

Understanding Issues

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ISSUES, EVENTS AND STORIES

An **issue** is a controversial subject that provokes differing opinions. Issues in the media arise from the news and popular culture. They are presented in such a way that they maintain, or even increase, the circulation of newspapers, visitors to online news sites, television or radio audiences, subscribers to blogs or followers of social media accounts. An issue can run in the media for a short time – a few days or weeks – or over several months or even years. This chapter focuses on understanding how issues develop, the role of different types of media in the development of issues, and the factors that can affect people's points of view on an issue.



What is an issue?

Not every news item is an issue. News sources report on many people, events and situations by simply giving audiences the facts about something that has happened. A person, event or situation might be widely reported and discussed without being an issue. For example, you can find articles and discussions about the Kardashians across all media text types, with a variety of opinions being expressed; but the Kardashians themselves are *not* an issue.

Similarly, just because an event or situation generates strong opinions, it is not necessarily an issue. For example, almost everyone would agree that the capture of a serious criminal is a good thing – there is little to debate about that and therefore no issue.

However, factual reportage can *give rise* to issues. An event or story becomes an issue when it becomes the focus of media attention and debate, provoking a range of attitudes and points of view.

For example, a news article about a bushfire (an event) might lead to discussion about whether people should be allowed to live in bushfire-prone areas (an issue). Similarly, a news story about Katy Perry's mobile phone being hacked into by journalists (an event) might lead to wider debate about how far journalists should be allowed to go in pursuit of a story (an issue).

Here are ten examples of issues that have grabbed the attention of the Australian media. Some have appeared only recently; others have been recurring over several years.

- Should asylum seekers in Australia be put in mandatory detention?
- Should there be tougher penalties for illegal downloading?
- Should marijuana be legalised?
- Should students be on selection panels for hiring teachers?
- Should plastic bags be banned?
- Should gay couples be allowed to marry?
- Should obese passengers be required to pay for two seats on a plane?
- Should the legal driving age in Australia be lowered to 16?
- Should population growth be controlled in Australia?
- Should maths be a compulsory subject in Year 12?



Identify issues

1 Identify whether the following are issues or not, by ticking yes (Y) or no (N).

- | | | | |
|---|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| a | Beyoncé gives birth | Y <input type="checkbox"/> | N <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b | Merit pay for teachers | Y <input type="checkbox"/> | N <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c | Massive earthquake in Chile | Y <input type="checkbox"/> | N <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d | Wearing the niqab for driver's licence photographs | Y <input type="checkbox"/> | N <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e | How to save the endangered Tasmanian devil | Y <input type="checkbox"/> | N <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f | Indigenous deaths in custody | Y <input type="checkbox"/> | N <input type="checkbox"/> |
| g | Student arrested for drug possession in Bali | Y <input type="checkbox"/> | N <input type="checkbox"/> |
| h | New tablet launched | Y <input type="checkbox"/> | N <input type="checkbox"/> |

2 Identify two issues that might arise from each of the events below.

- a Man caught faking a 'sickie' on Facebook by boss

ISSUE 1:

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ISSUE 2:

.....

- b Devastating flood in Queensland

ISSUE 1:

.....

ISSUE 2:

.....

- c Children anxious about NAPLAN testing

ISSUE 1:

.....

ISSUE 2:

.....

3 Choose one of the issues you identified in question 2. Create two headlines for imaginary opinion pieces about this issue – the first expressing one point of view and the second giving the opposite view.

HEADLINE 1:

HEADLINE 2:



PRODUCING THE NEWS

News reports are traditionally produced by organisations. The news itself might be unpredictable, but the way it is gathered and reported certainly is not. News reporting and gathering routines have an enormous effect on how the news is produced and presented.



As the diagram above shows, there is strong competition for market share for news organisations. In terms of newspapers, the main players, News Corp Australia (which owns the *Herald Sun* and *The Australian*) and Fairfax (which owns *The Age*) dominate, and continually work to strengthen their position in the market. Other newspapers, such as independents or foreign-language newspapers, have smaller, niche readerships. Popular newspapers such as *The Age* and the *Herald Sun* are published in print and online formats. Others, such as independent news publication *Crikey*, are only published online.

News organisations have an economic imperative to generate profits. Journalists are under constant pressure to source news stories daily and write them within very tight deadlines. When you consider that the news is presented over the same number of pages in print newspapers each day or occupies the same half-hour timeslot for television news each day, even though some days will have more news than others, it is apparent that news is subjected to selection and ‘packaging’.

Bias in the news

While journalists are supposed to be careful to get the facts right, they still have to present the news in ways that will grab the audience’s attention. Moreover, not all news stories are written by trained journalists and published by news organisations. Sometimes breaking news appears first on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, and is written by ‘ordinary’ people without journalistic training. The story might then be picked up by traditional news organisations. Whatever the original source of a news story, it can be affected by bias in a variety of ways, as outlined opposite.

- **News reports are geared towards the audience's profile** (i.e. their interests, prejudices, concerns and level of education).
- **In traditional news organisations, editors decide** which news stories will be used each day and their order of importance. These decisions are affected by:
 - the news editors' viewpoints on issues
 - their professional judgement and experience
 - what the competitors are doing
 - pressure from owners of news organisations, which may result from business or personal concerns
 - the political bias of the news outlet.
- **News sources can be limited.** Journalists rely principally on their regular 'official' or 'expert' sources. This means the news often reflects the views and concerns of the most powerful people or organisations in society. Mainstream news outlets give less coverage to the views of ordinary people or of minority or alternative groups and often depict these sections of society in a negative light, labelling them as radical protesters, criminals or irresponsible. Non-journalists who publish news stories are also likely to draw on limited sources. They are also under no obligation, as journalists often are, to attempt or appear to be balanced or unbiased in their reporting. However, some observers argue that the internet has improved access both for journalists and the general public to alternative viewpoints and news from around the world.
- **Complex information or events are often reduced to easily understood 'news bites'.** This means issues can be presented in an overly simplistic manner, with individuals or groups stereotyped to fit a formulaic story of good/bad, right/wrong, hero/villain etc. With journalists working under pressure to keep up with a 24-hour news cycle, sometimes shortcuts are taken and journalists recycle stories from other news sources, including social media, without checking the accuracy of these stories. News published on blogs and social media sites often focuses on the more sensational aspects of a story with the aim of achieving a high number of clicks, 'likes' or retweets.
- **The writer's own viewpoints on the issue or story** may influence how they present it.
- **Journalists and editors avoid offending or undermining businesses who advertise with them.** For example, a front-page newspaper report that criticises an oil spill might lead to that oil company withdrawing its lucrative advertising dollars from the newspaper. This can also be the case with some social media personalities, who might use their platform to advertise particular products.
- **Journalists may downgrade the importance of, or even omit, a news story** because of pressure from the government or other powerful players who want to ensure that the issue isn't exposed to public scrutiny.
- **Journalists often use the device of presenting opposing views on an issue to appear balanced.** For example, a statement from the Prime Minister may be used to balance one from the opposition leader. These opposing views might not cover other viewpoints and information on the issue.



Code of ethics

Journalists have a Code of Ethics – that is, a guide or set of standards that they are expected to follow in their profession. You can download this code at the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance website (<https://www.meaa.org/download/meaa-code-of-ethics/>). Various news organisations also have their own in-house codes of practice.

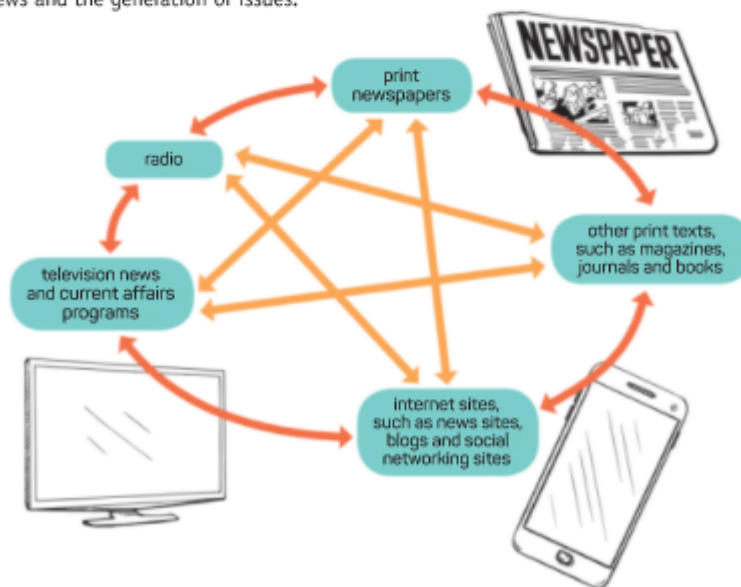
Non-journalists are not bound by any such code, nor are they usually required to perform the sort of fact-checking that news organisations are supposed to.

Interaction between various media

Newspapers (whether print or online) are still a major source of news and the development of issues. These days, many people prefer to access news online rather than via hard-copy newspapers. Other sources of news include magazines, journals, blogs, forums and social media sites.

Traditionally, newspapers generated discussion about issues via a range of articles in different text types and in letters to the editor. Now, with news online, issues are increasingly discussed on blogs, message boards and social media sites. This means that the relationship between the different media has become more interactive. Now a news story might be broken first on a social media site such as Twitter, sometimes by members of the public involved in a significant event, rather than on traditional news sites by journalists. News organisations, in addition to breaking stories themselves, will pick up and report on topics discussed by other internet media. Increasingly, people will follow news stories on social media sites, where they can see rapid updates from both traditional news outlets and ordinary citizens, and can also join other users in commentating on unfolding events.

The diagram below shows the ways in which various media interact in the reporting of news and the generation of issues.



Going viral

Viral advertising refers to a process in marketing whereby brand or product awareness is spread, as a virus is, from person to person, via word of mouth or on the internet. For this natural spreading of a message to occur, the message itself must be unusual, compelling or humorous enough for audiences to want to pass it on to their friends and associates. Issues can also sometimes 'go viral'.

Moral panic

Moral panic refers to a feeling of fear about a perceived threat to society. This fear is spread by the media through texts that intentionally provoke anxiety – even terror – in the audience, by exaggerating stories, appealing to prejudices and playing on people's insecurities. Someone or something is usually depicted as immoral or dangerous, while the complexities of the issue are ignored. Common topics for such stories include the increase in a certain sort of crime, drug use and the threat of terrorism. The aim is to provoke alarm, outrage or hostility, which can result in unjust attacks on the individual or group targeted.

Understand issues in the news

- 1 Look at the content of print and online newspapers over the last few weeks. Identify two events or stories that have been used to stir up moral panic.
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- 2 Find one issue that might be considered to have 'gone viral'. Why do you think it attracted the attention it did?
.....
- 3 Find an issue that has been discussed in various media. Complete the table below with details about three different news sources.

Media type (newspaper article, magazine article, tweet, blog post, Facebook post etc.)	Publication details (place and date of publication)	Writer	Summary of text (one or two sentences summarising the content of the text)

ACTIVITY 2



POINTS OF VIEW ON AN ISSUE

A **point of view** is the expression of an opinion from a particular angle. There can be a broad range of views on an issue because each individual's perspective is influenced by various factors, including:

- age
- gender
- socioeconomic status
- educational background
- job
- marital and parental status
- geographical location
- hobbies and interests
- previous knowledge about or personal experience of an issue
- ethical, moral or religious upbringing
- political or personal beliefs and biases that affect how the individual views the world.

While two sides will generally emerge, 'for' and 'against' the issue, there will also be a range of views or perspectives expressed within each camp. Sometimes, too, there is a middle ground of people who see both sides of the coin. People or groups whose opinions are affected by the fact that they have something to gain or lose in relation to a particular issue are often referred to as **stakeholders**.

When an issue appears in newspapers, on television or on the internet, the different opinions are based on:

- what the main players see as important and why
- the aspects that other concerned individuals think have been overlooked, neglected or not given enough emphasis
- specialist or expert input
- the political agenda of the owner or creator of the media outlet in which the issue appears and the approach of particular media or outlets to issues (i.e. whether they clearly opt for one side or aim for balanced coverage).



Consider different points of view

Complete the table by outlining the different attitudes the following people might have to the issue: 'Travel boycotts are a useful form of protest against human rights abuses.'

a backpacker	
a hotel operator in Bali, Indonesia	
the head of a human rights organisation	
a politician in a developing country	
a refugee	

ACTIVITY 3



SAMPLE ISSUE: POLICE IN SCHOOLS

In 2018, Matthew Guy, leader of the Victorian State Opposition (at this time, the Liberal Party) announced a proposal to introduce a police presence into certain 'at-risk' schools. Read the texts below, which present a variety of views on the suggestion from a range of stakeholders. Then complete the activity on pp.12–13.

Youth workers, not police, needed in schools

The Opposition's proposal to embed police in Victorian schools will do nothing to prevent youth crime and will instead foster a schools-to-prison pipeline, youth justice advocates say.

Opposition leader Matthew Guy says that putting police in schools identified as "having specific youth needs or at-risk challenges" will build respect between young people and police.

But chief executive of the Police Accountability Project, lawyer Anthony Kelly, describes the proposal as a "flawed and outmoded concept".

"These initiatives are based on the idea that if we educate young people to have more respect for police then things would be different. But what Mr Guy doesn't understand is that there is already a lot of police presence in the lives of these young people. They're already involved in basketball and soccer programs and camps run by police, and then they are constantly being stopped and searched by police as they walk home, they're being targeted by PSOs [Protective Services Officers] at stations, and followed by store security guards when they go out.



“It doesn’t matter how many respectful relationships these young people have with police if they are being targeted and abused by other police on the street,” he says.

Embedding police in schools would mean there is never any let up to that interaction, he says. Uniformed police are not well suited to be educators because of the nature of their role and because they have a tendency towards the “scared straight” approach that assumes that young people will be deterred if they are made aware of the possible consequences of their criminal behaviour, he adds.

US research has found that “scared straight” practices can increase crime by up to 28 per cent, says Smart Justice for Young People convener Tiffany Overall.

“Teenagers’ ability to anticipate the consequences of their conduct is at a low point during adolescence,” she says. “Some youth may even interpret Scared Straight tactics as a challenge to their ability to beat the consequences.”

If police are involved in schools to respond to students’ behaviour, that is likely to be even more counter-productive, says Mr Kelly. “Having police in schools has been shown to be highly problematic in the US, where children and young

people with behavioural problems end up being criminalised because of police involvement.”

“Young people who are vulnerable, at risk or from marginalised backgrounds or, when racial bias comes into play, are of a particular ethnicity, are more likely to be treated as criminals rather than get the support they need.”

Police contact in itself is criminogenic, Mr Kelly says. “As soon as you get police around you’re bringing up the probability of someone being caught for disobeying a police directive for refusing to hand over their mobile phone, or for resisting arrest or using abusive language if they walk away or become frustrated.”

Ms Overall says the proposed \$50 million would be better spent on resourcing schools. “Instead of full-time police officers, why not resource our schools with more full-time youth workers, student welfare workers, psychologists and other health specialists to provide disadvantaged and struggling students with more intensive staff support they individually require to help get to the heart of and address issues they are experiencing in their lives, that could otherwise result in offending behaviour.”

Karin Derkley, Law Institute Journal

COMMENT

Apart from anything else, the idea that academic rigour and the kind of enforced discipline that comes at the end of a police officer's truncheon share any common educational goal is both ridiculous and horrific.

At the point where it might be even vaguely credible that some students are so unruly as to frustrate all attempts at discipline, then in an educational setting a teacher's skill set is still vastly more likely to succeed than a police officer's. When a student is that disruptive, for the sake of the other students, they may need to come out of regular school and be enrolled in a different kind of educational facility. Whether that's a remedial class or whether social workers are called in might be up for discussion. But kids who push envelopes will call adults' bluff, and at the point where it emerges that they can't actually be jailed for insolence then police are apt to find themselves running out of options. In other words, it won't work.

What Matthew Guy apparently wishes to attempt is a Victorian remake of the old Schwarzenegger film, *Kindergarten Cop*.

Mike Burke, online comment, the Conversation website

FACEBOOK POST



Maybe if those against police in schools had a chat with victims of school crimes they wouldn't be so quick to shoot down the proposal. I'm a Year 12 student in a school where once upon a time the drug problem was out of control and assaults were a daily occurrence. Honestly, it was like a war zone and completely impossible for students like me who actually wanted to learn to do so. The final straw was a vicious attack on a Year 7 kid by an older group of students that landed him in hospital. As a result a police officer was brought in to enforce some much-needed law and order. Did it solve all our social problems? No. But it absolutely made a difference. Just having that authority presence in the school seemed to calm down the troublemakers, and the rest of us felt more able to get on with what we were supposed to be there for – pursuing an education.

Lia, former scared student, Facebook post

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Victoria had a police in schools programme for many, many decades which was stopped about a decade ago due to insufficient policing resources. All that is being proposed is to re-establish the programme, no different to what operates in most other states. As a police officer, I'm all for it. We're not there to bully or harass students, but to guide and assist them. Many of these at-risk students lack good role models, which police could provide. And stronger links between police and the community have been proven to reduce crime rates.

Min Park, letter to the editor, *The Weekly Roundup*



An indifference towards well-being of children

For some time, Victoria's opposition and government, and tabloid media, have worked to create moral panic about an "epidemic of youth violence". Victorian police, on the other hand, refused to support this fantasy, highlighting instead the fact that no evidence exists to support claims of a "youth crime wave". Undeterred by such advice, we see the latest attempt from the opposition to incite more fear of young people in a bid to gain political leverage in the context of an election. This time the Liberals' bright idea is to "embed" police in schools ("Opposition plan to put police in 'at-risk' schools", 6/2). This, according to Matthew Guy, will "keep Victorians safe". This policy disregards the fact that Victoria's youth crime has fallen from half of all incidents 10 years ago to 40 per cent in 2015–16 and points to an indifference towards the well-being of young people. What does Mr Guy think police in schools will teach children? What educational purpose will police serve? Does Mr Guy have in mind armed police handing out tickets for being late with homework or punishing bullies? Why would any clear-thinking person believe that having police in a school is ever a good idea?

Professor Judith Bessant, Global, Urban & Social Studies, RMIT University, letter to the editor, *The Age*

ACTIVITY 4

Find information on the issue of police in schools

1 Who are the main stakeholders in the issue of police in schools?

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2 Fill in the table with as many more arguments as you can think of, both for and against.

For	Against
Police in schools could make some schools safer.	Police are not trained to work with vulnerable young people.

3 What gaps are there in the information in the table? What additional facts or perspectives would help people make a more informed decision on this issue?

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- 4 Identify three main reasons Karin Derkley's opinion piece presents for not introducing police officers into schools.

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- 5 Summarise the positions of the writers of the other texts in the table below.

Writer	How they are affected by the issue	Opinion	Reasons
Mika Burke			
Lilla			
Min Park			
Professor Judith Bessant			

- 6 Go online to find some other texts that focus on the issue of police in schools. In how many different places can you find the issue being discussed? Is the issue mostly addressed by mainstream news sources, or can you find evidence of it being discussed on social media sites or other non-traditional news sites?

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- 7 Did you find any new perspectives on the issue that were not covered by the texts included in this chapter? If so, what were they?

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