

**Political discourse in a media saturated  
environment: the Howard Government's  
approach to communicating with the Australian  
electorate**

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## Abstract

The focus of this thesis is on the performance of Prime Minister John Howard as a communicator and the impact of technology on his government's methods of communication during its four terms in office from March 1996 to November 2007. This thesis addresses four research questions:

1. What was Prime Minister Howard's personal communication style, what strategies did he use to keep the Australian electorate informed, and how did political actors during this period view Howard's style and performance?
2. How did the prime minister's office approach the complexity of developing and coordinating its political communication during the Howard government's tenure?
3. What impact did changing technologies have on the Howard government's ability to communicate with the wider Australian electorate?
4. How did the Howard government handle communications when faced with "political crises"?

Eighty-six semi-structured one-on-one open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted with many of the key players of this political era, from Prime Minister Howard himself to many of his senior ministers, staffers, advisors, department heads, press gallery journalists, media commentators, lobbyists, and academics in order to obtain original material for this research. The Howard government was in power over a period of unprecedented technological change and the thesis discusses the way the reporting of politics changed as new mobile phone technology emerged; Sky News became a significant vehicle for political news dissemination, and the Internet emerged as a major communications vehicle. Despite his slow uptake of new media Howard can be understood to be Australia's first multimedia prime minister. He understood the logic of this new medium and the 24/7 expectations of the new technological age; therefore, rather than embracing this new technology he engaged with it in a fashion that matched his traditional approach to media, one he had successfully established since entering politics some three decades earlier.

## ABSTRACT

This research found John Howard arguably endured more intense media scrutiny than any of his predecessors, and he was the most “media active” political leader in Australia’s history. Howard lived in a “media saturated” environment, and was governed by the logic of the media, but worked with the media to drive the political agenda, incorporating his management of media issues into his hectic private and professional life. Howard viewed policy recommendations with a balance of what made sense in policy terms, and whether he would be able to explain it to the Australian people. Howard had a commanding memory, and an ability to articulate complex policy initiatives in simple terms. His use of talkback radio to talk directly to the Australian electorate, avoiding the “filters” of journalistic licence was a strategy Howard adopted throughout his prime ministership. He used this vehicle to ascertain the views of voters on government policies and initiatives, and also sought advice directly from a wide cross-section of people, including his family, advisors, fellow parliamentarians, the bureaucracy and other influential Australians. Howard faced many political challenges and fierce criticism for his stance on a number of social issues and his alleged stifling of free speech. In 2007, one of Howard’s most challenging years, the media and the public felt it was time for a change. Howard lost government on 24 November 2007.