toby Greene be suspended for kicking an opponent's face – dial X for yes and Y for no.

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There's only one kind of poll that's worse – [push polling](#) . This happens where the question is asked in such a way as to push the respondent toward a particular answer.

The one thing we will be able to say at the end of the plebiscite is that it shows the opinions of those who chose to take part. It will tell us nothing statistically valid about the opinions of the voting population as a whole.

Scientifically speaking, the government would be better off asking a reputable polling outfit such as Newspoll to do a stratified random survey of 2,000 voters for about A\$122,000, rather than the \$122 million the postal vote is going to cost.

However, the ethical issues are complex and not so easily disposed of.

First, the issue of harm minimisation. We know from people like former High Court justice Michael Kirby, who is homosexual, and from [a lot of research](#) , just how vulnerable adolescent boys and girls are when they discover they are attracted to people of the same sex.

A [research article](#) published in the American Journal of Community Psychology as far back as 1993 found that first awareness of sexual orientation typically occurred at the age of ten. Yet typically, the young person didn't tell anyone until they were about 16. That's six years of private struggle. Suicide attempts were acknowledged by 42% of the sample.

Broadly speaking, these vulnerabilities are a matter of common knowledge. It follows that there is a risk of foreseeable and avoidable harm associated with public debate on this topic.

This imposes on journalists an ethical obligation to identify foreseeable risks of harm arising from this debate and, where possible, avoid them.

Avoidance is not always possible. If someone like senator Cory Bernardi [likens homosexuality to bestiality](#)

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journalists have no choice but to publish it, because although what he says is crude and ignorant, he is a public figure and needs to be held to account for how he uses his power.

Minimising harm dictates that harmful statements like this be repudiated by a voice of at least equal authority.

But if something similar just goes viral on social media and comes from no public or authoritative source, are journalists justified in ventilating it further?

Often it will come down to a choice between exploiting some sensationalist remark or exercising responsible restraint.

Similarly, statements such as that by the Australian Christian Lobby saying children of gay couples [were a stolen generation](#) need to be published because they come from a major participant in the debate.

But when people base their arguments on false facts, journalists have a duty to put the true facts into the story. For example, some people say that the children of homosexual couples have poorer life outcomes than children of heterosexual couples. That simply isn't true.

A [meta-analysis](#) of 33 studies worldwide, including a study by Jennifer Power of La Trobe University, found that while there are methodological limitations to all studies in this area, it seems clear that children raised by homosexual couples do [at least as well](#) as children raised by heterosexual couples.

How journalists report and comment on the debate will affect its quality. That applies whether they work in commercial media or public-sector broadcasting.

The Guardian Australia [has already declared](#) that it will simply not publish what it regards as spurious arguments against same-sex marriage.

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The ABC does not have this luxury. It is obliged to give both sides a fair go, but that doesn't mean the ABC is obliged to republish known untruths or offensive or harmful material.

Its editorial policies require its journalists to be impartial. The elements of impartiality include factual accuracy, fairness and balance. Balance requires that the main voices in a debate be heard, but it also requires that journalists follow the weight of evidence.

For instance, in the vaccination debate, the weight of evidence is clearly on the side of the science that says vaccination is safe. To [give equal weight](#) to the anti-vax movement is false balance.

It follows that ABC journalists and ethical journalists everywhere have plenty of scope to decide whether and how to publish material that carries a risk of doing harm, or that is offensive or misleading, while at the same time giving effect to people's right to free speech.

*Denis Muller does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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