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Gruen Nation: Dissecting the show, not the business

Abstract

One distinctive feature of the increasing mediatisation of politics in general and election campaigns in particular is the growth of the media's self-referential reflections on the interplay between politics and media. This meta-coverage has become a familiar media ritual that is not only evident in traditional 'hard news' media, but has also become an essential part of comedy and lifestyle programs. While some scholars argue that these self-referential revelations about how political communication and audiences are being conceptualised serves the public interest, others suggest that meta-coverage leads to increased cynicism and disengagement among citizens. In this context, the highly successful Australian television program *Gruen Nation* is a particularly instructive example. On the program, advertisers and campaign strategists engaged in meta-coverage of the 2010 Australian Federal Election campaign. This article examines how the communication experts decoded political communication, how they performed their professional ideology and to what extent their meta-coverage contributed to a critical analysis of the interplay between media and the democratic process.

Keywords: Political advertising, meta-coverage, entertainment, television

Introduction

Welcome to *Gruen Nation*, where, for the next four weeks, we're gonna strap on

lead vests and run the election under an X-ray. You won't find any policy talk

here. We are only interested in the way the big four brands—Labor, Liberal,

National and Green—try to get you to buy them. (Wil Anderson's opening

statement on Gruen Nation)

Gruen Nation attracted up to 1.6 million weekly viewers on Australian public broadcaster ABC

television during the 2010 Australian Federal Election campaign. It was the ABC's highest rating

program in 2010. With *Gruen Nation*, the ABC continued its record of producing popular

broadcast coverage of elections—*Gruen Nation* out-rated any other election coverage on

Australian television. The program was an extension of *The Gruen Transfer* (2008–2011), a

popular show featuring a panel of advertising professionals discussing and decoding

advertising. *Gruen Nation* featured a panel of communication experts: advertising professionals

Todd Sampson and Russel Howcroft, political campaign strategist Neil Lawrence, former

Federal politician John Hewson and political commentator Annabel Crabb. The show was hosted

by comedian and political satirist Wil Anderson, his role on the show being to introduce

discussion, prompt laughter and respond with pithy and probing one-liners. Each segment was

framed with a scripted introduction and question from Anderson to a panellist. In this article,

we are primarily interested in the practices of the panellists.

Gruen Nation can be placed within the emergence of forms of political communication

that hybridise formerly distinct genres (news, editorial, satire and entertainment).[1] These forms

of political communication are novel in their concern with the decoding of the political process

and their plain language explanation of political strategies to the 'ordinary' citizen. *Gruen Nation*

presented itself as a 'national bullshit detector' that would 'X-ray' the 'show business' of

politics.[2] To detect and debunk 'bullshit' in Australian culture is a 'good' thing. It suggests not

only that you are wily and skilful, but also that your moral compass is attuned to undermining

elites.

Furthermore, Anderson's opening statement, and promotional press for the program, presented the exposure and decoding of politics as procedures that act in the public interest. Within the broadcast landscape, *Gruen Nation* was distinctive in its focus on political advertising and communication, rather than political news and journalism. It directed attention towards advertising as a central element of contemporary political communication and was promoted as enabling the public to examine their place in the political process by understanding how professional communicators conceptualise them. Jon Casimir, *Gruen Nation*'s producer, said of the program, 'we're making a show about how people are understood. And for the person on the couch, that's a scenario where they get to recognise themselves and their own behaviours, and their own thoughts' (interview on Mumbrella 2010). As a program produced by Australia's publicly funded broadcaster, the ABC, these claims deserve critical attention.

The development of such hugely popular satirical forms of meta-coverage by a public broadcaster is intriguing, as they face the challenge of producing content that is both popular and contributes to improving the quality of participation in the democratic life of the nation. With this in mind, it is important to consider what the national broadcaster's investment in such forms of meta-coverage contributes to a changing media-political process.

To this end, in this article we set out to examine *Gruen Nation* in three ways. Firstly, we examine how professional communicators on the program use their professional frameworks and identity to decode political communication. We ask: How do advertisers perform their professional ideology (Deuze 2006) on *Gruen Nation*?[3] And, what kind of understanding of, and participation in, the political process does their insight offer? Secondly, by analysing 'The Pitch', a segment on the program where advertising agencies pitch political advertisements to the panel, we explore advertisers' attempts to use their professional practices and frameworks to construct 'better' forms of political communication: How are The Pitch advertisements better, and do the proposed advertisements allow the audience to imagine better forms of political

communication? Finally, we place *Gruen Nation* within the growing emphasis on meta-coverage in the media-political process: Does meta-coverage by advertisers on *Gruen Nation* represent a critical engagement with political communication practices?

Learning to laugh at meta-coverage

A feature of the increasing 'mediatisation' (Louw 2010; McNair 2011) of the political process is the growth of meta-coverage. Meta-coverage is characterised by the media's self-referential reflections on the interplay between politics and media (Esser, Reinemann & Fan 2011; deVreese & Elenbaas 2008). The emphasis of this coverage is on the revelation and explanation of backstage interactions and strategies deployed by politicians and their advisors when dealing with the media. Sally Young (2011, p. 182) chronicled the practice of meta-coverage in her analysis of Australian elections. She found that

> stories that were mainly about policies… declined by 60 per cent between 2001
> and 2007. Stories that had no, or negligible, reference to policy rose by an almost
> equivalent amount of 54 per cent. When a policy proposal was reported, the
> focus was usually on its relevance to the horse-race rather than its finer detail or
> whether it would solve the problem identified.

Much of the conceptualisation of meta-coverage has focused on traditional 'news' media. We propose that meta-coverage is a now familiar media ritual evident in the practices of journalism but also more widely found in popular and political culture. Celebrity and political confessions, reality TV's self-referential exposure of its own means of production and backstage machinations (Andrejevic 2004), and corporate brands' references to the instrumental nature of their own appeals (Holt 2002) are all suggestive of a growing media culture that reflects on the constructed nature of media representations.

In Australia, the past two federal elections have been marked by the use of social media, irreverent viral advertising, and appearances by political leaders on lifestyle, comedy and entertainment programs. A preoccupation of these hybridised forms of political communication is the 'debunking' and 'revealing' of the backstage process, motivations, and 'real' beliefs of politicians and their parties. In the United States, political satirists have emerged on comedy news programs like *The Daily Show* as a new class of generators of meta-coverage; they offer an explanation and exposure of the political process that their audiences take to be credible (Baym 2005; Feldman 2008). Similarly, in Australia, *Gruen Nation*'s advertising and political communications professionals emerge as a distinct group engaged in the production of meta-coverage.

Accounts differ on the impact of this growth of meta-coverage on the democratic process. Some argue that it provides citizens with important and enlightening information about how political communication works (McNair 2011). From this perspective, media concerned with 'exposing' the inner workings of the political process prompts politicians towards democratically desirable principles and practices of communication (Esser & D'Angelo 2006). In contrast, critical accounts suggest that meta-coverage impels citizens to become increasingly cynical and disengaged from the democratic process (Kerbel 1999; deVreese 2005; Louw 2010).

Some scholars have argued that the integration of the political process with comedy, popular and celebrity culture democratises politics and enables citizens to understand complex political issues (Temple 2006; van Zoonen 1998; Scammell 1995). These accounts suggest that the satirical debunking of the political process reinvents political journalism by opening up new forms of critical enquiry and engaging an estranged audience of mostly younger citizens in the democratic process (Baym 2005; Feldman 2008). Greg Baym (2005) praises *The Daily Show* for advocating a 'conversational or deliberative theory of democracy' where 'only open

conversation can provide legitimate foundation for governance'. In contrast, critics (for instance, Postman [1987], Andrejevic [2007] and Marshall [1997]) argue that the savvy attitude invoked by decoding, debunking, backstage revelations, confessions and exposing production only stimulates a 'critical apathy' that directs the public away from 'imagining alternatives' (Teurling 2010, p. 370).[4]

Within the context of increasing meta-coverage and debate about its impact on the political process, we examine what useful contribution *Gruen Nation*, as a program funded by the public broadcaster, made to the election coverage. Our strategy is to examine how the professional communicators on the program offered their expertise as a framework for the public to understand political communication.

The Advertising Professional as 'Bullshit Detection Expert'

In the following sections we analyse interactions between panel members on *Gruen Nation*. The program consisted of four weekly episodes throughout the formal election campaign. We focus specifically on the parts of the program that invested in a considered analysis of that week's political advertising and communication strategies.

Gruen Nation enables us to examine advertising professionals' public performance of their professional ideology. The program offers a unique avenue for contributing to accounts of how communication professionals give meaning and legitimacy to their work (for instance, Carpentier [2005], Deuze [2006], Hackley and Kover [2007], Hesmondhalgh [2010], Pieczka [2002] and Svensson [2007]). In the analysis, we set out to elaborate on the frameworks employed to evaluate political advertising.

Throughout the program, panellists' analyses of advertising implicitly drew on managerial criteria that are evident in advertising practices and frameworks (see, among

others, Wells [2011], Duncan [2005] and Hackley [2010]), and industry awards recognising

outstanding performance in creative excellence.[5] On *Gruen Nation*, advertising and professional

communicators applied some combination of the following managerial criteria to an analysis of

the political process and an evaluation of 'good' political advertising:

a) Advertising strategy: the soundness of the strategic advertising concept in terms of choice of target audience, persuasion strategy and strategic fit into the overall campaign.

b) Creative idea: originality of the creative concept and the communication idea.

c) Creative execution: originality and quality of the design and production of the advertisements.

d) Use of media: originality and effectiveness of the chosen media in terms of target audience.

e) Evaluation of effectiveness: overall effectiveness of advertisement and campaign against the set objectives.

In the following section, we consider how panellists deployed communicative capacities

such as intuition, judgment, deliberation and explanation to 'decode' political communication

for the public. In the analysis of *Gruen Nation* to follow, three practices become evident.

Firstly, panellists draw attention to the constructed nature of the media-political

process. In particular, they explain how emotional or affective appeals are incorporated into

political communication.

Secondly, panellists theorise and explain communication strategies using advertising

frameworks. In their account, advertising is presented as a legitimate framework for

representing and understanding the political process. In broad terms, panellists allude to a

larger critique of the manipulative and promotional nature of the media-political process but

specific advertisements are only evaluated using strategic frames (for instance, effectiveness or

creativity). Advertising professionals focus on the creative aspects of the discussed

advertisements rather than an analysis of advertising in the political process. This happens even in cases where they express concerns about the tactics used. For example, the panel criticised negative campaigning in general before celebrating the creative excellence and strategic cleverness of specific negative advertisements.

Thirdly, panellists deploy advertising frameworks as a method for enjoying being knowledgeable about the political process. Simply understanding the constructed nature of political communication ('detecting bullshit') is presented as empowering in its own right. The panellists invite the audience to enjoy being knowledgeable, distanced and exempt observers of an instrumental communicative process. In each of these activities the professionals on the panel draw on affective communicative capacities and legitimacy embodied in their professional identity.[6] The audience are invited to find panellists credible by virtue of their professional experience.

'You're Soaking in it': Decoding Political Communication

On the first episode of *Gruen Nation*, advertising creative Todd Sampson said of the incumbent Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard's opening campaign advertisement:

> The challenge with any political advertising is the products we're selling can
> talk. And the more they talk the more we need advertising to kind of shape and
> massage and kind of put their image together. And in this case she's using a
> controlled environment to come across as very competent. And really, in
> political advertising it's not about whether you are competent—it's about
> whether you can be competent on television.

Sampson's analysis illustrated two components of professional communicators' analysis of political communication on *Gruen Nation*. Firstly, panellists claim that 'good' political

advertising is strategically effective where it appeals to our emotive or intuitive assessments of how a person 'comes across'. For the advertising professional, evaluating the appearance of a leader (as Sampson explains 'whether you can be competent on television') is more important than the substance of the ideas communicated. Secondly, panellists suggest that the role of professional communicators is to create and manage 'controlled environments' that shape and modulate the 'image' of a leader. Sampson's frame was repeated by the panel throughout their analysis of the election campaign to address the key strategic problem of making a political leader believable.

In the same episode, the panel discussed the symbolic gestures or 'stunts' politicians perform to attract media attention. When prompted for his opinion of media stunts like signing promises or pledges on television, former politician John Hewson garnered laughter and applause when he said, 'it's basically bullshit'. The panel and audience repeatedly laughed at and applauded statements that denoted politicians and their communications as 'bullshit'. This practice suggested a cynical enjoyment of the contrived nature of political communication strategies. Laughter is significant here; it acts as a method of clarifying the intentions within this social interaction by negotiating its meaning. Laughter functions as a way of indicating insider status. The audience, the panel and the viewers at home reveal their special status as an in-group who 'know' by communally acknowledging that they too are smart enough to see through the political talk, labelled here as 'bullshit'. 'We' laugh because 'we' see through the constructed nature of double-speak, even though others may not. But laughter that functions primarily to designate an in-group may 'fail politically' to prompt action, mark out an alternate vision or enable dialogue between different positions (Truscello 2011, p. 138). While laughing indicates a savvy and knowing disposition, as opposed to being gullible or naive, it does not necessarily translate into empowerment, action or critical engagement (Teurling 2010, p. 368).

John Hewson and former political strategist Neil Lawrence both pointed to the problem of an audience made aware of the constructed nature of media representations.

John Hewson: It's hard to prove that you should be believed these days. I mean people just do not believe political leaders anyway. So you go to extreme lengths to say, 'look I can be believed, look I'll even sign it, I'll put...' and everyone says, 'so what?'

Neil Lawrence: I believe you even less.

John Hewson: I believe you even less.

In Hewson's account, the political leader undertakes ever more conspicuous attempts to be believed and, in doing so, further erodes the credibility of what they say. Hewson's lament pointed at a larger social critique of a political communication process that inhibits debate and engagement with ideas. The panel, though, moved on to explain how political communication is strategised in such a system. That strategic challenge was not placed in larger critical or social terms. Advertising professional Russel Howcroft then commented on John Hewson's story about a pledge he signed during an election campaign:

Russel Howcroft: This is all about the media cycle though isn't it? It's the pressure to give the media a picture, yeah? And the picture has got to be as big as you can. The signature has got to be as big as you can possibly make it. You try and do a stunt, you're trying to get on the front page of the newspaper.

Neil Lawrence: But it always ends up looking amateur, and I've never seen it work, it's actually usually been quite damaging.

To Howcroft and Lawrence, Hewson's story was a strategic lesson in how to craft political messages for a public grown savvy to the contrived nature of political campaigning. As

advertising professionals, their interest was in how these gestures can be crafted so that they are effective in capturing the public's attention or making a leader appear credible. The two advertising professionals were not interested in Hewson's view about the impact of these practices on the political process.

The problem of being believed was elaborated on throughout the program, with reference to aspects of political communication that are less about the public's engagement with a particular idea and more about their emotional or intuitive engagement with a political leader's tone of voice, gestures or the medium in which they appear. The panel discussed Julia Gillard's attempts to 'modulate' her tone of voice. Howcroft explained that 'brands have a tone of voice' and was concerned that changing Gillard's tone would dilute an aspect of what makes her 'different'. Lawrence countered Howcroft by explaining that Labor strategists think a more feminine tone is a 'key selling point' against Liberal Opposition Leader Tony Abbott's male aggression. In a discussion about the televised Leader's debate, Todd Sampson drew attention to Gillard's body language and explained that her repeated display of her palms was an attempt to conjure trust with the public. He explained that anyone who had 'done body language courses' and 'knew' body language would find it 'irritating'. In each of these discussions the professional communicators on the panel drew on their professional expertise to make judgments and explanations about affective aspects of communication. As advertisers, they judged the strategic effectiveness of political communication by evaluating its emotive and intuitive appeals.

The panel also drew attention to how a medium can be used to modulate and manage the public's intuitive or affective response to a candidate. In these explanations the leader is communicated *by* a particular medium. The emphasis is not on any *particular* meaning a leader or their campaign constructs, but instead on how advertisers and political communicators position the leader within a certain 'affective background' (Clough 2008) provided by a specific

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television, radio or online format. Anderson introduced the discussion with a summary of recent attempts by politicians to appear in popular culture, lifestyle and entertainment formats:

Wil Anderson: Now, Neil, you put Kevin Rudd on a bunch of FM breakfast shows, you put him on Rove, are there risks involved in that?

Neil Lawrence: There's always risks in anything live. If you look at Kevin going on Rove, there's a few reasons for doing it. It's a good environment. He could talk to—reach—an audience it's difficult to get to through normal political advertising. Also, there's maybe this judgment that he's such an uber-nerd that it's maybe cool in its own way and would maybe work in the show.

[An excerpt from Rudd's appearance on Rove is screened]

Neil Lawrence: There's one other reason for doing that in the serious part of the campaign. Even though it's Rove and it's live entertainment, it's all serious business. And, the great differentiation in that campaign, the fundamental strategy, was about the Labor party being the future, and the Howard government being the past. John Howard couldn't have gone on Rove, and wouldn't have gone, if he tried it would've been a disaster.

Lawrence demonstrated how the key differentiation in the campaign was the ability of the leaders to operate within a particular medium. John Howard, as an older conservative politician more comfortable in traditional radio talkback or journalistic television interviews, couldn't appear believable within the popular media that Rudd could use. Rudd's presence in those media communicated a generalised set of meanings and embedded Rudd within an environment that wasn't accessible to Howard. To the panellists, the success of the strategy wasn't about Rudd's particular ideas or policies. Instead, the panel celebrated a political communication process that privileges the modulation of the public's affective response to Rudd.

The opportunity presented by the panel was to identify with the panellists' ability to discern how tone of voice, body language or a particular medium are used to make a leader appear credible. The exposition of politicians' staged attempts to conjure trust with the public arguably helps people 'see through' politicians' attempts to manipulate their feelings and judgments. As the program's producer, Jon Casimir, put it, this activity develops a critical media literacy that helps the public understand how the political process 'understands them'. Importantly, this ritual of exposure also constructs the advertising professional as an expert who, by virtue of their professional identity, expertise and experience, can offer visceral insight into how political communication works. In this sense, the panellists are affective labourers who draw on their 'linguistic, communicative, or intellectual capacities' and their place in the social body (Clough et al. 2007, p. 71) to explain how political communication works. They do the work of making advertising expertise a legitimate part of understanding and engaging with political communication. They invite the audience to trust their expertise and deploy it to make similar assessments of political candidates and their communication strategies. This activity constructs and promotes savvy and cynical forms of political participation as much as it decodes and pre-empts them (Andrejevic 2010; Massumi 2005).

In these forms of political communication, both communications professionals and the public are more concerned with how messages are formed and presented than what those messages are. The impasse this creates is that the beliefs of the public matter only in so far as they can be aggregated, catalogued and analysed for the purpose of creating instrumentally effective communications. The advertising and political communications professionals on *Gruen Nation* contributed to the normalisation of a media–political process that, following Clough (2008) and Dean (2010), focuses not on the substance of particular demands the public make but on how those demands can be 'modulated' (Clough 2008, p. 16). Furthermore, they invite the public to enjoy identifying with the insiders who 'get' and can discern the constructed

character of political communication (a practice Andrejevic [2008] also observes in his study of *Television Without Pity*).

While the public's judgement about politicians will always be in part affective (Street 2004), *Gruen Nation* appears to amplify the importance of making intuitive judgments about the constructed affective appeals of political communication. Since the 1970s, advertising has developed strategies based around emotional, associational and cultural appeals. On *Gruen Nation*, advertisers deployed criteria of effectiveness, media use and creativity associated with these strategies to evaluate political communication. The implicit appeal to a well-informed public is to understand how purposive communication attempts to manipulate them. The paradox here is that advertising works regardless of how audiences or publics understand it. Arguably, these rituals of deconstruction do not prompt more imaginative or constructive forms of political participation; instead they amplify cynical distance and critical apathy (Andrejevic 2009; Teurling 2010). Where these critical accounts claim that ideology can be exposed without ceasing to function (Andrejevic 2004), advertising industry narratives provide a corresponding reference point. Advertisers readily acknowledge that advertising works on an affective or emotive level and that exposing how it works doesn't make it any less effective. In the next section we consider *Gruen Nation*'s attempt to go beyond deconstruction to construct 'better' forms of political communication.

'The Pitch': Constructing 'Better' Political Communication

'The Pitch' segment of the show demonstrated how advertising professionals envision 'better' forms of political advertising. In the first episode of *Gruen Nation*, Russel Howcroft described political advertisements as 'ordinary compared to great brand communication'. Given the ambivalence of advertising professionals to political advertisements (Scammel & Langer 2006) it is instructive to examine how the panellists evaluated the advertisements presented to them by agencies participating in The Pitch. Agencies were asked to construct campaign

advertisements that would exemplify good political advertising. The work of the pitching agencies and the panellists' critiques provided avenues for the audience to imagine different forms of political communication.

In the first episode, the pitching agencies were asked to produce 'the perfect candidate ad'. The two agencies took different approaches. Melbourne agency Freeform produced an advertisement for Tony Abbott that did not feature any concrete policy proposal nor address any relevant political issues. The advertisement worked on an emotional level, presenting Abbott as a father who wanted to make the world a better place for future generations. Brisbane agency Make aimed to overcome the perception that Julia Gillard, as a new leader, was 'unknown' to the public. The advertisement used quotes to reveal her life story and finished with the statement that this advertisement would be the only official one Gillard would run. Instead of advertisements, she would hold community forums every weeknight on ABC2 as a way to guarantee 'a proper conversation, a proper opportunity to make an informed decision.'

The panel of advertising experts (except for Todd Sampson) preferred Freeform's advertisement for its strategy. For instance, Neil Lawrence noted it was 'a very usable ad' because it 'humanised Abbott'. Although both Howcroft and Lawrence found the idea of Gillard's community forum 'laudable', the Abbott advertisement was judged to be better because 'there is a strategic reason why that might work' (Howcroft). The attempt of one of the pitching agencies to envision a different communication strategy aimed at promoting rational deliberation was voted down by the panel applying strategic advertising frameworks in their critique.

Subsequent Pitch segments followed in a similar vein. In the second episode, agencies were asked to make 'better fear ads'. Despite, in earlier episodes, critiquing the negative effect fear advertisements can have on the 'mandate for leadership' of particular politicians, the panel discerned which of the fear advertisements would be most strategically effective. In the third

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episode, the participating agencies were asked to come up with advertisements for and against The Greens. When asked to outline their strategic thinking behind the proposed advertisements, both agency representatives stressed the importance of featuring policy issues in their executions:

> Ben Peacock (Republic of Everyone, Sydney; pro-Greens pitch): The thing about The Greens is their biggest asset is their biggest liability. They're known to be caring; they're known to stand up for what they believe in. The problem is everyone only knows what they believe in is one issue. How do you take all that good stuff and show that they actually apply to a whole bunch of issues and policies?
>
> Jim Gall (Redhanded, Melbourne; anti-Greens pitch): We didn't think 'fear and smear' were going to do it with this campaign. So we opened up a conversation with the audience and we wanted to appeal to their intellect. We wanted to look at the policy, we wanted them to really discover their policy and understand where it could take them.

The panel's response to the presented advertisements was overwhelmingly positive. Both advertisements were praised for their excellence. But the pro-Greens advertisement came out the clear winner, with the panel drawing attention to its emotional appeal and strategic concept. Howcroft called it a 'wonderful, really positive, emotive piece of advertising', and Hewson was taken by 'the softness and reality of the people in the ad' and the clever punchline. Lawrence also praised it for its 'really good line' and the fact that he could 'see the ad extended and other policy issues featured in coming ads'. For Sampson, it was 'the best ad the Greens have ever done' and he predicted that Republic of Everyone would be approached by The Greens.[7]

The panel's intuitive judgement about the qualities of these advertisements is even starker when compared to their critique of an actual campaign advertisement The Greens had produced for the election campaign. The panel criticised the advertisement as 'just an error' (Lawrence) and 'an awful piece of film' (Sampson), yet both The Pitch advertisement and the actual advertisement featured policy issues. The difference for the panel was the execution of the idea in terms of tone and style, as discerned by the advertising experts.

The Pitch exemplified the way that *Gruen Nation* panellists appeared to allow for alternative visions of political communication but actually constrained this through the use of professionally opaque criteria. While some of the pitching agencies tried to envision more policy-focused forms of political communication—in the case of Make's proposed community forum in the candidate advertisement for Julia Gillard, for example—the panel always determined the better political advertising pitch on the grounds of strategic effectiveness embedded in its affective or emotional appeals.

The Pitch also demonstrated how any mild meta-critique of advertising practices was superseded by the celebration of advertising creativity and the effective modulation of the audience's affective responses. For instance, although the panel engaged in a very brief normative debate about the downsides of negative campaigning, they tended to celebrate the strategic and creative cleverness of some of the negative campaign advertisements. The use of traditional forms of advertising, like fear ads, was further legitimised by their inclusion in The Pitch challenge. Thus, instead of providing ideas for a different form of political discourse, the 'better' ads of the *Gruen Nation* pitches were merely variations of well-known advertising formulas.

'The Advertising is Very Honest': Legitimising the Marketing Approach to Political Communication

In her analysis of Australian election reporting, Sally Young (2011, p. 196) argues that 'meta-coverage helps journalists reiterate their professional role, demonstrate their distance from politicians and explain gaps in their reporting brought about by the effectiveness of political PR'. On *Gruen Nation* we can observe advertising and political communications professionals engaged in a similar process. The panellists deployed meta-coverage as a mode of enacting their professional identity.

Savvy forms of meta-coverage like *Gruen Nation* do not benignly decode or explain the role of advertising in the political process. Advertising frameworks have a normative connotation; using them to explain the role of advertising in the political process legitimises advertising, marketing, branding and public opinion research as legitimate frameworks the public might use to understand their participation in the political process. By doing so, panellists reflexively inhibit discussion about the impact these modes of communication have on the political process itself.

Through participation in meta-coverage, the panellists on *Gruen Nation* (just like journalists) attempted to construct their professional identity and ideology as a legitimate framework for facilitating public dialogue. Rather than simply 'serving' the public interest, panellists on *Gruen Nation* legitimised and promoted their professional identity as an integral part of the political process. While much attention has been devoted to journalists' construction of journalism as a meaningful and integral part of the political process (Deuze 2006; Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1979), on *Gruen Nation* we see panellists reach for their own distinctive professional narratives to explain the political process, justify their own role and offer their own constructed forms of participation for citizens.

Perhaps, because of the paradoxical nature of making and managing instrumental forms of communication within a liberal-democratic process founded on imagined ideals of

participation and deliberation, advertisers struggle to make a legitimate positive account of their role. For instance, when Howcroft sincerely claimed that 'advertising subsidises democracy' the audience laughed—they 'knew' it couldn't be true—and his industry colleague, Sampson, cringed.

> Todd Sampson: …the major issue with this election I think is that they have officially blurred the line between political advertising and consumer product advertising. And I think it's an awful thing. So spin-doctors, advertising agencies, pollsters—they package up these people.
>
> Russel Howcroft: Hang on, hang on.
>
> Todd Sampson: Hang on, one second. And it's terrible to watch smart, intelligent people trying to pretend to be something they are not—holding back themselves because that does not fit the brand that they've packaged up.
>
> Russel Howcroft: You are not talking about advertising here, you are talking about the performance of the leaders.
>
> Todd Sampson: All of them, all of them.
>
> Russel Howcroft: No, no. The advertising is very clear. And it is actually very honest. The ads are honest in that you know exactly what they are trying to do. It's only when you get the media involved, when you get the spin involved that you say 'I am getting confused here'. There is actually no confusion about the advertising.
>
> Todd Sampson: It's part of the spin, Russel.

In a media–political process framed by meta-coverage, the professional communicator not only constructs political communication but they also manage how those communication strategies are represented.

On *Gruen Nation*, professional ideologies and frameworks of advertising are employed to offer an explanation of the political process to 'ordinary' people. Advertisers engage in the paradoxical activity of explaining to citizens how political communication attempts to manipulate them. This rhetoric of participation is not aimed at reforming or critiquing a political process increasingly organised around meta-coverage of itself. Instead, it aims only to give citizens an understanding of the manipulative and strategic nature of that process. It only offers the chance to 'get off' on the 'failure' of political communication to meaningfully engage them as citizens (Andrejevic 2008; Dean 2010). On *Gruen Nation* this was evident in the audience's frequent laughter at the advertisers' claims. They appeared to enjoy identifying with the insiders who constructed the political communication at which they laughed. The invitation to participate by identifying with advertisers, laughing at their attempts to manipulate them, or enjoying the feeling of being an expert on how political communication works does not appear to lead us towards more creative or constructive communicative practices (Andrejevic 2004; Teurling 2010).

The *Gruen Nation* audience identifies not only with the professional satirist, like the audience of other comedy news programs would, but also with the representatives of the industry at which the satire is aimed. The political participation that *Gruen Nation* invokes amplifies the feeling of being privy to how political communication works. This talk reflects Graeme Turner's (2010) critique of a new democratic deficit, where talk of participation increases while real participation decreases (also see Andrejevic [2009], Couldry [2010] and Hindman [2009]).

Gruen Nation ends up reflexively celebrating what it sets out to 'X-ray'. Its 'bullshit detection' exposes the construction of particular appeals but doesn't explain the broader cultural and political context within which that activity takes place. Furthermore, the construction of 'better' forms of advertising on The Pitch simply represents and reinforces

strategic advertising formulas and judgements. The panel does not reflect on the systemic role of advertising and promotion in the political process. Advertising and political communications professionals avoid examining how they are caught up in the political process they mobilise their professional identity to deconstruct. Howcroft appeared to believe that advertising subsidises democracy and that advertising was the only 'honest' communication in the campaign because 'you know exactly what they are trying to do'. This version of honesty appears grounded not in the substance of what is said, but the ability of the receiver to judge the intentions of the communicator. The paradox here is that perhaps if political advertisements were 'actually very honest' then the public wouldn't need experts to explain how they work. While affective and intuitive judgment is an inevitable part of any mediated communication (Street 2004), *Gruen Nation* appears to amplify intuitive judgments in place of rational and critical explanation and deliberation.

Gruen Nation suggests that everyone from advertising professionals to the public can understand and enjoy the constructed appeals of political campaigns. The claim that we have 'debunked' the process of constructing political communications leads us to settle for the claim that it is no longer constitutive of our political participation. This serves the advertisers and other professional political communicators quite well. By performing an informed critique of themselves, they inhabit, maintain and control the spaces where a more thoughtful and constructive critique of political communication might emerge. The national broadcaster should be applauded for creating innovative ways of engaging the public in the political process attuned to the contemporary circulation of politics. But, in doing so, it ought to consider what role it plays in reinforcing advertising as both a central part of the democratic process and as a framework for conceptualising and managing political participation.

NOTES

1 For academic discussion of television comedy news and news entertainment see Baym (2005), Baumgartner and Morris (2006), Feldman (2008), Harrington (2009), Jones (2009), Morris (2009), Warner (2007), Young (2008), and Young and Tisinger (2006).

2 Although neither the producers nor the panellists ever explicitly stated how they would define 'bullshit' with regard to the subject matter and objectives of the show, it can be assumed that the term was supposed to carry normative connotations. A useful reference in this context is Harry Frankfurt's reflection on 'bullshit' (2005). 'For the essence of bullshit is not that it is false but that it is phony… This points to a similar and fundamental aspect of the essential nature of bullshit: although it is produced without concern for the truth, it need not be false. The bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean he necessarily gets it wrong' (Frankfurt 2005, quoted in Drew, Lyons & Svehla 2010, p. 46). Thus, Frankfurt differentiates plain falsehoods from systematic phoniness. In a similar vein, when *Gruen Nation* claimed to be a 'bullshit detector' it can be assumed that the show's objective was to analyse and critique the 'systematic phoniness' of political communication.

3 By *professional ideology* we refer to the narratives that professional communicators employ to make their work meaningful to themselves (following Deuze 2006).

4 A similar debate can also be observed with regard to the impact of 'celebrity politics' on the political process. In the view of some authors (Postman 1987; Crick 2002; Meyer 2002; West & Orman 2002) the way politicians have, over the last decade, engaged with popular culture to advance their political goals has impoverished the relationship with the electorate. In this account, the rational debate of important issues of public concern has been replaced by a focus on irrelevant gestures and superficial appearances. But defenders of celebrity politics (Brennan & Hamlin 2000; Corner & Pels 2003; Ankersmit 2002; Street 2004) see this phenomenon as a logical extension of political marketing that does not impoverish but, in fact, strengthen the representative relationship between politicians and the audience. According to this position, the affective elements of political communication that focus on appearance and style enable citizens to reduce the complexity of political

reality and are thereby important and helpful indicators for them to find out what they find politically attractive.

5   The advertising industry is known for its award-consciousness, with more than 240 international awards and 25 Australasian awards existing (Wells 2011). Some of the awards focus on creative craftsmanship, some focus on proven results of the respective advertising campaigns (EFFIE; IPA) and some recognise competitiveness within a channel or sector. In the case of effectiveness awards, the agencies entering their campaigns into the competition have to prove that the advertising was guided by measurable objectives and that evaluation after the campaign showed that the effort had at least met these objectives. The vast majority of the awards, however, give priority to creativity (AWARD; Melbourne Art Directors Club; Caxtons; The One Show; CLIO; International Advertising Festival at Cannes).

6   Following Andrejevic (2010), Clough (2008) and Massumi (2005) by *affect* and *affective* we mean the emotive, intuitive and visceral dimensions of perception and communication. Affect precedes individual rational perception; it is open-endedly social. We circulate affect by virtue of our communicative capacities and place in the social body. We are affective labourers when we deploy our linguistic, communicative or intellectual capacities to create sociality.

7   And this is what happened. The Greens wanted to use the ad in their campaign but the ABC refused to transfer the copyright. The Greens asked their supporters to spread the advertisement virally (http://greens.org.au/content/have-you-seen-ad-everyone-talking-about).

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