

# Media agendas, Robert Manne and Iraq: The strengths and weaknesses of quantitative analysis

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## Abstract

*Robert Manne's Quarterly Essay, 'Bad News: Murdoch's Australian and the Shaping of the Nation' argued that, under the editorship of Chris Mitchell, The Australian, while 'one of the most important political forces in the country', had become overbearing in character and an unhealthy influence (Manne, 2011a). The Australian responded with 25,000 words of copy, around eighteen dedicated articles (including a number under the headline 'Setting the Record Straight'), numerous letters to the editor and a cartoon depicting Manne on the toilet, defecating. Headlines described Manne as 'A critic untroubled by facts who seeks to silence dissent' (Mitchell, 2011).*

*One of Manne's case studies was The Australian's coverage of the Iraq war. This paper takes data from the author's PhD, which supports Manne's portrayal of a strong Australian editorial position in favour of the war, supports his view that there had been a more balanced editorial approach with respect to opinion pieces (reflecting the anti-war position of the opinions editor at the time), but raises some questions about Manne's findings that The Australian's straight news coverage was always strongly pro-war.*

*This last difference reflects the strength and limit of quantitative evidence in such debates. The content data gives a more representative picture of the newspaper's coverage and not a picture that relies only on the most spectacular examples. Equally, discussion of the numbers raises questions about the degree to which quantitative content analysis can capture the meaning and impact of newspaper coverage. Numbers cannot capture the intensity and tone (sometimes scathing) of a debate, nor can they capture the way readers respond to headlines, article placement and graphics, including cartoons.*

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## Introduction

Manne argued that the nation has two Murdoch problems: News Ltd's ownership of 70 per cent of Australia's newspapers represents a threat to an open democratic culture; and under a 'bullying' Chris Mitchell, *The Australian* has become a 'player in national politics without there being any means by which its actions can be held to account' (p114). He detailed a series of case studies – including the one on Iraq – to demonstrate his point.

Manne had clearly touched a nerve. Nick Cater, editor of the *Weekend Australian*, responding on behalf of *The Australian* in the subsequent issue of the *Quarterly Essay* suggested that Manne, not a journalist, 'loved his loaded adjectives too much to adopt the pretence of objectivity' (2011). Instead, according to Cater, Manne had 'become a polemicist who press-gangs the evidence into fighting for his cause' (2011). Paul Kelly, editor-at-large at *The Australian*, claimed that Manne had 'failed to understand strong journalism' and had a 'fixation on repressing stories and debates he doesn't like' (2011). Greg Sheridan, foreign editor, described Robert Manne's treatment of foreign policy as 'abusive, scattered, unsystematic and frankly dishonest' (2011).

Manne then suggested that 'while *The Australian* is only too willing to dish out criticism on a daily basis, when in turn the paper is criticised it explodes with rage and indignation' (2011b).

Was *The Australian's* 'rage and indignation' justified? To what extent are Manne's criticisms of the paper supported by the evidence of other researchers? This paper considers the arguments and evidence that Manne presents on *The Australian's* coverage of the Iraq war in light of content analysis data obtained as part of the author's wider PhD project.

## Unravelling the Arguments

Robert Manne has long argued that *The Australian's* coverage of the Iraq war was unbalanced. In *The Australian* on 16 July 2005, Manne argued that

Through their editorials, opinion columnists and presentation of the news, Rupert Murdoch's newspapers softened an originally hostile and sceptical public in preparation for Australia's participation in the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, an invasion many political commentators around the world still regard as unlawful, unprovoked and unnecessary.

In his *Quarterly Essay* in 2011, Manne argued that *The Australian's* support of the Iraq war was just one example of the way in which Rupert Murdoch uses his papers around the world to further his own political agenda. Manne cited research conducted by *The Guardian's* Roy Greenslade which found that the editorial line of every one of Murdoch's 175 papers had given unquestioning support for the US, UK and Australian governments' arguments for going to war in Iraq: with one exception: Hobart's *Mercury* wrote an anti-war editorial once in 2002, but 'it toed the Murdoch line only after a warning letter came from News Limited's Australian head office'. (p16). Manne argued that, through his papers, Rupert Murdoch advanced the arguments being put by the US Administration: that Saddam Hussein possessed chemical and biological weapons, was not far off developing nuclear weapons and, as leader of a 'rogue state' that supported terrorism, was likely to pass WMD to terrorists (including Al Qaeda) intent on attacking the US and its allies. Such a threat was intolerable and, according to Manne's interpretation of News Limited's position, would be grounds for a preventive war waged without the support of the UN.

Much of the evidence Manne advanced in support of his argument was sourced from *The Australian's* editorials and from articles written by the paper's foreign editor, Greg Sheridan. On this basis, Manne argued that the entire paper supported the Murdoch agenda - with one significant caveat: that during the Iraq invasion Tom Switzer, editor of the opinion pages and 'conservative foreign-policy realist', was opposed to the invasion and that, as a result, there was a more even balance of pro-war and anti-war articles on the opinion pages of the paper. Switzer's count was that there were '45 dovish... and 47 hawkish' opinion columns between July 2002 and March 2003. Manne argued that:

Although in my review this undercounts the explicitly and implicitly pro-war pieces by at least twenty, it is still true that before the invasion the only reasonably balanced section of the paper was the opinion page. Everywhere else the paper overwhelmingly supported it. This was the reason why, in March 2006, John Howard said that Chris Mitchell's *Australian* had been 'a very strong supported of our military operations in Iraq' (p17).

As Manne points out, the ‘base claim of the Washington war party was false’ (p. 16), but more damaging than *The Australian’s* errors of judgement about the arguments for going to war was their ‘attempt to create an atmosphere where cautious considerations of facts and arguments were seen as examples of stupidity, or as the betrayal of the national interest, or as ideological blindness’ (p18). Drawing on Greg Sheridan’s coverage of Tony Blair’s September 2002 dossier and a ‘Mitchell-inspired’ leader on Hans Blix’s report to the UN Security Council in January 2003, Manne argued that *The Australian’s* ‘overweeningly self-confident, uncritical, unreflective and bullying style’ made ‘the possibility of a sober national debate’ on the invasion of Iraq more difficult (p18).

The ‘September dossier’ included reference to Iraq having sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa and Tony Blair’s foreword to the document, included the controversial claim that Iraqi WMD might be mobilised within 45 minutes. The next day the UK print media carried headlines such as ‘Brits 45 Mins from Doom’ (The Sun), and ‘Mad Saddam Ready to Attack: 45 Minutes from a Chemical War’ (Star). Most if not all of the content of the September dossier was later proven to be false but, as Manne pointed out, at the time of its release ‘no-one outside the intelligence world, and perhaps few inside it, was in any position to judge its accuracy’ (p. 18). However, as Manne argues, instead of critically examining the content, Sheridan wrote with enormous confidence about the contribution of the dossier to the Iraq debate; that Saddam had ‘substantial biological and chemical weapons that could be deployed within 45 minutes’; and that Saddam was ‘one or two years away from producing nuclear weapons’ (p. 18). Rather than analysing the document, according to Manne, Sheridan had taken Blair on trust.

Not only did he pose no critical questions about the dossier. Implicitly, by asking readers to choose whether it was Tony Blair or Saddam Hussein who was the ‘monstrous liar’, he treated anyone with doubts about WMD as a conscious or unconscious dupe of the dictator (p19).

According to Manne, Sheridan ‘used his journalism for one purpose only, to beat the drum of war’ (p. 19). Furthermore, after the invasion, when WMD were not found, ‘Sheridan simply could not admit to himself that he had been wrong, or to put it in his foolish language, that it had been Tony Blair and not Saddam Hussein who had been the “monstrous liar”’ (p. 23).

## Research Design and Rationale

The author’s PhD research included a content analysis of the coverage of two quality broadsheet newspapers – the *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* and *The Australian* – during key periods in the lead up to, during and after the US-led invasion of Iraq. These two media outlets were selected because they target a similar readership (perhaps better educated and more politically savvy) but have different proprietors. While the wider research project looked at a number of themes and voices in the debate, this paper will focus on the pro-war or anti-war sentiment of straight news coverage, analysis and opinion articles and editorials.

## Sample and Press Attention

The content analysis involved the coding of 1,204 articles published on Iraq by the *SMH* and *The Australian* during nine one-week sample periods before, during and after the invasion of Iraq. The periods selected include peaks of media attention at moments that were pivotal in the politics of the war. All articles that included the term ‘Iraq’, were downloaded using Factiva and

out of an original sample of 1,896 articles, 692 articles were excluded because they were either not primarily about the Iraq war or were duplicates of articles already coded. Articles were excluded, for example, if they were travel articles with a passing reference to the impact of the Iraq war on travel routes; business analyses not primarily about the impact of the war on the economy or opinion pieces where reference to Iraq was just in passing. Letters to the editor were not included. Table 1 shows the break-down between the two papers of the numbers and proportion of articles coded. Around 35% (419) were published by the *SMH* and 65% (785) were published by *The Australian*.

Different editorial policies, and *The Australian's* more extensive international coverage, meant that the *SMH* had fewer articles, but with a higher word count. Despite the differences in the number of articles published, however, the patterns of coverage reflected in the percentages of articles published in each time period are surprisingly consistent across both papers. This suggests that, putting aside differences in proprietors' views, editorial policies and format, the two papers shared similar news values: that is there was consistency between the two papers in their views of what constituted news.

**Table 1** Sample size by media outlet

	Frequency	Percentage
<i>SMH</i>	419	34.8
<i>The Australian</i>	785	65.2
Total	1,204	100.0

Three of the nine sample periods were in the lead-up to the war: 12 to 18 September 2002; 5 to 11 February 2003; and 13 to 19 March 2003, the week immediately prior to the invasion. One sample period was selected during the invasion: 20 to 26 March 2003, the first week of the war. Five sample periods were selected after the invasion: 1 to 7 May 2003 when President George W Bush announced the end of major combat operations; 2 to 8 October 2003 when there was a furore in the US over the failure to find WMD; 1 to 7 March 2004, the first anniversary of the war; 20 to 26 July 2004 when US, UK and Australian inquiries reported within weeks of each other; and 20 to 26 March 2008 which marked the fifth anniversary of the invasion and the 4,000th US military death in Iraq. Table 2 shows the number and percentage of articles in each sample period.

**Table 2** Nine sample periods

Number and percentage of articles in each sample period by media outlet

Period		Media outlet	
		<i>SMH</i>	<i>The Australian</i>
1. 12–18 September 2002	Number	35	52
	% within media outlet	8.4%	6.6%
2. 5–11 February 2003	Number	59	105
	% within media outlet	14.1%	13.4%
3. 13–19 March 2003	Number	87	150
	% within media outlet	20.8%	19.1%
4. 20–26 March 2003	Number	147	265
	% within media outlet	35.1%	33.8%
5. 1–7 May 2003	Number	28	55
	% within media outlet	6.7%	7.0%

6.	20–8 October 2003	Number	7	42
		% within media outlet	1.7%	5.4%
7.	1–7 March 2004	Number	24	44
		% within media outlet	5.7%	5.6%
8.	20–26 July 2004	Number	27	60
		% within media outlet	6.4%	7.6%
9.	20–26 March 2008	Number	5	12
		% within media outlet	1.2%	1.5%
	Count		419	785
	% within media outlet		100.0%	100.0%

## Findings: Sentiment or tone of headlines and articles

For each stage of the war, each article and each headline was coded as being ‘pro-war or supportive of the US-Australian position’; ‘neutral/balanced’ or ‘anti-war or critical of the US-Australian position’. Table 3 sets out the results of that coding process for headlines in each paper, while Table 4 sets out the results for articles. For both papers there was a greater likelihood of an anti-war article being given a headline that did not accurately reflect the sentiment of the article, but in *The Australian* this tendency was more pronounced. *SMH* headlines and articles were more anti-war than *The Australian* at each stage of the war, though their anti-war stance softened during the invasion.

*SMH* anti-war headlines dropped from 48% before the war to 35% during the invasion, while anti-war articles dropped from 53% to 39% during the invasion, when headlines and articles tended to be more ‘balanced’ or ‘neutral’ (46%, 41%). Pro-war articles in the *SMH* slightly increased from 17% before the war to 21% during the invasion. *The Australian* slightly softened its pro-war headlines from 36% before the war to 35% during the invasion, but slightly increased its pro-war content from 36% to 37% during the invasion period, when the largest category for both papers’ headlines and content was ‘neutral/balanced’. Forty-six per cent of *SMH* headlines during the invasion period and 41% of articles were neutral or balanced, while 48% of *The Australian*’s headlines and 42% of their articles were neutral or balanced. Both papers published more anti-war articles after the invasion (*SMH* 59%, *Australian* 37%) than at any stage before or during the war, which is to be expected given the failure to find WMD, the worsening civil unrest in Iraq and weakening public support for the war. Despite mounting costs and casualties post-war, *The Australian*’s largest category after the invasion was ‘neutral’ (41%) with anti-war articles (37%) for the first time outnumbering pro-war articles (23%).

**Table 3.**

### Headline sentiment

Sentiment of headlines at each stage of the war by media outlet

		Pre-war	Invasion	Post-invasion
<i>SMH</i>	Pro-war	17%	19%	6%
	Anti-war	48%	35%	49%
	Neutral	35%	46%	44%
<i>The Australian</i>	Pro-war	36%	35%	23%
	Anti-war	28%	17%	32%
	Neutral	36%	48%	45%

**Table 4.****Article sentiment**

Balance of sentiment in articles at each stage of the war by media outlet

		Pre-war	Invasion	Post-invasion
<i>SMH</i>	Pro-war	17%	21%	5%
	Anti-war	53%	39%	59%
	Neutral	30%	41%	37%
<i>The Australian</i>	Pro-war	36%	37%	23%
	Anti-war	34%	21%	37%
	Neutral	30%	42%	41%

**Findings: Placement of articles within each newspaper**

The placement of articles within a newspaper conveys to readers the editorial views of the importance of particular items. For example, page 1 is reserved for the most important items of the day, followed by page 3, page 2, page 5 and then page 4. Research shows that readers read the right hand pages (the odd numbered pages) before the left-hand or even numbered pages (Holsanova, Rahm et al. 2006). The layout of a page, including an article's location on the page, accompanying graphics and headline treatment, reflects the editors' views about the relative importance of an article and the order in which they expect their readers to explore a page's content. While semiotics, the study of signs and sign processes, is outside the scope of the thesis, the page location of an article has been taken as an indicator of the editor's view of the relative importance of, in this case, reporting on Iraq and as an indicator of the media agenda. Other editorial policies, for example the placement of international news items in an international section of the paper, also influence placement decisions, but the right-hand page was still seen as the one that would be read first and therefore the dominant page.

Table 5 looks at the balance of sentiment of articles on Iraq placed on the front page, the dominant pages (the odd-numbered right-hand pages) or the left-hand pages of each newspaper. According to these data, page 1 of the *SMH* was most likely to carry neutral articles on Iraq (53%); less likely to run anti-war articles (28%); and even less likely to run pro-war articles (19%). Both dominant and left-hand pages in the body of the paper were more likely to run anti-war articles than pro-war articles. Page 1 coverage of *The Australian*, however, was most likely to carry a pro-war article (46%); less likely to run a neutral article (36%) and even less likely to run an anti-war article (18%). Both dominant and left-handed pages of *The Australian* were most likely to carry neutral articles, with pro-war articles next and anti-war articles following closely.

**Table 5****Article sentiment and placement**

Sentiment of articles on page 1, the dominant page or the left-hand page by media outlet

		Balance of article: in favour, against or even-handed		
		Pro-war	Neutral	Anti-war
<i>SMH</i>	Page 1	19%	53%	28%
	Dominant page (odd page numbers in body - recto)	16%	30%	54%
	Left-hand page (even page numbers in body - verso)	17%	36%	47%
<i>The Australian</i>	Page 1	46%	36%	18%
	Dominant page (odd page numbers in body - recto)	34%	35%	31%
	Left-hand page (even page numbers in body - verso)	31%	38%	31%

Each row adds to 100%

## News Opinion/analysis and editorials

Table 6 shows the breakdown of coverage in the *SMH* and *The Australian* into type of article (news, opinion/analysis, editorial and other). Here the editorial positions of the two papers became very clear. Of thirty-three editorials in *The Australian* during the sample periods, thirty were positive about the war, two were even-handed and one was negative. This pro-war position in editorials remained constant through all stages of the war, despite the failure to find WMD, reports of poor post-war planning and an under-resourced invasion, a bloody civil conflict, 4,000 US military deaths and Rumsfeld's sacking as US Defence Minister. On the other hand, only 63% of *SMH* editorials during the sample periods were anti-war, suggesting that while the paper was anti-war, other views also made their way into *SMH* editorials. Of all *SMH* editorials, 26% were neutral or balanced, while 11% were assessed as being on balance pro-war.

*The Australian's* pro-war position was also evident – although less so – in the balance of analysis and opinion articles, with pro-war articles accounting for 40% and anti-war articles almost balancing numerically at 36% of opinion pieces (see table 5). Twenty-four percent were neutral or balanced. In *SMH* analysis and opinion articles their anti-war position was clear, accounting for 67% of all analysis/opinion articles. Pro-war pieces accounted for just 12%, while neutral or balanced pieces accounted for 21% of all analysis and opinion articles (see table 5).

When it came to straight news coverage, both papers were more likely to be neutral or balanced in their coverage than they were likely to take a position on the war. This did not mean that they did not take a position in their news coverage, just that this was less likely than for any other category of coverage. *The Australian's* news items were predominantly neutral or balanced (45%), with pro-war and anti-war articles evenly represented (28%) in those news articles which took a position (see table 5). The *SMH's* news coverage also tended to be predominantly neutral or balanced (46%), but its anti-war news coverage was greater (33%) than its pro-war news coverage (20%).

**Table 6**

### Article sentiment and type

Sentiment of articles by type of article by media outlet  
(data aggregated across all sampling periods)

		Sentiment of articles		
		Pro-war	Neutral	Anti-war
<i>SMH</i>	News	21% (47)	46% (107)	33% (77)
	Opinion/Analysis	12% (20)	21% (35)	67% (109)
	Editorials	11% (2)	26% (5)	63% (12)
	Other	0%	33% (1)	67 (2)%
<i>The Australian</i>	News	28% (141)	45% (227)	28% (142)
	Opinion/Analysis	40% (92)	24% (55)	36% (81)
	Editorials	91% (30)	6% (2)	3% (1)
	Other	25% (4)	31% (5)	44% (7)

Rows add to 100%

Tables 7 and 8 provide a view of pro-war and anti-war news, opinion and analysis, and editorial articles before the invasion and after the end of major combat operations in Iraq. Articles that were judged to have been balanced or neutral have been excluded to enable ready comparison with the figures provided by Manne and Switzer. The content analysis found that the balance of news coverage by both papers tended to be anti-war rather than pro-war, with the *SMH* anti-war

news articles outnumbering pro-war news articles by a ratio of 3:2. In *The Australian*, however, the balance of sentiment in news coverage was 53% anti-war to 47% pro-war. The editorial positions of each newspaper were much clearer when editorials and opinion and analysis articles were considered. Around 83% of *SMH* opinion and analysis articles and 86% of *SMH* editorials were judged to be anti-war while, in *The Australian*, 91% of editorials were pro-war, leaving no-one in any doubt as to their editorial position on the war. However, only 53% of opinion and analysis articles were judged to be pro-war, suggesting a different approach when it came to the presentation of views in the paper's opinion pages – a point acknowledged by Manne.

**Table 7 Article sentiment before the war**

Pre-war coverage		Pro-war	Anti-war
<i>SMH</i>	News	44% (19)	66% (37)
	Opinion/analysis	18% (11)	83% (52)
	Editorial	14% (1)	86% (6)
<i>The Australian</i>	News	47% (53)	53% (60)
	Opinion/analysis	53% (47)	47% (41)
	Editorial	91% (10)	9% (1)
		Rows add to 100%	

**Table 8 Article sentiment after the end of major combat operations in Iraq**

Post invasion coverage		Pro-war	Anti-war
<i>SMH</i>	News	20% (2)	80% (8)
	Opinion/analysis	4% (1)	96% (23)
	Editorial	0% (0)	10% (4)
<i>The Australian</i>	News	27% (13)	73% (35)
	Opinion/analysis	42% (14)	58% (19)
	Editorial	100% (8)	0% (0)
		Rows add to 100%	

## Comparison with Manne and Switzer: *The Australian's* opinion articles

Table 9 compares the results of the content analysis with the numbers suggested by Manne (2011) and Tom Switzer (2005), the (self-confessed) anti-war opinions editor of *The Australian* at the time. For the pre-war period, the PhD content analysis found a slightly higher proportion of pro-war opinion and analysis pieces in *The Australian* than the number claimed by Switzer, while Manne suggested that Switzer's account of '45 dovish...and 47 hawkish... undercounts the explicitly and implicitly pro-war pieces by at least twenty' (p17). During the post-invasion period - after President Bush declared major combat operations over – the PhD content analysis figures suggest a higher proportion of anti-war articles in *The Australian* than Switzer suggests. This may be a reflection of the sampling method: the sample was much smaller and focused on critical events after the war, including the US administration's acknowledgement of failure to find WMD. Judgements about sentiment were also based on themes, so that an article about the failure to find WMD would be more likely to be coded as anti-war.



**Table 9** **Comparison with Switzer and Manne**  
Balance of sentiment (pro-war/anti-war) of opinion or analysis articles on Iraq in *The Australian*

	Pre-war		Post-invasion		Switzer**
	Betts	Switzer**	Manne*	Betts	
Pro-war	53% (47)	51% (47)	60% (67)	42% (14)	52% (107)
Anti-war	47% (41)	49% (45)	40% (45)	58% (19)	48% (114)
Columns add to 100%					
Sources: **Switzer, 2005: 31; *Manne, 2011: 17					

## Discussion

This paper has traced a number of dimensions of the anti-war and pro-war dispositions of the *SMH* and *The Australian* and compared recent findings by Robert Manne with the results of a content analysis as part of a wider PhD project. The analysis suggests that each newspaper, while giving voice to opposing views, took a position on the Iraq conflict, which was moderated during the invasion but was evident in coverage at each of the three stages of the war (pre-war, invasion and post-invasion). It also suggests that each newspaper was sensitive to public opinion and moderated content through article placement or a more moderate headline, when there was a sense that public opinion might be changing direction.

In straight numerical terms, the aggregate data seemed to suggest that the *SMH* was perhaps more anti-war than *The Australian* was pro-war – but this was contrary to the impression that many people had at the time. A number of academics, including Robert Manne from La Trobe University, David McKnight from the University of New South Wales and Mitchell Hobbs from the University of Newcastle, have argued that *The Australian* was biased in its coverage of the war. Robert Manne has argued that *The Australian* ‘delivered public opinion for the Howard Government’ on the Iraq war (Manne, 2011). Mitchell Hobbs wrote in his PhD thesis, *Paper Cuts: Media Bias, the Iraq War and the Politics of Rupert Murdoch* that:

...in the days leading up to Australia joining the ‘coalition of the willing’ in their war against Iraq, *The Australian* was conforming to the outspoken views held by Rupert Murdoch, producing many articles with a pro-war/neo-conservative bias. Although this bias was not totally pervasive, it was not confined to the opinion and editorial pages, but seemingly seeped through to the regular news pages...While it cannot be determined whether these findings are a reflection of the corporate culture of News Corporation (unwitting bias) or the direct results of editorial policies (deliberate bias) they suggest nonetheless that the quality of this publication’s journalism can be undermined when the proprietor takes a keen interest in a particular story (pp. 239–240).

The explanation for the variation in findings may lie in the different research designs, including sampling, which in the PhD content analysis targeted specific times when there were major developments in the war, including when WMD were not found and news coverage tended to focus on anti-war themes. Another possible explanation lies with the limitations of quantitative content analysis, which fails to capture fully the way that people read newspapers. Editors and researchers know that people rarely read everything in a newspaper. Readers skim headlines and pages to identify articles of interest and, more often than not, read articles that resonate with

their own values. This is where placement, the language used in headlines and graphics can make a huge difference to the way an issue is framed for readers. A page one headline will leave a more lasting impression of the paper's sentiments on an issue than will the detailed content of an article, say, on the left-hand page of the international section in the body of the paper. Readers' impressions of the paper's position will be influenced more by headlines and particularly by page one placement than by articles in the body of the paper. Table 5 shows the sentiment of both papers' page one articles – and, in comparison with the aggregate numbers, they suggest a more moderate, balanced agenda on the part of the *SMH* and a much more aggressive pro-war position on the part of *The Australian*. On the assumption that editors know what they are doing when they choose headlines and place articles on the front page, it would seem that *The Australian's* pro-war front-page bias was intentional – as was the *SMH's* decision to convey a more neutral or balanced position on Iraq on its front pages.

In response to criticism of *The Australian's* coverage of Iraq, Tom Switzer, the newspaper's anti-war opinions editor at the time, has argued that his coverage of Iraq was pretty balanced (with marginally more pro-war than anti-war opinion pieces) – and this research would appear to confirm this. But his response does not effectively counter the concerns of *The Australian's* critics, given that this research also finds consistent bias in *The Australian's* front page and editorial coverage, with a more balanced approach to straight news coverage and a slight pro-war bias in analysis and opinion articles (see table 6).

The pro-war positions taken by *The Australian's* regular columnists added to a widespread perception of bias. Greg Sheridan and Dennis Shanahan consistently put the US and Howard Government's argument for war, while the argument against the war was often put by Simon Crean, Bob Hawke, Peter Botsman, Richard Butler, Scott Burchill or Carl Ungerer – opinion leaders who were not on *The Australian's* payroll. It is true that journalist Matt Price tended to put an anti-war position and editor-at-large, Paul Kelly tended to be balanced in his analysis – but the well-known regular columnists tended to be pro-war, while their counterparts at the *SMH* tended to be anti-war.

*The Australian's* perhaps disingenuous response to critics – using the numbers of their own content analysis (Tom Switzer's numbers) as proof that accusations of bias were not true – suggests that the paper may have a business model that seeks to 'have their cake and eat it too'. The often inflammatory front page headlines and the strongly pro-US views of some commentators appear to have been a tactic designed to attract conservative readers and, in the case of Iraq, to support the Government's views. But the variety of views put by external commentators and opinion leaders suggests that *The Australian's* editors wanted to appeal to a wider and more educated readership, including those who may have been opposed to the war, but particularly those in the bureaucracy with an interest in international affairs. *The Australian's* editors may have been seeking to influence, not just the community, but also the Government on Iraq. This will be explored in interviews with journalists and editors in the second part of the research.

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