Public relations, discourse practice and the public interest: analysis of a health communication campaign

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Communication Studies

by

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January 2013
Acknowledgements

During the time that I have been undertaking this thesis I have had the opportunity to draw on the knowledge and experience of a number of individuals, who have contributed to this dissertation, and my professional development as a public relations scholar, in many ways.

First and most important, I would like to thank my principal supervisor, Dr Marianne Sison, for her continuous support and guidance. She has always been available, providing timely feedback and valuable suggestions, and challenges to my ideas. I am also indebted to my co-supervisor, Dr Emsie Arnoldi, for her support, suggestions, experience, encouragement and understanding. I thank them both for their invaluable assistance and faith in my ability to complete the project. Special thanks also to Dr Jeff Lewis for his encouragement and guidance during the early stages of the project.

This thesis was professionally edited by Dr Margaret Johnson of The Book Doctor. Further gratitude goes to Dr Pat Bazeley for her encouragement and clear, insightful advice when I was grappling with the analysis. Her expertise in research design and guidance with Nvivo enabled me to produce a much more effective analysis than would have otherwise emerged.

I am also indebted to all of those scholars who provided advice, observations and critical comments during various forums, research conferences and other formal and informal encounters.

Finally I would like to thank my family, especially Nicole, Jacqueline and Tony. I simply could not have done this without their love and support.
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## Glossary of organisational titles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association</td>
<td>APMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Associated Press</td>
<td>AAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Medical Association</td>
<td>AMA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation</td>
<td>ATAGI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Vaccination Network</td>
<td>AVN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chartered Institute of Public Relations</td>
<td>CIPR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Public Relations Association</td>
<td>IAPR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicines Australia</td>
<td>MA</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Health and Medical Research Council</td>
<td>NHMRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations Institute of Australia</td>
<td>PRIA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Relations Society of America</td>
<td>PRSA</td>
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Abstract

The role of public relations in civil society and the degree to which public relations work exerts influence on the shape and texture of public discourse in democratic societies is a contentious issue. While public relations has grown to be a significant industry in terms of revenue and employment, it continues to attract public criticism; and the related academic discipline, with its well developed body of knowledge, receives general low regard as a field of professional practice.

Through a critical discourse analysis of Australia’s pneumococcal communication campaign and its media coverage between 2001 to 2004, this study explores the role and influence of public relations in the construction of public discourse. Current understandings of the social role of public relations are traced, pointing out the lack of consensus in the literature on an appropriate articulation of the relationship between public relations and the public interest. Conceptualisations of an effective public sphere are reviewed and a perspective which draws on the work of Habermas, Foucault and Bourdieu is proposed as a means by which media discourse may be examined. The assumption underpinning this study is that one of the reasons for the negative perception of public relations is its failure to articulate its social role: that is, how PR power is enacted in the public interest.

The study reveals the complexity of public relations discourses and the pervasiveness of their influence. It also reveals the complex relationships between discourse actors seeking to enact their interests in political debate in the public sphere. The importance of ethical and accountable practices to both the reputation and development of public relations as a profession are highlighted. The analysis of the discourse practices of PR enacted in the public sphere reveals a misuse of power and a distortion of public debate.

The study finds that public relations professionals have a major role to play in discourses concerning the creation and maintenance of civil society. As well as communicating the strategic intents of their clients, public relations needs to a professional ideology which recognises their role in multiple public spheres and take part in debates on issues of concern to the profession. There must also be
clear acknowledgement and articulation of the wider social role played by public relations. Deeper appreciation of this role and its implications for the shaping of civil society strengthens the imperative for practitioners to understand and enact ethical behaviour.
Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

A major part of public relations professionals’ work is enacted through their role in political debates as discourse actors in the public sphere. Here, where private and public interests intersect, the relationship between an aspiring profession and the wider society can be observed, and critical issues concerning standards of professional practice are revealed.

The questions this thesis asks relate to the role public relations plays in political debate of public policy issues. The overall question this thesis asks is: How do public relations campaigns shape and influence media discourse on health issues?

While opinions on the role of public relations in society tend to be polarised, most would agree that public relations exerts enormous influence on the shape and texture of public discourse in democratic societies. The modern communication landscape bears testimony to its influence, and many disparate groups have embraced PR techniques to promote their interests in the public sphere (Moloney 2006). A large part of public relations discourse production is inherently and understandably persuasive. This, combined with a host of other persuasive messages that proliferate in the media, results in what is described as a “great Niagara of spin” (Moloney 2006, p.1). Public relations is not limited to any one sector or group; as well as government and business users there is an abundance of consumer, celebrity, charity and other advocacy groups who use public relations techniques in their participation in public debate. Indeed, PR practice has been valued at US$8 billion annually worldwide (Sorrell 2008), and the total global public relations workforce is estimated as anywhere from 2.3 to 4.5 million, depending on the definition of public relations used (Macnamara 2012): sufficient to recognise public relations as a global industry. In Australia, in 2010, an estimated 15,300 people were employed in an industry with revenues estimated at $443 million (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011; Ibisworld 2012).
An argument can be made for the economic contribution of public relations, although the social equity of the outcomes of that contribution is not easily assessed in an imperfect market (Morris & Goldsworthy 2008). Public relations offers “a set of flexible techniques for the promotion of values by interest and cause groups, by voluntary associations, and by an individual alone. It can be used by them in paid professional form, or in ‘cottage industry’ and ‘personal kit’ forms” (Moloney 2006, pp.30–31). From this perspective public relations can achieve favourable publicity for the client and promote competition by improving consumer information about product choices; but it can also send extremely one-sided persuasive messages about goods and services (or ideas) to the market (Moloney 2006). Macnamara argues that, more than just disseminating messages, public relations has adopted a “control paradigm” whereby it seeks to manage messages and meaning-making (Macnamara 2010, p.325). In fact, it is used by such a diverse range of organisations that arguments can be found to both endorse and condemn this drive for control.

The development of public relations education, from a technical training-based approach to established programs in the higher education sector, has seen similar growth. Seventeen universities across Australia offer more than 40 industry-accredited undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in public relations (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2011). This figure does not include non-industry accredited courses, purely vocational courses, or related media courses which can provide a career pathway; nor does it include related fields such as marketing and advertising. These statistics imply an occupation of growing professional stature and influence, within media occupations and society at large. While many authors have documented the achievements of public relations education and theory building (Neff 2010; Heath 2010; Toth 2006), many have also lamented the poor reputation it still holds within other forms of media and the wider society (Moloney 2006; Mickey 2003; L’Etang 2008).

These image problems arise from different but related areas. One is the bad press public relations attracts, a considerable amount of which is deserved. Poor practice often receives publicity regarding cover-ups, spin doctoring and other deceptive practices (Elliot & Koper 2002). At other times, the negative attitudes
of journalists and the nature of the relationship between journalists and PR consultants leads to public relations being portrayed unfavourably in the media, which constructs images of an occupation variously presented as sinister and manipulative, or trivial fluff. The relationship between media and public relations practitioners is complex and interdependent, and both share responsibility for the outcomes of their practices.

In addition, as public relations professionals work to promote the interests of client organisations their image is inextricably linked with the clients or employers they serve. The issue of agency is cited as one of the key issues that impact on the social legitimacy of the field (L’Etang 2011). Public relations practitioners who work for disreputable organisations do so at the risk damaging their own reputation by association. However, the distinction is not as clear in this context as perhaps it is for a lawyer representing a guilty client, whose role is that of advocate and whose values remain distinct from those of the client. Public relations work is not as clearly distinguished by, or even visible to, observers. The interdependence of the client and the public relations professional in achieving their objectives has implications for both parties. Practitioners arguing for the advocacy model of practice suggest that one of its advantages is the distance it can provide: “Image is what you are. It is projected, not created. Ethics starts with the client and is projected by public relations” (Thomas 2002, p.309). In this model, public relations work projects client values; however, it can also be argued that the ability of public relations to provide a high-quality communication service to clients depends on the public’s perceptions of PR practitioners (Callison 2001), and that this is related to credibility: the perceived trustworthiness and integrity of practitioners.

Numerous studies (Newsom, Ramsey & Carrell 1993; Saunders 1993) have confirmed that perceptions of professional integrity in public relations are consistently low. Callison’s (2004) research has confirmed that when sources are associated with public relations spokespeople, as opposed to other sources, there is a negative impact on their credibility. In turn, any problem with credibility in a public relations organisation has the potential to affect the organisations they represent.
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These issues carry over into the popular image of the profession, although public relations does not figure as largely in popular culture as do other professions (Tilson 2003). In a comprehensive review of popular culture represented in film and television from 1930 to 1995, Miller (1999) concluded that depictions of public relations have been inadequate, showing writers’ dislike for public relations’ apparent effectiveness. This pattern has continued in later films, such as Thank You for Smoking (2005), revealing misconceptions about and stereotypes of public relations and, according to Miller, suggesting a certain amount of deliberate skewing by the media (1999). Recent research, albeit in small studies, has noted some improvements. Ames (2009) found some improvement in portrayals of PR practitioners, noting that characters undertook more complex and challenging work and were not necessarily liars, cheats and scoundrels previously shown as the norm. In contrast, Johnston (2010) found that public relations does not generally fare well in popular culture, and noted that this has significant ramifications for how the profession and those who work within it are viewed and understood.

For all the progress in the development of the field, public relations remains haunted by the ghosts of its past and the fallout from some current practices. It continues to attract a degree of public criticism, which dominates public understanding of the work of the field and overshadows the achievements of the ethical and professional people who form the majority of practitioners. The cumulative result is a field of work held in general low regard. This carries over into the education sector where relationships with other media disciplines, such as journalism, are troubled. Macnamara (2012) in his discussion of the relationship between public relations and journalism, both professionally and in the academy, questions the origins of negative attitudes in journalists, looking, as do other researchers, to the academies where these attitudes are formed and where, as White and Shaw (2005) conclude journalists are conditioned, through their experiences at work and in the academy, to hold negative attitudes to public relations. In researching public relations educators in the US, Wright (2005) found evidence of discrimination and prejudice against public relations, particularly in journalism. Much of the tension in academic circles derives from tensions in
industry, where the relationship between journalism and public relations is profoundly influenced by the economic imperatives of the media industry.

This thesis argues that one of the reasons for the negative perception of public relations is its failure to articulate its social role: to explain how its power is enacted in the public interest. Public relations meet many of the criteria by which it could be judged a profession; however, an gap remains between society’s expectations of professional conduct and its perceptions that the field fails to meet adequate standards of practice.

While there has progress in these areas, the wider social role of the field, and particularly its influence in shaping public discourse and the implications of this power, have not been addressed adequately either by the professional associations or in the literature. The majority of public relations research and theory development has dealt with aspects of campaign effectiveness, or ethics guiding practice, with scant attention to the wider social role of the field. There are a number of reasons why this has occurred. Elmer (2007) argues that, at the time when culture, economics and politics were becoming intertwined, public relations remained distant from the immediacy of the marketplace, did not engage fully with discussions of culture, and developed in ways that marginalised critical perspectives. This perceived failure to integrate other perspectives can partly be accounted for by the need to legitimise the practice as a field of vocational study through a functional rather than critical approach (L’Etang 2005), and also by the desire to give some scientific legitimacy to the practice by undertaking research from essentially positivist perspectives. The outcome has been a discipline which some believe “inadequate for the needs of either a globalised economy or a global community” (Elmer 2007, p.360) and which, as a field of inquiry, is held in low regard by other academics (Cheney & Christensen 2001; Moloney 2006). Theorists argue for research into public relations to go beyond the positivist approaches of the past, and to move beyond increasingly detailed examinations of practice to grappling with larger issues (Bentele & Wehmeier 2007). This is a problem for the industry: for if public relations does not respond to the challenge of finding ways to deal with complexity and reintegrate this knowledge into its theory base and practice, other occupations such as marketing and management,
in competing for professional jurisdiction, will continue to encroach on the professional domain public relations seeks to claim (Coombs & Holladay 2009; L’Etang 2011). There are now calls for more explicit and distinctive definitions of the culture and practices of public relations (Neilson 2006) and specifically for a broader examination of advocacy, representation of influential points of view, and dialogue and persuasion (Elmer 2007).

While issues such as ethics, public interest and advocacy have been the focus of considerable research and continue to be significant concerns for the field, there are also continued calls for critical research into the role of public relations in the wider social context. It can be argued that, as a relatively new occupation, public relations is yet to articulate a professional ideology, worldview and set of values consistent with the moral fabric of the societies in which it operates. This has motivated calls for more research into public relations from a critical perspective (Leeper & Leeper 2002; Pieczka & L’Etang 2000; Stark & Kruckeberg 2003). As McKie and Munshi explain, “in society and in the academy alike, reputation does matter” (2007, p.11).

Just as the relationship between public relations and those engaged with it are complex, so too is the context in which public discourses are created and circulated. Although public relations can be seen as a socially embedded profession and one which is inherently “a profession defined by its social context” (Edwards 2009, p.252), the role of public relations professionals as discourse participants in the public sphere attracts much criticism; it has been questioned whether public relations helps or hinders democracy (Moloney 2006). The role of public relations in democratic public debate is considered against the Habermassian conceptualisation of the public sphere, Foucault’s conceptualisation of power and the role of discourse in the social construction of knowledge, and Bourdieu’s theory of habitus.

Questions about practice in the political and socio-economic context can be explored from a critical research perspective, and there is a growing body of critical public relations research which examines the manner in which the profession sustains or generates social inequity. Work in this area includes
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theoretical critiques of scholarly work (Aldoory 2005; Pieczka 2006a); examination of the implications of public relations practice for democracy (Moloney 2006; Weaver & Motion 2002); explorations of the experiences of minority professionals (Pompper 2004); postmodern analyses of the profession and its processes (Holtzhausen 2000); discursive analyses of power in public relations (Roper 2005); deconstructions of public relations practice (Demetrious 2006; Pieczka 2002); public relations and the public interest (Weaver, Motion and Roper 2006) and examinations of the relationship between public relations practitioners and the media (Davis 2000; Mickey 2002). According to Edwards, the breadth of these perspectives generates understandings of public relations as an inherently relational profession (2009, p.252). This study builds on this work through an investigation public relations political discourse practice and the complexity of the interactions of discourse actors, specifically public relations, advocacy groups and the media.

The questions posed by this thesis are examined through a case study of a campaign in the health sector. The case is a campaign conducted by the agency Turnbull Porter Novelli, on behalf of Wyeth Lederle Vaccines, to launch Prevenar 7, a vaccine designed to protect infants and young children from pneumococcal disease. Pneumococcal disease is a term for a number of illnesses caused by the bacterium known as Streptococcus pneumonia, including meningitis, bacteraemia and pneumonia; infants and young children are the most vulnerable victims. The product was launched in July 2001 in a campaign which built awareness of the disease with parents, secured the involvement of leading third parties, equipped specialists to educate parents and health providers, and officially launched the vaccine. This campaign was submitted to the PRIA Golden Target Awards for excellence.

Prevnar 7 was made available at no cost to the high risk groups of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders from March 2001, and people over 65 in March 2002. The vaccine was also available on prescription to children under two, but was expensive, costing $A500 for the series of injections. Shortly after the launch the emphasis of the campaign moved to having the vaccine included on the childhood vaccinations schedule and provided free of charge by the Federal Government. A
lobbying campaign was initiated to secure this outcome, and in June 2004 the Federal Government announced that the vaccine would be funded for all children under two years of age from January 2005.

The relationship between pharmaceutical companies and government policy is controversial, partly because of the enormous profits that can be made when drugs are provided at taxpayers’ expense, and partly because conflicts of interest can distort research, clinical practice and policy (Mansfield 2012). Prevnar was among Wyeth’s top revenue producers and continues to be a major source of revenue for Pfizer, which acquired Wyeth in 2009. Although sales of Prevnar 13 (the new version) fell 14 percent to $868 million, and sales of the older Prevnar 7 dropped 17 percent to $81 million in 2012, the vaccines are Pfizer’s second-biggest franchise (Pierson 2012).

This case is slightly dated, but the practices it represents remain current. The advocacy groups and other promotional techniques deployed in the case are part of modern public relations practices. For example, the consultancy firm, Weber Shandwick, explaining their services in the health sector, note that they “use advocacy to meet our clients’ objectives by harnessing the voices of others (KOL [key opinion leaders] and other healthcare professionals, patients, caregivers, third party organisations, government, media) to bring about a change in thinking that drives a change in behaviour” (2012). The most significant change in PR practices concerning pharmaceutical marketing (or any other marketing, for that matter) has been the increased use of the Internet and social media to expand marketing opportunities by using, for example, consumer opinion leaders, corporate blogs and web sites (Sweet 2009). Global communications consultancy Burson Marsteller promote the services of Crowdverb, a digital advocacy and mobilisation firm that harnesses the power of web data to identify and recruit large numbers of advocates (Burson Marsteller 2012). The practices used by the agency promoting Prevenar reflect a long tradition of industry practice in pharmaceutical promotion.

Public relations influence in the health sector is critical; health issues can be a matter of life and death, with political and financial implications for public policy.
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As Guttman and Thompson argue, while ethics are crucial in all areas of communication practice, “health communication brings special concerns related to life and death, mental and physical well-being that are rarely relevant in other communicative contexts” (2011, p.293). Health is also newsworthy, as it is “politically sourced, under-sourced, and a subject open to alternative perspectives” (L’Etang 2006, p.252). This, together with mounting public concern over negative health trends, presents opportunities for the expansion of public relations in this area. There is a large role for public relations in communicating government health policy and health services well as in the promotion of private sector interests.

A recent trend in health promotion has been to shift focus from individual responsibility to take into account contextual and cultural factors (L’Etang 2006, p.254). This offers a more holistic view of health issues and aims for wide social change, a particularly pertinent shift in perspective for issues such as immunisation, where success relies on group compliance. Key issues relevant to public relations communication in the sphere of public health identified by L’Etang include ideas of risk and trust; the reliability of non-specialist public relations practitioners representing scientific, medical and health organisations or lobbies; media amplification and panics; the empowerment of publics; and the difficulties of evaluation in a multi-factorial field. She notes that while the media are often seen as having a central and defining role in public relations, that role is unlikely to be well researched or understood (L’Etang 2006, p.252).

Public relations theory in the area of health reflects trends in other areas. The current emphasis is on providing information to practitioners to increase technical effectiveness (see, for example, Gauntlett 2005; Avery 2010; Servaes & Malikhao 2010). There has, however, long been a call for attention to communication ethics and for more cultural and critical studies of the effect of PR (Flora 1993), as most people accept media messages concerning health at face value, a response that may not be in their best interest (Mickey 2003).

The Pneumococcal case study touches on concerns about immunisation, which is a serious health issue in modern societies. While there is a history of the proven
effectiveness of immunisation as a health strategy, authorities face a challenge from the growing complacency of populations that have never been exposed to the diseases that vaccines prevent. Immunisation becomes a political concern when governments must balance the cost of prevention against that of treatment and decide which vaccines are to be free to the public and so a burden on federal health budgets. The challenges of balancing competing interests and managing limited resources are amplified when more and more, increasingly expensive, products are available for an increasing number of illnesses.

A health promotion campaign presents an opportunity for deep analysis of a variety of important issues such as determining a legitimate social role for public relations, investigating the interaction of competing interests in the political economy and civil society, and considering the effects of mediation on public relations discourse practice. Turnbull Porter Novelli’s campaign on behalf of Wyeth Lederle Vaccines blends health communication discourses designed to improve vaccination outcomes with the marketing of health promotion and government lobbying. This presents an opportunity to observe a complex campaign situation where the interests and objectives of various stakeholders overlap. The illness the vaccine aims to present is a serious one, and there is a legitimate reason to try to prevent it; but the means used to promote the vaccine warrant scrutiny.

The practices deployed by public relations in such campaigns have been criticised in the media and in academic journals, although the extent to which they exert influence is not fully understood. Critiques of previous health communications have demonstrated that the “language and rhetoric employed are crucial to change individual, community and cultural levels” (L’Etang 2006, p.252), and acknowledge the valuable role public relations can play in managing the complex relationships between the media, pharmaceutical companies, medical professionals, government policy makers and patient advocacy groups. The level of responsibility of such groups is high, requiring “more accountability as a practice as the public interest is at stake – every public relations campaign needs to be open to critical review” (Mickey 2002, p.100). Critiques also emphasise the
importance of preparing future practitioners to deal with issues of ethical and social responsibility and public interest arising from public relations campaigns.

The rationale for studying a single case is based on Yin’s (2009) argument for a representative or typical case: the objective is to capture the circumstances and conditions of practice which commonly occur. The lessons learned from this case, while not formally generalisable, may be informative for a range of professional public relations practices. The focus on a single case study enables examination of pluralism in practice: the interplay of individual, institutional and group voices in the public sphere.

Larsson maintains that public relations is “both a social phenomenon and international business and as such has brought itself to an important position with respect to its political and cultural impact and power” (2006, p.125). By revealing the public relations role in campaigns which dominate media discourse and influence public policy, this study illuminates the fundamental social role played by public relations.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Public relations has, since its inception, suffered from poor reputation and lack of social legitimacy. Some argue that public relations needs a public relations strategy (Moloney 2006); and this apparently frivolous suggestion pinpoints a serious challenge faced by the field. While there has been considerable progress in certain aspects of professionalisation, such as education and accreditation, the image of public relations continues to be undermined by reputational issues. That these have implications for practitioners, academics, and students of public relations is indicated in part by the body of knowledge concerning public relations and applied communication, which has grown significantly in recent years. The approach of much of this research is functional, based on aspects of campaign effectiveness or practice ethics, and tends to be epistemologically conservative. There has been little success in articulating and explaining the role public relations plays in society and public discourse. In what ways is public relations able to exercise power in the production of discourse? What are the implications
of public relations discourse practice for public policy decisions? To what extent is the influence of public relations limited or accentuated by other discourse participants such as journalists? How much power does public relations actually have? The profession of public relations as a profession needs to take a proactive role to address its critics by building a body of work that acknowledges and addresses the challenge, rather than avoiding the issue and waiting for functional research to provide it with the reputation it seeks.

Exploring the role of public relations in the context of complex intersecting fields, a stance that characterises the Australian political economy, is challenging. The boundaries between organisations, their stakeholders and other discourse actors in the public sphere are characterised by multiple intersections and overlapping interests. Traditional research methodologies have not delivered the progress needed for complex social problems and new approaches are required. This research hopes to contribute to the development of approaches to understanding the complexity of modern political public discourse.

1.3 Research objectives

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate the role and influence of public relations in the construction of media discourse on a public policy issue.

This study will critically examine in depth a case study in the health sector, testing criticisms of public relations practice against evidence from the outcome in the media of that work. It aims to describe and explain the critical role public relations plays in shaping debate and the importance of ethical and accountable practice.

It will highlight the interaction of organisations and interests competing for influence and critically assess the enablers and constraints on public relations influence. Analysis of public relations discourse practices enacted in the public sphere will identify and characterise those practices which represent a misuse of power and distortion of public debate.
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To examine the role public relations plays in public discourse, the research is guided by this question:

How do public relations campaigns shape and influence media discourse on health issues?

This question is to be answered through a number of sub-questions:

1. How are public relations campaign message strategies constructed?
2. Which voices are deployed to carry the messages?
3. Which legitimation strategies are used to support the campaign argument?
4. How does the media discourse reflect the public relations campaign message?
5. How does the media discourse represent normative standards for a deliberative public sphere?

1.4 Limitations

This study seeks to understand the links between public relations practice and public discourse through a critical discourse analysis that considers practice within its context. One immediately apparent limitation of this approach is that such a discourse analysis does not include reference to practitioner perspectives (Motion & Weaver 2005) but relies on texts as evidence. The approach adopted in this study attempts to address this issue by analysing both campaign texts and media discourse.

Another limitation is that the study looks only at the production side of communication and does not consider the process of media consumption. Assumptions are based on interpretations of various media texts independent of reception analysis. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to incorporate reception analysis for a campaign the size and duration of the one under examination.

In addition, no practitioner perspective is included in the analysis. This is for a number of reasons: firstly, there is a reluctance in practitioners to be interviewed in relation to what may be considered a controversial topic; and secondly, this part
of the campaign was publicly acknowledged by neither the company nor the public relations agency, but was revealed through investigative journalism. As the aim of this study is to reveal public relations practice through evidence of outcomes in the public sphere, professional interpretations in this instance are of only secondary benefit.

1.5 Personal statement

In undertaking critical research I am aware that, as a researcher, I am part of the world constructed by my research (Usher & Edwards, 1994). I am therefore concluding this chapter with a brief history of my background.

I am currently working as an academic, teaching and researching in public relations at an Australian university. Before this I had a professional career in the fields of marketing, marketing research and public relations, primarily in the business-to-business sectors of engineering and construction. I have taught public relations in both the vocational education(TAFE) system and universities for over twenty years and have a strong commitment to equal access and pathways in education.

Why this topic? I teach in a faculty where public relations, as a field of practice, is often regarded poorly. Assumptions of spin doctoring and shallowness, which are well documented in the literature, carry over into the academic context. I feel that both academic institutions and industry associations need to do more to claim a strong professional identity for public relations. To me this means acknowledging and affirming the role that public relations plays in society; including its potential for good or evil. A strong voice on these issues can help to create awareness of the important consequences of public relations practices, and clarify the value to society of qualified professionals.

The challenge was daunting as it was difficult to examine a complex, long-term case study which shifted focus as it progressed. To focus closely on one section of the overall campaign is to lose perspective on the whole. Having a background in quantitative research but acknowledging the value of qualitative approaches and
tending to favour a mixed methods approach, I combined elements of both. I believe this case study demonstrates how the impact of the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.

My aim was for a critical analysis, which would bring attention to important challenges in public relations practice, and provide some insights into how they might be addressed. I did not work on this case nor did I interview any of the practitioners who did. The aspects of this campaign which are controversial are also issues on which practitioners would be reluctant to be interviewed. I wanted to allow the results of the media analysis to speak for themselves.

It is my hope that ideas and issues emerging from this study may be used to open up thought and debate about the roles and responsibilities of public relations in civil society.

1.6 Definitions used in this thesis

1.6.1 Discourse

Central to this thesis is the concept of discourse. The term discourse has come to be used in a number of different ways: for example, to mean broadly “all of the phenomena of symbolic interaction and communication between people” (Bloor & Bloor 2007, p.6) or alternatively that which takes place within a specific institutional context such as legal discourse or medical discourse. The definition used in this thesis is

a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment … Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But ... since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct –all practices have a discursive aspect. (Hall 1997, p.44)
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.6.2 Text

There are many ideas about what constitutes a text for the purposes of discourse analysis. Fairclough refers to text as “the written or spoken language produced in a discursive event” (1993, p.138), later adding simultaneous visual images and sound as other relevant types of language (1995). This view is supported by others, such as Bloor and Bloor (2007) who consider text a product of discourse, a linguistic record of a communicative event; or Fairclough, who extends the term to include images or music.

The idea that texts have both internal and external dimensions (Titscher et al. 2003, pp.22–23) is important to a critical analysis of media texts. Recent approaches have shifted focus from the internal elements of media text alone to the social, cultural and political contexts, including as well local constructions of meaning; discourse thus comes to consider texts within their contexts (van Dijk in Titscher et al. 2003, p.26).

1.6.3 Context

This thesis adopts a “mega discourse”, an approach that looks for universal connections, rather than a micro approach which involves a detailed study of language within a narrow context. In this way it seeks to address some of the challenges in linking texts with contexts “beyond the immediate interactions associated with their creation and interpretation” (Leitch & Palmer 2010, p.1198).

There is a range of definitions of context in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the major distinction being that some emphasise the cognitive dimension and others do not (Meyer 2001, cited in Leitch & Palmer 2010). Context is defined in terms of multiple categories: geographic boundary of the national state; time, in terms of the location of texts and discourse in relation to other texts and events; practice, in terms of locating the texts within the domain of public relations professional practice; sociocultural, economic and political, in terms of the potential impact of the texts on public policy and the wider public interest (Leitch & Palmer 2010). This thesis adopts the more common definition, most notably
promoted by Fairclough (1992), in which context includes discourse practices including the production, distribution and interpretation of texts, and social practices including the use of power and ideology (Leitch & Palmer 2010).

1.6.4 Civil society

Civil society is an idea that touches on major themes of western political traditions and embodies “an ethical ideal of the social order, one that, if not overcomes, at least harmonises, the conflicting demands of individual interests over social good” (Seligman 1992, p.10). The idea of civil society as a social site of public relations practice (Moloney, 2006) is relevant to questions posed in this thesis.

Although there is difficulty gaining consensus about what is to be included and what the term means, civil society is essentially collective action – in associations, across society and through the public sphere. This thesis adopts the definition proposed by Edwards, that the modern idea of civil society focuses on “the value of voluntary associations in curbing the power of centralising institutions, protecting pluralism, nurturing constructive social norms” (2004, pp. 78–79). This recognises the effects of unequal resources on the functioning of civil society and is relevant to the case study in this thesis as it enables consideration of the different resources available to advocacy groups as well as to professional associations and commercial entities. For Edwards the concept of a public entity that collectively is concerned about the public interest and has the capacity for deliberative democratic debate is central to ideas of civil society. Civil society becomes a space where issues are debated and organisations collaborate. This dynamic public sphere is crucial to democracy, and where there are inequalities and imbalances, the public interest suffers. Edwards argues that civil society needs to be fostered by government, and proposes a list of reforms to encourage public debate, including involving marginalised groups and being more transparent about public and private finances and policy-making. Moloney (2006) adds that there should be more access to public relations training and education, to equalise communication resources between elite groups and marginalised interests in the public sphere.
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1.6.5 Political economy

Political economy refers to the field of interdisciplinary studies, which draws on economics, law and political science to understand how political institutions, the political environment and the economic system influence each other. The study of political economy rests on the central proposition that economic processes do not take place in isolation from social and political processes. This thesis adopts Mosco’s definition of political economy as “the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources” (Mosco, 2009, p.24). Mosco argues that the idea of political economy moves thinking beyond technical economic debates to issues of power and the ability to control other people, processes and things. He argues that research should be concerned with the wider “social totality” in understanding the connection between the political and the economic. He also offers a definition of political economy as being about “control and survival in public life, where control relates to the internal organisation of individual and group members while survival takes up the means by which they produce what is needed to reproduce themselves” (2009, p.25). Public relations can be widely used to secure advantage in the political economy, by advocacy and interest groups as well as by commercial producers of goods and services (Moloney, 2006). While there are acknowledged challenges in being too broad, the value of this definition is that it permits questions about the narrowness of both political economy and communication studies (Mosco 2009).

The idea of political economy is important to this thesis in two ways: the public policy distributive issue of health funding, where public debate concerns allocation of resources and influence on health policy; and the political economy of communication – the effect of changes in the media landscape, the degree to which activists can use traditional and new media technologies, and their impact on public relations work.
1.7 Structure of the thesis

To explore how public relations practitioners shape and influence public discourse, the thesis is organised in the following manner: Chapters 2 and 3 provide the theoretical framework for the thesis. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the role of public relations in society and sets out the evolution of public relations thinking in this regard, including a discussion of the thoughts of early practitioners through to current critical conceptualisations of the social role of public relations. It explores public relations practice, public interest, ethics and the issue of advocacy. In Chapter 3 the work of Habermas on the public sphere, Foucault on discourse and power and Bourdieu on capital are discussed in relation to their relevance to research in the practice of discourse about public relations. A review of the literature concerning public relations as a discourse producer is also included, exploring the way public relations contributes to the construction of public discourse, describing the strategies used and discussing the implications of this practice in terms of power and persuasion or manipulation. A discussion of specialist discourses, in this instance the discourse of medicine, is also included.

Chapter 4 sets out the methodological approach of this thesis and describes in detail the research questions, process and design. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of public relations campaign texts. Chapter 6 provides an analysis of media texts arising from the campaign under study. Chapter 7 considers the implications of these findings for the wider social context, and Chapter 8 discusses the implications for public relations education and the profession.
Chapter 2  Perspectives on the social role of public relations

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 established the purpose of this thesis, which is to demonstrate the role and influence of public relations in the construction of media discourse on a public policy issue. It established the significance of the Australian public relations industry in terms of size and revenue, and noted the development of the body of knowledge concerning the discipline in higher education. These achievements were contrasted with the range of reputational challenges the field continues to face, and a brief overview of research approaches so far. The validity of locating the research study in the health sector and the importance of studying the professional legitimacy of public relations practice were justified.

The purpose of this second chapter is to examine the literature that relates to the research questions. Consideration of the role and influence of public relations in public discourse has been the subject of considerable research in the field, and a number of competing propositions have emerged. To understand current knowledge and competing views on the social role of public relations, this chapter will discuss the development of public relations scholarship on the relationship between public relations and the public interest, and the social role of the field. It will also consider the public relations function of discourse production, focusing on engagement and influence in the mediated public sphere. From this a conceptualisation of the role of public relations in society is proposed, and this will form the basis of the research study.

2.2 Competing perspectives on the social role of public relations

There is much debate, and little consensus, about the role of public relations in society. As an aspiring profession, public relations faces criticism from those who argue that it is trivial and inconsequential to those who argue that it has an impact, and the impact is negative. A theoretical understanding of the social role of public
relations has evolved as the body of knowledge has developed, but popular opinion is more problematic, with much of it informed by popular culture and the opinions of journalists and other social critics.

To date, scholarship has been dominated by researchers and writers from the United States. While there have been recent attempts to redress the imbalance (Botan & Hazelton 2006; L’Etang 2008; Sriramesh & Vercic 2003), there can be no argument that US academic research has contributed the dominant theoretical framework of the field and so has provided a basis for argument and guidance for practice. The dominance of US research globally, and the acknowledgement that other research is defined “against the standards, expectations and experience of US academics” (L’Etang 2008, p. 246) means that the development of public relations in the US and the development of US scholarship is fundamental to any understanding of the evolution of public relations thought.

Descriptions of the role that public relations plays in society have always been contentious. In the early stages of academic development, public relations was often described as publicity generation (Grunig & Hunt 1984; Turner & Cunningham 2006) intended to influence. One early pioneer, Bernays, talked about the engineering of consent: “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses are an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country” (1947). This statement perceives public relations as central to the production of social discourse. Indeed, in the early days, public relations was closely tied to advertising and marketing, persuasion and awareness building. It relied strongly on the mass media and was primarily a one-way process. As Bernays saw it, most PR practitioners saw their work as purely press agentry: in 1976 he labelled the public relations specialist a “social technician” (p.25), promoting a notion of professional efficiency. The role of public relations was “to eliminate the waste and the friction that result when industry does things or makes things which its public does not want, or when the public does not understand what is being offered it” (Bernays 1928, p.44).
In response to the growth of social unease at the activities of some practitioners, a more explanatory approach was adopted, with organisations seeking to have their point of view understood and their message accepted by their audiences; thus organisations attempted to explain the reasons for their actions rather than simply sell a message. Hiebert notes that Ivy Lee, one of the earliest thinkers in this vein and an influential pioneer of public relations, in his 1906 Declaration of Principles was the first to articulate the idea that public relations has a public responsibility beyond its obligations to the client (Hiebert 1966). Lee is credited with lifting the field from a questionable, publicity-hungry pursuit to a professional discipline based on openness and trust – an assessment not without its critics. Stauber and Rampton (1996), for example, argue that Lee not only put things in the most favourable light, but also studied public opinion and shaped organisational affairs so that they would meet with public approval. Many of Lee’s clients, moreover, were engaged in activities of which the public were unlikely to approve. In spite of this early move to legitimise the field, through the early part of the 20th century public relations was still a one-way process. Obfuscation and other practices which could be reasonably considered propaganda were always a tempting alternative to honesty and transparency in actions.

John Hill was one of the first to identify the role of public relations as influencers of corporate actions rather than just their messengers or damage control team. Hill suggested that public relations needed to understand the needs of their clients as an initial step toward understanding the roles and challenges facing them:

> It is the job of public relations to help management find ways of identifying its own interests with the public interest – ways so clear that the profit earned by the company may be viewed as contributing to the progress of everybody in the American economy (1958, p.21).

This was the first time the importance of public interest was noted. Hills further argued that good public relations should be based on sound organisational policies which were genuinely in the public interest and then upon clear and effective communication (1958, p.63). Rather than relying on communication professionals
Chapter 2: Perspectives on the social role of public relations

to establish legitimacy only, this approach focused on organisational actions which genuinely considered the public interest.

2.2.1 The evolution of the dominant paradigm

The Excellence Study (Grunig & White 1992) and the articulation of the two-way symmetrical model of organisational public relations was a landmark in defining a socially acceptable role for public relations. Grunig and Hunt (1984) first defined four models of public relations practice: press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetry and two-way symmetry. The first two are one-way models, involving the dissemination of information only, in contrast to the symmetrical models which involve some flow of information back to the organisation. In asymmetrical communication one side is dominant and often feedback is only sought for the purpose of campaign evaluation and refinement of message strategy. Grunig and Hunt saw the one-way asymmetrical models as propaganda or at best as persuasion-based, and the two-way symmetrical model as providing truthful representations of the public and the organisation to each other (Stacks & Watson 2007). Acknowledging that asymmetry is the dominant view in public relations, Murphy described it as “a way of getting what an organisation wants without changing its behaviour or without compromising” (2007, p.124). It presupposed that “the organisation knows best and that the public benefit from cooperating with it” according to Grunig & White (1992, pp.39–40), who argued that such efforts at dominance were “unethical, socially irresponsible and ineffective” (1992, p.40). “Two way communication is concerned with the organisation’s environment, evaluation and feedback; however, the models differ in their goals. Symmetrical models seek cooperation, whereas asymmetrical models seek “environmental domination” (Grunig & Grunig 1992, p.346 in Stacks & Watson 2007).

Interestingly, the origin of Grunig’s symmetry is in

a theory of politics called interest group liberalism. Interest group liberalism views the political system as a mechanism for open competition among interest or issue groups. Interest group liberalism looks to citizen groups to
champion interests of ordinary people against unresponsive government and corporate structures (Grunig & Grunig 1989, pp.37–39).

The idealistic social role this describes assumes that “public relations serves the public interest, develops mutual understanding between organisations and their publics, contributes to informed debate about issues in society, and facilitates a dialogue between organisations and their publics” (Grunig & White 1992, p.57). “Symmetry means that communicators keep their eye on a broad professional perspective of balancing private and public interests” (Grunig 2000, p.34).

However, some scholars claim that to most people asymmetrical communication continues to best describe the prevalent model of public relations practice (Mackey 2003; McKie & Munshi 2007). Responding to criticism of the idealised nature of his model, Grunig said, “Symmetrical public relations does not take place in an ideal situation where competing interests come together with goodwill to resolve their differences because they share a goal of social equilibrium and harmony. Rather, it takes place in situations where groups come together to protect and enhance their self-interests” (2001, p.18). He described symmetry as a process that constantly aspires to balance – generally between listening and arguing; collaboration and advocacy; “self-interest and concerns for the interests of others” (2001, p.28).

As a result of continued debate and modification, the original Excellence model has been transformed into the current “contingency” or “mixed motive model”, incorporating two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical communications between an organisation and its publics (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig 1995; Grunig 2001). Contingent decisions are made with consideration of both the organisation and the public interest (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002). There is a need to balance competing interests, as “Public relations professionals, by definition, believe their role is to balance the interests of their clients with the interest of the publics that constitute society” (Grunig 2000, p.27). Spicer responds that while this addresses the relationship between the organisation and its publics, it does not define the relationship of the organisation with the wider community (2007).
Scholars have taken what has come to be known as the Grunigian position as a normative theory to guide professional practice (Stark & Kruckeberg 2003); however, not all agree. One criticism that is difficult for the defenders of symmetry to overcome is that public relations is essentially strategic, seeking to achieve the goals and objectives of client organisations. It is always purposeful, and always privileges management discourse in the pursuit of rational economic goals (Deetz 2001). A counterargument posits that in postmodern societies as exemplified by modern management, the focus on sustainability and the mutuality and interdependency of organisations, environment and community interest that this entails means that strategy “is a rich multi-dimensional concept that needs to be examined broadly” (Hallahan et al. 2007, p.10).

Moloney argues that Grunigian theory enabled public relations to position itself on a “progressive journey toward ... betterment, if not perfection” (2006, p.3) by being able to distance itself from propaganda and the implications of pernicious influence attached to the idea. It made public relations “Intellectually respectable, decently practicable, and legitimately teachable at public expense in the ideological and geopolitical circumstances of the 1980’s” (2006 p.3). McKie and Munshi (2007) argue that theorists were able to distance public relations from earlier links to propaganda by separating the new “ideal” two-way symmetrical dialogue from earlier asymmetrical practices. Only flawed practice, which does not live up to the standards of the Excellence theory, can be linked to propaganda. Scholarly critiques of the symmetrical model (Cheney & Christensen 2001; L’Etang 1996, 2008; Weaver, Motion & Roper 2006) characterise it as “flawed, largely normative at best (and, at worst, misleading in its promise of equality of exchange amid realities of uneven power); very restricted in practice; and to date, structured in support of socially exclusionary practices” (McKie & Munshi 2007, p.36). On another level, symmetry theory is criticised for the functional and applied nature of its approach and its reliance on quantitative research (L’Etang 2008).

While these authors acknowledge the inherent, common sense of the symmetrical approach for long-term relationships, their criticism circles around “its methodology, its intellectual depth, its standards of proof, and its
implementation” (McKie & Munshi 2007, p.37). A major criticism of symmetry is that it fails to address issues of power, particularly given the inequality between corporations and citizens (Leitch & Neilson 1997). In response, Grunig alludes to ideas of the ideal public sphere: “Argumentation, debate and persuasion take place. But dialogue, listening, understanding and relationship building also occur because they are more effective in resolving conflict than are one-way attempts at compliance gaining” (2001, p.18).

2.2.2 Challenges to the dominant paradigm

While scholars agree on “the very reach of public relations – powerful in its pervasiveness as well as its persuasion” (McKie & Galloway 2007, p.370), active debates continue on a common definitional focus about the social role of public relations. In their assessment of the relevance of Grunigian two-way symmetry, McKie and Munshi (2007) maintain that public relations theory as developed under the Grunigian paradigm has not developed in line with new directions in business and global change. These authors argue for more plurality in theory building, moving beyond the dominance of symmetry and positivist approaches to alternative paradigms that accommodate post-positivist traditions. In this sense, it could be argued that the dominant, US-centric Excellence theory has been limiting, in that it has supplied neat answers that allow practitioners and academics to function without addressing fundamental, ongoing issues such as power and contexts. Exploring the “myth of symmetry”, Brown (2006) argues that public relations history has been distorted by symmetrical concepts which confuse “the science of evolution with a belief in evolution” (cited L’Etang 2008, p.259).

The Grunigian paradigm has provided a focal point from which to elaborate or extend two-way symmetry, and a launching point for attempts to find theoretical diversity by challenging or departing from it. McKie and Munshi (2007) identify the work of scholars such as Botan and Hazleton (2006), Heath (2010) and L’Etang and Pieczka (2006) as having, to varying degrees, contributed to theory in ways which acknowledge geographic and theoretical diversity. In acknowledging the contribution of Botan and Hazleton, McKie and Munshi (2007) note that while they remain loyal to the excellence paradigm, they do call
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for increasing pluralism and international contributions. Similarly, Toth (2006) seeks to extend the relevance of excellence theories.

A further example of the extension of two-way symmetry is provided by Kent and Taylor’s (2002) proposal of a model of public relations which draws on the interactive concept of dialogue involving reciprocity, mutuality, involvement and openness. This emphasis on two-way communication implies some flexibility, which resonates with Grunig’s (2001) appeal to understand excellence theory in terms of flexible variables of practice: a process rather than a fixed typology (Macnamara, 2010).

2.2.3 Dialogic and relational approaches to a social role for public relations

While a number of theoretical approaches have emerged, the relational approach and the rhetorical approach are most relevant to a consideration of the social role of public relations. Ferguson (1984) first noted the value of a relational approach; and prominent researchers in this tradition, Ledingham and Bruning, have since argued that “balancing the interests of organisations and publics is achieved through management of organisation–relationships” (Ledingham 2006, p.465). The key concepts of the relational approach include degrees of co-orientation and transparency drawing on social psychology, interpersonal and organisational communication, and conflict resolution and mutuality. The quality of relationships and the loyalty of stakeholders are important (Ledingham 2006), as is the management of expectations and the public interest. Mackey notes that it can be argued that “relationship management” is more instrumental than critical, a prescription for how public relations should be undertaken rather than a perspective through which to understand it, although Ledingham and Bruning do claim it is a “paradigm for public relations scholarship and practice (2000, p.xiii). Mackey argues that the relational approach is actually an elaboration of public relations as “goodwill” and, therefore, does not really “get to the essence of the role public relations really plays in society” (Mackey 2003, p.5).

The rhetorical perspective promoted by Heath (1992, 2001) offers an alternative perspective from which to understand public relations. While rhetoric has
negative connotations, it is also associated with the origins of democracy and therefore, has some inherent legitimacy. Heath (2001) sees rhetoric as the preferred conceptualisation of public relations, whereby rhetoric can “underpin the values of public relations being those of the good organisation communicating well” (Heath, 2001 p.70). The rhetorical tradition acknowledges that advocacy operates not in a vacuum but in a marketplace of ideas where the strength of all ideas must be considered. This does not mean that all ideas are necessarily available for consideration. Curtin and Boynton (2001) note the power differential that enables large organisations to keep ideas from the public instead of increasing the opportunity for a wide range of ideas to be considered.

Early discussions of rhetoric, particularly the work of Heath and Toth, were concerned with the legitimacy of rhetoric and persuasion (L’Etang 2008), who turned to rhetoric to solve public relations’ “legitimacy gap”. Achieving consensus within the framework of argumentation advocacy and persuasion is legitimate within the context of dialogue (L’Etang 2008). Taking a rhetorical perspective, Bivins (1993) argued that public relations should develop articulate guidelines by which issues important to society are defined and presented for democratic debate. From this perspective, the social role of the public relations profession is fulfilled “If public relations as a profession improves the quality of debate over issues important to the public” (Bivins 1993, p.121).

It has been suggested that Heath echoes Grunig’s symmetry when he talks of a level playing field as a requirement of ethical communication practice (Mackey 2003):

public relations as a discipline seeks to advance marketplace and public policy discourse by pursuing relational excellence in actions (organisational responsibility) and discourse that lead to the co-creation, co-management, or co-definition of meaning (zones of meaning) that reconcile strains and alienation and foster mutually beneficial relationships” (Heath 2001, p.35).

Heath further argues that rhetoric is “symmetrical because each idea placed in the marketplace or public policy arena stands on its own merits” (2001, p.49).
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However, this view suffers the same shortcomings as the idealised Grunigian paradigm in that such a symmetry can only be achieved when all parties are able to participate equally. In discussing the social role of public relations in relation to the Web, civil society and democracy, Heath argues that mass media can no longer provide equal access to the public sphere – if they ever could. The only answer is public relations, not in terms of spin or propaganda but in terms of developing real relationships in the public sphere (Heath 2005), thereby not only legitimising the role of public relations but placing it at the centre of democratic debate. Through argument, and debate of issues, policies and ideas, meaning and reality are constructed and decisions reached in civilised democratic societies (Macnamara 2012).

2.2.4 Critical views of public relations role in society

Critical researchers ask questions related to power, the nature of authority and the political authority. “Critical thinkers ‘do different’ and … ‘make strange’ the taken for granted aspects of public relations” (L’Etang 2008, p.261). Critical research seeks to expose power imbalances and social inequities in which communication is often implicit. Critical theorists are concerned with critiquing and changing society as a whole, and take an integrated approach; they have drawn on frameworks and theories of sociology and cultural studies such as those of Habermas, Bourdieu, Foucault and Marx, seeking new perspectives on public relations. Other prominent critical researchers include Moloney, who wrote on spin doctoring and propaganda (2000); Mickey, who discussed the deconstruction of public relations (2002); and Motion and Leitch, who worked on discourse theory and power effects (2007).

Research from a critical perspective can highlight how public relations works as part of larger strategies by private interests to manage or control resources. It attempts to look beyond objectivity and neutrality to incorporate historical, sociopolitical and economic conditions. The contribution research from a critical perspective can make to the field is to encourage practitioners to feel a sense of personal connection to the wider implications of their practice and to encourage a view of social changes and political decisions which are not removed from
everyday existence. Critical thinking enables an explicit connection between the personal and the political and enables practitioners to ask awkward questions; important for a healthy democracy and the development of the field. Critical inquiry needs to continue to establish its relevance to scholarly research and professional practice. Latour (2004) discusses the challenge for critical inquiry, where the tools of critical analysis have been taken up by opposing forces with the potential to undermine critical argument in the public sphere. One solution to the problem Latour proposes is in the definition of the problems investigated; a move to look at reality as a ‘state of affairs’ rather than ‘matters of fact’ (p. 232). This implies a broader view of the context of discourse practice and attempts to deal with the complexity of the whole.

Postmodern critical theory politicises social issues “by situating them in historical and cultural contexts, to implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analyzing data, and to relativise their findings” (Lindlof & Taylor 2002, p. 52). Holtzhausen’s postmodern approach (2000) challenges the arguably modernist perspective of the dominant Grunigian paradigm. To Holtzhausen, contemporary public relations efforts are

  balancing acts between management practices based on modernist principles of command and control and the postmodern expectations of those people who constitute the organization’s multicultural, multiethnic, and gendered internal and external publics (2000: 93).

This view enables consideration of public relations practice not only as a series of management behaviours designed to achieve organisational ends but “as a narrative, a way of talking about the world, the people in that world, and PR’s relationship with those people” (Radford 2012, p.49). Radford extends Holtzhausen’s argument to propose that “it is not that a modernist PR is out of step with a postmodern public, but rather that the manner in which PR talks about itself is in competition with a whole range of alternative narratives available to people in a postmodern culture” (Radford 2012, p. 50).
In proposing a postmodern perspective, Holtzhausen (2000) links public relations practice to politics and examines the power of public relations as an active agent in society. Public relations can act as a power function, legitimising the discourse of the powerful by presenting their perspectives and interests as objective knowledge (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). The postmodern perspective highlights the gap between how public relations practitioners see public expectations and the way the public, interacting in a postmodern, technology-rich society, see the world. Holtzhausen suggests that this difference between a modernist managerial focus and the postmodern expectations of stakeholders “might explain why [PR’s] well-intended practices do not always come up with the expected results” (2000, p. 95).

Extending public relations scholarship, Edwards draws upon Bourdieu to argue that “adopting a relational view of public relations as a profession defined by its relationships will help explicate power more effectively” (2006, p.22). Edwards’ approach highlights the deceit involved in public relations work that disguises organisational intent and consequently distorts relationships. Edwards sees the role of public relations practitioners, using language in symbolic production, as able to transform and disguise interests into distorted meanings and thereby to legitimise arbitrary power relations (2006). She divides responsibility for this between public relations and those who use their services, making the point that the occupation is dependent on and answerable to organisational interests in the conduct of its work.

In other research Vercic, Butschi and Flodin (2001) allude to a multiplicity of interpretations in a global context, contrasting European perspectives with the American theoretical tradition. In their proposed framework, which they argue is more holistic than relational models, public interest is located within the reflective role. In a number of the European countries included in their study, reflective and educational roles are considered fundamental to advanced public relations capability (van Ruler & Vercic 2004). Each of these roles require public relations to be socially oriented, with the reflective component requiring the practitioner to ensure that the decisions the organisation makes reflect the norms and values of society and the educational component enabling all members of the organisation
to become competent communicators responding to societal demands. Drawing from a cultural studies perspective, Schoenberger-Orgad (2010) employs the circuit of culture model, first introduced to the public relations field by Curtin and Gaither (2005), to discuss the role of the public relations practitioner as a cultural intermediary. In this model each of the components of communication – regulation, production, consumption representation and identity – work with the others to contribute to social constructions of meaning. Seen through this lens the role of the public relations practitioner is not only to span boundaries but to mediate the meanings and consumption of messages for the benefit of the organisation (Schoenberger-Orgad 2010).

Critical theoretical and applied contributions to public relations literature support the need to explore and understand the role of public relations in society and its use of discursive power. According to Edwards, “Public relations role in society, specifically the power exerted by public relations as a socially embedded profession, is a focus for increasing numbers of scholars in the field” (2009, p.251). She cites critical approaches which examine the manner in which the profession sustains or generates social inequity, such as the work of Aldoory (2005) on a feminist paradigm, and of Pieczka (2006) who provides a theoretical critique of scholarly work. Other researchers, such as Moloney (2006), explore the implications for democracy of public relations practice. Roper constructs a discursive analysis of power in public relations (2005). Others deconstruct public relations practice (Demetrious 2006; Pieczka 2002) and examine the relationship between public relations and the media (Davis 2000; Mickey 2002). Edwards argues, “If one regards practice as a manifestation of the struggle for capital to gain symbolic power, then understanding public relations practice is fundamental to understanding power in public relations” (2009, p.253).

Edwards’ approach is designed to gain an insight into the workings of power in day-to-day practice; my own investigation seeks to investigate the power of public relations practices as it is exercised in public discourse. Political economy offers a critical approach appropriate to the Pneumococcal Vaccine case study. A notable feature of the case study is the degree to which it involves the distribution of public and private resources; it is essentially a distributive issue, but the
components are more complex than single economic issues of pricing and government funding.

Mosco (2009) defines political economy as the study of “social relations, particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources” (2009, p.24). Political economy combines the economic and the political, seeing the concepts of “public life, government, power, and the state as forming part of our understanding of politics” (Duhe & Sriramesh 2009, p 23). Gilpin highlights the role of powerful actors pursuing private interests when he defines the economy as “a socio-political system composed of powerful economic actors or institutions such as giant firms, powerful labour unions, and large agribusinesses that are competing with one another to formulate government policies on taxes, tariffs and other matters in ways that advance their own interests” (Gilpin, 2001, p.38).

By bringing the fields of economics and politics together, political economy allows examination of an economy in a broader social context. Caporaso and Levine summarise politics as “the activities and institutions that relate to the making of authoritative public decisions for society as a whole” (1992, p.20). These authors offer three definitions of economics: as economic calculation, as material provisioning, and as a socially specific institution. Duhe and Sriramesh argue that the concept of material provisioning is most relevant to public relations as it focuses on “the nexus of relationships between individuals (or organisations) and societal institutions in the pursuit of private wants” (2009, p.23).

Theoretical distinctions are not necessarily apparent in the workings of society. Political economy enables the study of competing interests and perspectives, and of the unintended consequences of political and economic activity on society, and as such provides an ideal basis for an integrated understating of multiple variables relevant to public relations (Duhe & Sriramesh 2009). Furthermore, a political economy approach to public relations, in examining the interaction between parties as they compete for influence, examines the effects of a “powerful combination of social, economic, and political forces” (Duhe & Sriramesh 2009,
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Contemporary public relations research in this vein (Dutta-Bergman 2005, Eid 2007, Weaver & Motion 2002) has revealed how the combination of these forces has produced outcomes which disadvantage some interests and prioritise others.

Duhe and Sriramesh argue that political economies influence the saliency of issues and how organisations choose to respond and “dictate the proper role of firms, special interests, and governments in powerful and lasting ways” (2009, p.26). Health issues have political (public policy) social (quality of life) and economic (cost/benefit) implications. Companies operating in a political economy such as Australia, where the government subsidises medicines, will seek to influence politicians and form alignments with advocacy organisations in order to further their economic interests.

Political economies vary between nations. The Australian political economy has been described as fitting the neoclassical (also known as neoliberal) model. The term neoclassical political economy defines individual private commercial transactions as “economic” and the public role of the state in regulating this process as “political” (Caporaso & Levine 1992 p. 28). Both individuals and corporations are constrained by rules of law in the pursuit of their interests. A notable characteristic of the neoclassical model is that the economy is treated as separate from politics. Proponents support a free market that provides a broad range of choices and allows welfare-enhancing transactions to take place with minimal government intervention (Stilwell 2006). The free market is relied on to redistribute resources efficiently and deliver optimal social welfare. Neoclassical political economy does acknowledge the possibility of market failure (Stilwell 2006); it is possible that unintended consequences may follow when single interests are pursued, and may be positive or negative. In the neoclassical view, the state’s role is primarily to correct market failures. The state is expected to play a role in property and other rights as well as concerns of justice “not because they can be performed more efficiently there, but because the state rather than the market can best enforce equal protection and treatments” (Caporaso & Levine, 1992, p.28)
The Australian political economy, like other western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, began to shift toward a neoclassical political economy in the 1980s (Fairbrother Svenson & Teicher 1997). This period was characterised by the internationalisation of the economy, adoption of a managerial model, privatisation in the public sector and workplace industrial reforms. In the health care sector there was increasing adoption of private sector practices, increased transparency and accountability, and a more managerial approach overall. In the wider economy protection for manufacturing and agricultural sectors was removed and unionisation declined (Lloyd 2002). Governments of all persuasions placed considerable faith in market relations. Gains in productivity and wealth were accompanied by social costs, evident in greater inequality in wealth income and social power (Lloyd 2002).

Research suggests that “neo-liberal political economies adopt labour market and welfare state policies that lead to greater levels of inequality and poorer population health outcomes” (Boxall & Short 2006, p.3); however, despite considerable social and economic reforms over the last 30 years, Australian health outcomes remain comparatively high. One reason for this is that, while the Australian political economy has much in common with the US and UK policies, crucial differences exist and may account for the difference in health outcomes. Boxall and Short note a significant difference in the operation of the welfare state, arguing that “the ‘wage earners’ welfare state model used in Australia has been long regarded as unique. It differs from the typical democratic socialist models, like that of the UK, but also from liberal models, like that of the US. Australia’s unique welfare state model may also partly account for its exceptionalism in terms of population health outcomes” (2006, p.3). While there are other possible explanations, Australians’ expectations of governmental participation in the health sector are unique. The government provides a public health system designed to provide universal access to health care and minimise inequality.

Recently, a cocreation approach to the role of public relations in civil society building on the work of Botan and Hazelton (2006), and proposed by Taylor (2010) addresses the criticism that there is a functional bias in public relations research. Taylor argues that “based on symbolic interactionism, cocreational
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theories generally view communication, relationships, and co-constructed meaning as core assumptions of how public relations function in society” (2010, p.6). Combining functional and cocreational approaches, Taylor suggests that the role of public relations in society is “to create (and recreate) the conditions that enact civil society” (2010, p.7).

This wide variety of approaches and theories indicates a field of study in transition, moving to a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the role public relations plays in the wider society and public debate. Newer theories attempt to integrate ideas from a pluralistic perspective in an attempt to develop an understanding of public relations practice that will serve a modern profession. This study aims to contribute to these developments through a deep analysis of the complexity of public relations practice as a producer of discourses in both the political economy and civil society.

2.3 Understanding the meaning of public interest

Discussing the social impact of public relations practice requires an understanding of the term “public interest”. The term appears in many codes of practice, including those of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), but is highly subjective and not readily defined. Part of the problem lies in determining where, on a continuum, public interest gives way to private interest; debate on this issue is not new and is unlikely to be resolved soon.

Public relations and the public interest can be approached from a number of perspectives. The first of these is that public relations is essentially an activity carried out on behalf of organisations, particularly corporations. The special privileges society has allowed modern corporations are tied to an obligation for them to consider the public interest (Leeper & Leeper 2001; Stark & Kruckeberg 2001). As much public relations work is carried out for corporations, judgements about public relations are often tied to how the public interest is served by these corporations. From this point of view, the issue of public relations and the public interest is tied to that of the “nature of the contract between corporations and
society” (Stark & Kruckeberg 2003, p.33). Another perspective from which public interest can be considered is the obligations of public relations professionals to consider the public interest, independent of the organisations or clients for whom they work. This is to consider public relations as a profession: that is, a group of people with a common set of skills and roles, who may be bound together by formal association and, in many cases, given the right of self-governance. “This right is a reflection of, among other things, the notion that the uniqueness and importance of what the profession does, places the profession in a special trust relationship with society” (Fisher, Guntz & McCutcheon 2001, p.97). While serving the public interest is not necessarily a criterion for professionalism (Bivins 1993), it is often cited as one of its values.

A discussion of public interest usually requires a consideration of the requirements of the political economy and civil society. This implies a generalised conception of the public sphere, including informal movements and associations, the public mass media, formal parliamentary and legal institutions (Baynes 1994), and formal corporate and other organisational structures. Baynes argues that if public opinion can be considered an expression of a wider public evaluation of the performance of institutions and professions vis-à-vis the public interest, then “‘public will’ is not localised within any one institutional complex, but is dispersed throughout a vast communicative network” (1994, p.323). Thus, the task of determining just whose interest is being considered when talking of public interest becomes difficult.

There is a tradition in public relations literature and practice of defining the basic functions of public relations as serving the public interest (for example Fitzpatrick 1996; Grunig & Hunt 1984; Newsom, Turk & Krukeberg 2004) but there is still contention over the meaning and enactment of this concept. Messina (2007) argues that determining the public interest is something that is beyond the capability of any practitioner and therefore not a measure of ethical practice. Apart from any other limitations that might constrain practitioners in working in a way that reflects a balance of interests, the point is that it is impossible to measure what cannot be defined and, therefore, public relations need to develop other means to determine the ethicality of practice in terms of the wider society.
In many discussions an understanding of public interest is formed in oppositional terms. A concrete interpretation defines acting in the public interest as putting public service ahead of personal interests, although the complexities involved in implementing such a definition are daunting (Jamal & Bowie 1995). Ethical discussions of self-interest in public relations practice go only part of the way toward addressing general public concerns.

The question of public interest extends previous debates on self-interest into a wider range of issues involving self-interest, client interest. While there is some research to suggest that the public interest would normally take precedence over other interests, including client interest (Huang 2001), such claims should be treated with caution. While there is evidence to support the claim that many public relations practitioners consider the client’s interest their main responsibility some authors also support the idea that it is possible for public relations practitioners to determine the public interest, Bivens (1993) emphasised the interests of individual clients, including the requirements that public relations services should be accessible to all individuals who need it, and should improve the quality of debate. Messina questions whether this really amounts to a determination of the public interest or only an extension of individual interests (2007, p.35). He argues that if serving the public interest is a defining standard of practice it must be possible for practitioners to determine just what the public interest is.

Messina (2007) maintains that it is not only difficult to define the public interest, but virtually impossible. For example, in exploring this concept he cites Flatham (1966) who agreed that individual interests would remain central, but that the public interest required a consideration of the other in the consequences of one’s actions, arguing for evaluation of the consequences and evidence to support this reasoning. “To say a policy is in the public interest is to say that it meets standards and satisfies principles” (Flatham 1966, p.73). Messina argues that even if this approach addresses flaws in earlier definitional attempts there are still problems for public relations – the issue being whether it is possible for practitioners to be the judges of public interest for their actions. Messina further argues that the public interest depends on reciprocal interplay between individuals and government and that the “ultimate mechanism for determining the public interest
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is the democratic political process” (2007, p.38) and, therefore, how can public relations possibly know what this is beforehand in order to act on it. Messina argues, “this duty cannot be authoritatively discharged by practitioners because they cannot know the public interest” (2007, p.49). While this may be the case, practitioners claiming professional status should be able to exercise professional judgment, along the lines of a duty of care, in assessing the impact of their actions on the public interest. This study addresses these issues by illuminating the impact of practice on public discourse, thereby adding to the body of knowledge that public relations practitioners have to draw upon in determining how to act ethically in the public interest.

Further insights into this elusive concept can be gained by contrasting public interest with special interest, the latter focusing on the benefit of one section of the public at the expense of the larger public (Held 1970, cited Martinson 1995). This dilemma is not applicable only to the corporate sector. For example, the credibility of special interest groups derives from the perception that they represent a broad base of individuals and have no other agenda than the public interest, even though the interest of one group is rarely in the interest of society as a whole (Bodensteiner 1997). Bodensteiner suggests that this problem is intensified when coalitions are formed between groups with similar interests, and in this context the nature of the interest served becomes questionable.

The wider public and the profession have different views about what serving the public interest requires. It is, however, possible for public relations practitioners to act in the interests of management or client and in the interest of the greater public. It is in these areas, of discretionary decision-making rather than rules based technical levels of practice, where public relations can demonstrate a capacity for professional judgement at a high level. Issues which invoke the public interest are typically characterised by complexity and competing interests; they require practitioners schooled in ethical practice and able to consider the micro and macro implications of decisions. There need not be an ethical conflict except where the action is at the expense of the greater public interest (Botan 1997; Fisher, Gunz & McCutcheon 2001), however this is determined.
This issue was highlighted by Pearson (1989c) whose doctoral dissertation reviewed the writings of public relations scholars on ethics and concluded that few had developed a basic philosophical theory to underpin their work. Pearson noted that Sullivan (1965) was an exception who had articulated genuine philosophical statements about ethical public relations practice. Sullivan described three kinds of values in public relations which help to clarify the issue of divided interest. The first, technical values, are values concerned with performing tasks efficiently and professionally. Sullivan said that most ethical problems arose around the other two values – partisan and mutual values. Partisan values arise from a belief in the rightness of a person or idea and a willingness to champion this belief. The four partisan values Sullivan identified are commitment, trust, loyalty and obedience. The third type of value, which Sullivan considered higher values, are mutual values; rights that belong to people because they are human and which others are obliged to respect. These rights may, for example, address the United Nations universal declaration of human rights or require professionals to conduct themselves in accord with the public interest. Interestingly, while the PRSA code states a core value of professional conduct in the public interest, the PRIA code of ethics has no such commitment. Two basic rights relevant to public relations are “each person has a right to true information in matters which affect him and that each person has a right to participate in decisions which affect him” (1965, p.428). Sullivan concluded that partisan and technical values are not enough in public relations suggesting that mutual values showed the way to professional status.

Balancing the often contradictory interests between private enterprise and public good presents increasingly complex ethical dilemmas for public relations professionals and the field as a whole. To act ethically in a manner that serves both public and private interests, practitioners must identify the parameters that define acceptable conduct in any social context. As the media often feature the misdeeds of public relations, consideration of both the practitioner’s and society’s ethical frameworks should be central to this practice (Berger & Reber 2006).

One of the claims of public relations practice is that it offers ethical guidance to organisational management, but there is scepticism about its capacity to provide
“ethical guidance” in light of its own reputation. The lack of a clear moral framework encapsulated in a code of ethics or a regulatory body and, according to some writers, a yet to be articulated professional culture of shared values and beliefs (L’Etang 2003; Stark & Kruckeberg 2003) limit the credibility of public relations. While public relations ethics can be studied at a number of organisational levels: program, the level of the function, the level of contribution to organisational effectiveness, ethics can be considered most significant at the societal level (Bowen 2007). This thesis frames the discussion of ethics primarily from this perspective, considering the implications for public relations of a code of ethics in relation to the public interest.

What are public relations’ ethical responsibilities to society? One view is that ethical practice is defined according to the values of the society in which that practice takes place, a concept of enormous complexity given the challenges presented by a global environment. Stark and Kruckeberg discuss the normative values essential to a 21st-century global society, including in their suggestions the right to privacy and transparency: values which, they point out, inevitably will clash. Instead, what we end up with is a “negotiated relationship in which corporate culture and civil society co-exist thorough identification and realisation of mutual interests” (2003, p.35).

A fundamental responsibility of any professional is to communicate truthfully and openly. Public relations practitioners have frequently been accused of having a flexible interpretation of truth (Stauber & Rampton 1995; Toth & Heath 1992), but “truth” is a problematic concept. Skerlep argues that “the positivistic concept of truth [has] become controversial with the ascent of postmodern relativism”, and continues, “In the situation of public contention on a controversial issue the speaker can only marshal the best arguments for his or her case. The ‘truth’ can only be reached through argumentative dialogue that reveals which of the participating parties has better arguments” (2001, p.183). Mackey (2003) notes that many would argue that, in issues such as environmental protection or human health, there are absolute truths.
Public relations should be concerned, because ethics and professional status are linked. While public relations has made many attempts to improve the standing of the field within organisations, and to acquire social legitimacy, there is still “no seat at the table” and “perceptions of practitioners as flacks and publicists remain pervasive” (Berger & Reber 2006, p.52). Professionals are generally expected to hold to high standards of professional and personal ethics; this is part of the bargain that the profession strikes with society.

One way of establishing standards of professional behaviour is through a professional code of ethics, which may or may not be enforceable but which is intended to establish the profession’s position on a number of ethical and moral questions. It is in the interests of professions to have a code of conduct which is acceptable to the moral standards of the public and to ensure that practitioners adhere to it (Jamal & Bowie 1995).

Codes of ethics specify appropriate behaviour, encompassing attitudes, decision-making and ways of thinking that reflect values (Paine 1994). A code may have various intentions: influencing the group’s behaviour; pinpointing areas of moral conflict and offering possibilities for resolution, or expressing and recognising the organisation’s collective conscience (Brinkmann & Ims 2003). The usefulness of professional codes for any of these functions is determined by the degree to which a code meets the expectations of the public or private conscience. A profession’s code of ethics also reflects the concerns and priorities of the field. Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995) specify five duties they believe must bind practitioners: duties to self (own values), duty to client, duty to the employer, duty to the profession and duty to society. This last is defined in terms of the public interest and, like truth, its definition is problematic (Messina 2007, p.49).

While the Public Relations Institute of Australia has included the phrase “identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest” in its definition of public relations (Tymson, Lazar & Lazar 2002, p.20) a phrase in line with comparable American and British professional associations, only four of 15 items listed in the code of ethics can be related, directly or indirectly, to the public interest. Two are particularly relevant to the
current study as they make particular reference to the obligation of members not to disseminate false information either knowingly or inadvertently, and to identify sources of funding for any communication they initiate or facilitate (PRIA 2012). The other items refer a wider accountability, and while there is a general statement of intent, specific guidance through the professional code of ethics is limited.

From the perspective of virtue ethics, external and institutional rules count less than good character and personal values. Machiavelli claimed that it was better to live in a state with bad laws but good morality than in a state with good laws but bad morality (Brinkmann & Ims 2003). This is the position adopted by many in occupations like public relations that have unenforceable codes of ethics: the existence of rules has never guaranteed good behaviour, and the degree and manner in which they are enforced are open to interpretation. Ultimately there are limits to the effectiveness of rules and codes; however, the perception of a profession is to a large part determined by its stated and enforced code of practice, as well as by the actions of its individual members. These views are reflected in public relations literature; for example, Wilcox and Cameron state that while there is guidance for the individual from codes of ethics, it mostly comes down to individual decisions as voluntary adherence to professional standards of conduct is the real measure of a public relations person (2006).

Although the codes do not delineate a clear means by which professionals can determine standards of ethical practice in relation to the public interest, there is considerable work on this issue in the academic literature, indicating the difficulties that arise in the nexus between theory and practice, between what is ideal or desirable and what is possible. Berger and Reber (2006) suggest the perspective of an ethical framework based on justice and fair play – that people should make decisions on the understanding that they may be on the giving or receiving end of the decision – is appropriate when balancing public interest against an organisation’s interest. Cheney and Christensen (2001) make a valuable contribution to this discussion, arguing that ethical issues arise on different levels. First is the integrity of the source of the message, the degree to which the organisation’s intentions are essentially ethical. Next is the defensibility of a
particular message with regard to questions of truth, representation of interests, propaganda and one-sidedness. This, they maintain, is especially important in the current climate where private lobby groups disguise their orientations or, as in the case of health communication, the sponsorship of community groups is not transparent. They also talk of the legitimacy of the pattern of campaign messages in their consistency, adaptation and openness, plus the degree to which they represent genuine dialogue. Stark and Kruckeberg talk of pluralism and the requirements of a pluralistic society, and the need for a “morally defensible theory of social ethics that is both professionally agreed upon and adhered to by public relations practitioners” (2003, p.34). From this will emanate a “professional ideology” in which social values can be identified and subscribed to by practitioners, embraced by practitioners’ organisations, and communicated to and reconciled with the organisations’ stakeholders. This should be so, they argue, because in a civil society the rights of all take precedence over the rights of a few.

While not impossible, there are constraints to public relations in doing the right thing, including have the support of senior management, being part of strategic decision-making and being in control of the public relations function, and having the political intelligence to achieve all of this (Berger & Reber 2006). Overall Berger and Reber find that while practitioners serve multiple interests their primary loyalty is to their organisation rather than to society. In their view this constrains the influence of public relations professionals within organisations and affects their public image. Ultimately individuals make judgements; and the kinds of decisions that are particularly difficult are those which fall between legal wrong and ethical wrong. Although “these thresholds vary from person to person … most people have a strong desire to play by the rules established by their organisation, profession and society” (2006, p.246). Individual decision-making as the basis for ethical decision-making in a professional group is problematic, as “the lack of a single common framework for deciding what is ethical and what is not thus ultimately influences the outcome of public policymaking and the reputation of public relations” (Nelson 1994, p.225). As this case will demonstrate, public relations is tied to a complex network of relationships and the practitioners are not
always masters of their own destiny, a situation which must always present challenges to the profession.

2.3.1 Public relations as discourse actors in the public sphere

This section locates public relations practitioners as discourse actors in the public sphere, and discusses some of the issues that arise from their involvement, including how they participate, on whose behalf they do so, and the ethical implications raised by their participation. Much public relations practice is enacted in the public sphere, and the idea of a central discursive space, where issues can be debated, is central to democratic theory and practice. Conceptualisation of the public sphere and the normative ideal proposed by Habermas will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Heath, Motion and Leitch (2010) maintain that meaning is created through discourse, which influences society as it “defines power resources that are enacted at individual, organizational and social levels” (2010, p.191). They argue that community discourse shapes meaning, identity and institutional power relationships by “what is said, who says what about these matters, and how such meanings shape thoughts and actions” (p.191). They cite Stokes’ (2005) position that discourse has constitutive impact, arguing that a social constructionist impact also applies as words define matters to privilege certain points of view and marginalise others.

The primary means by which public relations firms participate as discourse actors in the public sphere is in the construction and distribution of texts which have the objective of ensuring that the ideas and practices of their clients are established and understood (L’Etang 2006). Public relations texts enter public discourse by various means – either directly, through their production of primary sources such as newsletters, pamphlets and web pages, or indirectly via the mass media, through media releases and the construction of events and newsworthy stories. In the latter case the role of the public relations person is not always apparent; often the true value of public relations, in gaining editorial credibility, rests on this fact.
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Motion and Leitch (2007) refer to Fairclough (1992) to argue that, from a discourse perspective, we can conceptualise public relations as a meaning-creation process with ideational, relational and identity functions. They argue that how we analyse these functions depends upon whether public relations is perceived to be a business or management practice, an art, a science, a societal good or a societal evil.

Researchers have found that public relations professionals facilitate the achievement of socio-cultural objectives through the transformation of discourse and thus change social practices (Motion & Leitch 2007). Deliberate attempts to transform discourse are described by Fairclough as “technologisation of discourse” by “professional technologists who research, redesign, and provide training in discourse practices” (1996, p.8). L’Etang extends this to argue that public relations practitioners are “theorized as working to (strategically) privilege particular discourses over others, in an attempt to construct what they hope will be accepted as in the public interest and legitimated as policy” (2006, p.18). She and other scholars (Motion & Leitch 1996; Motion & Weaver 2005; Weaver 2001; Weaver & Motion 2002) extend this again: from a critical discourse perspective we can understand public relations professionals as being in the business of creating particular discourse knowledge and identity positions which then influence the types of social relationships that are possible within and outside that discourse.

On another level, public relations functions as an important facilitator of communication, enabling the exchange of information and creating an informed society that can make reasoned judgments (Bowen 2007). Bowen claims that public relations is responsible for the betterment of society through open communication and maintenance of symmetrical relationships with publics, as “public relations can help organizations be socially responsible and good citizens in the communities in which they operate” (2007, p.276). She argues that the expansive boundary-spanning role of public relations, when performed ethically, incorporates the ethical imperative of facilitating dialogue. Bowen appears to be saying that public relations has the moral obligation of facilitating communication among systems, rather than just being part of the system. The implications of this
are enormous: “public relations communicates on the level of public policy, activism, and social norms, and even values on a global level in multinational organizations” (2007, p.275) and she argues for the importance of an informed marketplace of ideas in debate of public policy.

In their role as discourse actors, public relations practitioners often have at their disposal the resources of powerful interests: economic and social capital which advantage them in their endeavours on behalf of client organisations. Much of their work is achieved through generating publicity, producing materials and creating events attracting media attention to client issues and giving voice to discourse actors. It can be argued that publicity is essential to the working of a civil society and may be considered a neutral technology (Moloney 2006) and that pluralism of message sources and contents are a basic component in the democratic process. On the other hand, the inequality of voices participating in civil debates, and the capacity of privileged voices to reach further and ring louder, calls the idea of neutrality into question. Moloney maintains that the essential purpose of public relations for business is to voice their interests and influence public opinion and political decision makers (2006), while other, less resourced interests have less voice. This idea of multiple voices is a key aspect of this study, and one question the study raises is whether the appearance of multiple voices in media discourse necessarily equates to democratic practice in the public interest. The means by which voices are deployed, the interests they serve and the transparency of the interests they represent all have weight in the determination of public interest.

Public relations can be seen an impediment to democracy in situations where “the circulation of ideas is governed by enormous concentrations of wealth that have, as their underlying purpose, the perpetuation of their own power” (Ewen 1998, cited in Hiebert 2005, p.410). Moloney (2006) relates Lukes’ (1974) analysis of power to the use of public relations by business, drawing connections between the “voicing” of messages supporting businesses and designed to influence attitudes and behaviours, and the policy-making of governments. This power is amplified by the different resources of various groups, affecting the capacity of each to have their voice heard. Lukes identifies three dimensions to this imbalance: firstly that
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is creates noticeable conflict among interests, secondly that the more powerful are able to control agendas for public debate and policy-making, and finally that the loudest voices can condition the beliefs and thoughts of others (Lukes 1974, cited Moloney 2006, p.93). Moloney also notes Lukes’ point about the relationship between visibility and power – that there is decreasing public visibility of the power exercised. Moloney’s work focuses on lobbying, the least visible public relations activity, but his points are valid for the other aspects of public relations explored in this thesis, particularly that of public relations work in the public sphere, which tends to be hidden.

The power of the voices interacting in the public sphere at any given time is likely to be weighted toward established business interests, and it is difficult for the general citizenry to take this into consideration and make sound judgments when much of the process is not transparent. Because business “as a set of ideas and as a practice, is so constitutive of liberal democracy that it has structural power to affect the circumstances in which it operates” (Moloney 2006, p.93), it can be considered, by extension, to confer a great deal of power upon public relations practices when it employs them.

The creation of hegemony, whereby a worldview created by powerful interests is accepted in the state and civil society (Roper 2005), enables greater influence for public relations and the interest it promotes. The effect is subtle as public relations messages may be visible but also have an unintended conditioning effect on consumers whereby “the message contents are the natural order” and are perceived as “common sense” (McLellan 1979, p.185). Moloney argues that public relations messages originating with sponsoring interests and repeated through many media actually act to reproduce structural power for dominant institutions by creating uncritical acceptance (2006, p.95). To achieve this, control of material and political resources is more important than access to the media. The negative effects of public relations on democracy and whether this type of influence can realistically be matched by the efforts of subordinate groups with fewer resources and influence is a matter of concern (Moloney 2006).
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Legitimacy is a vital topic for public relations (Heath & Palenchar 2009, Vaara, Tienari & Laurila 2006); it has been argued that legitimacy is at the core of what public relations is about (Waeraas 2009). Organisations frequently seek to influence the conduct of others but are not in a position to impose demands on them and even those which can, government and the law, seek cooperative compliance before coercion. Successful organizations therefore rely on voluntary compliance, which can be seen as acceptance of legitimacy: “when organisations have an acknowledged right to rule, they are seen as legitimate” (Waeraas 2009 p. 303). An organisation can undertake efforts to gain legitimacy however they can only achieve this if publics recognise them as such. It follows therefore, that identification is a requirement for political discourses to be regarded as legitimate; only discourses which resonate with social norms will be considered legitimate (Habermas, 1976; Rahaman, Lawrence, & Roper, 2004).

As Motion and Doolan explain, “legitimacy is a central concept for understanding how discourse participants attempt to guarantee the influence of a discourse” (2007 p.64). They cite the Habermas’ (1979) view that sees the legitimacy of competing claims being decided by compromise and argumentation from which a solution in the public interest emerges. One solution they offer to address the idealism of the Habermassian position is a perspective which sees the process of gaining legitimacy in public discourse as a power struggle to keep “dominant meanings in place” (Hardy and Philips, 2004, p.307).

One of the stated objectives of the campaign was to establish organisational credibility; the overall aim of the company and the public relations agency is to legitimise the organisations’ claims in the public sphere, to provide a credible argument that will be trusted by the public.

By deploying these strategies the organization hopes to establish its identity as a trustworthy source and assume a position of dominance in the discursive space. The concept of position and positioning introduced by Davies and Harre (1990) is most commonly related to marketing and in this context allows products to be placed in a market relative to the competition. The idea can be applied to the political context, where organisations and actors seek to establish distinct and
superior positions in relation to other discourse participants. Legitimation strategies can be used to position one party as the authoritative voice on the issue in the discursive space and position opposition views as less credible and on the periphery of the debate.

Discourse theory provides valuable insights into public relations practice; however, there has been limited research demonstrating how the practice can be deconstructed through critical discourse research (Motion & Leitch 1996, 2001; Weaver 2001).

2.3.1.1 The contentious issue of advocacy

The issue of professional advocacy, and the question of whose interests it primarily serves, are at the heart of questions about the social role of public relations. Advocacy is a central concern in the Pneumococcal Vaccine case study on two counts: First in regard to activities undertaken by public relations professionals acting as advocates for client interests, and second in the use of advocacy groups to promote those interests. These two perspectives on advocacy illuminate some of the challenges of determining ethical constraints on the advocate’s role. Edgett (2002) argues that public relations practitioners need to reconcile their roles as advocates for special interest groups with their role in social discourse if they are to mature as a profession.

Some scholars (Barney & Black 1994; Edgett 2002) argue that advocacy is a central function of public relations; however, evidence suggests that public relations practitioners are uncomfortable with their role as advocates (Edgett 2002), mainly because of a focus on objectivity and a failure to see persuasiveness as ethical. Some practitioners, uneasy with taking the role of advocate, describe it as most uncomfortable when “public relations practitioners attempt to meet the needs or desires of their organization or stakeholder group to the exclusion of the needs or desires to the other side” (Reber 2005, p.1). Others take a different view: Heath notes the Advocacy Institute’s view that advocacy offers positive benefits to society (2007).
In a democratic public sphere, all parties with a stake in an issue should able to give voice to their perspective. Professional advocacy may assist with this: in his defence of the role of advocacy, Heath (2007, p.44) maintains that all interests better understand one another through a process of advocacy, in which positions are set out, understood and debated through appropriate means. However, this may be considered idealistic. If one voice drowns other voices, as Fitzpatrick and Gaulthier (2001) argue, “when opposing forces are silent or important information is withheld, how will the public obtain information that challenges the institution’s version of the truth? With access to only one version of the truth, how can the public take responsible action?” (2001, p.197) This argument can be extended to incorporate the difficulty of sifting through a plethora of information from dubious and unacknowledged sources in order to find some representation of reality on which to base a decision. Not only are the public offered an institutional viewpoint: they are offered it from many sources, some disguised as independent bodies claiming intellectual and social credibility and some posing as third party entities but which practitioners have created, as Beder (1998b) and Stauber and Rampton (1995) have pointed out.

For public relations professionals, the power to act ethically as advocates, balancing the interests of their clients with their professional duty to the public interest, reveals something of the social dilemma of their profession. In one sense, public relations has no real power of its own; it is more properly an auxiliary for the pre-existing power of business (Moloney 2006). Public relations has no power in and of itself – its power is derived in large part from the organisations it represents. Lobbyists project the power of their business clients into government circles, and corporations project the power of the corporate voice into the public sphere. If business is the largest bloc of interest, it can be viewed as more important than other interests when designing public policy; this principle applies to all sectors.

Among the criteria that Edgett (2002) proposes for ethically desirable advocacy is that the public relations person should determine whether the client merits advocacy and then, having decided to act as advocate, should put the client’s interests first. Realistically, any other position is untenable for a practicing
professional. Other criteria include balancing social responsibility with client priority, veracity, and, most interestingly for the case study in this thesis, visibility (Edgett 2002). All parties whose interests are being promoted need to be visible to the public, and not hidden behind other interest groups and discourse actors.

Validity is also important, where arguments presented, as well as being truthful, must be based on sound reasoning. Establishing the validity of claims through scientific data and expert spokespersons was crucial to the success of the Pneumococcal Vaccine campaign. The area of transparency is where the case is most wanting, where identification of the originating source of information is not necessarily clear.

Edgett asserts that advocacy can be defended on moral grounds and is consistent with existing codes of ethics (2002). It is a neutral tool: it can be deployed either ethically or unethically. The issue of transparency in advocacy becomes important where public relations seek to create meaning through indirect means, such as by using advocacy coalitions. In the case of the Pneumococcal Vaccine campaign this was done through community support groups, professional organisations and medical specialists. This technique of using advocacy coalitions to expand interest in a particular issue or policy is a practice that critics label as front groups (Gosden & Beder 2001).

Most writers on civil society agree (Flyvbjerg 1998, citing Habermas 1992), that at the heart of civil society is a core of voluntary associations that exists outside the sphere of the state and the economy. The formation of these types of organisation is a fundamental act of citizenship in a pluralist democracy, and their task is to maintain and redefine the boundaries between civil society and the state (Flyvbjerg 1998). This becomes problematic when the groups are deployed in a manner that does not reveal the full range of interests they represent. This problem has been identified in the health sector, where front groups are used to represent industry interests in the name of concerned citizens: a relatively recent phenomenon and one that pharmaceutical companies have embraced enthusiastically (Gosden & Beder 2001), as instead of (or as well as) lobbying government directly and putting out media releases in their own name, they can shelter behind public interest groups. Gosden and Beder argue (2001) that the rise
of citizen and public interest groups has been paralleled by growing public scepticism about statements made by businesses. Using voluntary associations as front groups to lobby for legislation in the corporate interest, to oppose undesirable regulations, and to introduce policies that enhance corporate profitability is a perhaps a questionable but very effective manoeuvre. As Merrill Rose said,

put your words in someone else’s mouth … there will be times when the position you advocate, no matter how well framed and supported, will not be accepted by the public simply because you are who you are. Any institution, with a vested commercial interest in the outcome of an issue has a natural credibility barrier to overcome with the public, and often, with the media. (Rose 1991, p.28, cited Gosden & Beder 2001, p.3)

There are sound strategic reasons to have the organisations’ messages conveyed by independent, credible sources; however, the advantages of this tactic need to be weighed against the long-term loss of trust it may ultimately produce.

2.3.1.2 Contextual challenges in modern discourse practice

Social and technological changes have influenced modern discourse practices, both in the way people communicate and interact individually and in the way citizens relate to the political institutions which govern them. Social attitudes and expectations have evolved to be generally more questioning and critical of established social structures; for example, in citizens’ demands for access to information, inclusion in decision-making for public projects and enforcement of corporate accountability. In most industrialised countries, the population is highly educated; information is available on an unprecedented level through the Internet and other media, and news and information have an immediacy previously unimaginable. Information technology has made the activities of organisations increasingly open to public scrutiny. Globally, the costs of communication have fallen dramatically, and the ease and speed of transmission of information has increased exponentially (Elmer 2007). As people have developed the confidence to question, they have also gained the technical capacity to access more of the
information they need; and in increasingly market-driven economies, the rise of consumerism has reshaped the pliable or passive client into a robust consumer (Lane 2007). As Macnamara notes,

the social change sweeping society … has provided an ideal environment for public relations to provide value to organisations and even benefits to society – if conducted according to best practice principles. Need for public relations to rethink its methods and practice and commit to openness, authenticity and conversations which lead to true dialogue and relationships, rather than distributing packaged imagery. (2010, p.316)

These changes have occurred alongside an emerging crisis of confidence in the truthfulness of many public institutions; and public relations is implicated by association with clients and practices of dubious integrity. In Australia there has been increasing interest in corporate reputation and management in recent years (Quazi 2003). Major changes in attitudes and values have been motivated not only by economic changes such as globalisation but in response to the corporate governance scandal of the 1980s (Mackay 1993). The global financial crisis of 2009 was one of a series of events that undermined public trust in both corporate and public governance.

One aspect of social change particularly relevant to this thesis is an increase in plurality at both individual and group level. Moloney noted “great, observable changes in personal behaviour by … citizens and in collective behaviour by voluntary groups” in the sixties (2006 p.30). These groups, many associated with social movements (feminism, environmentalism, consumerism, multi ethnicity, secularism), added to the range of voices seeking to be heard in the public sphere – a trend, Moloney notes, which accelerated after the 1960s and has been further accelerated by new media technologies. One noted aspect of plurality is the growing number of registered non-profit organisations. A 2004 BRW survey in Australia estimated them to comprise 10% of the economy, worth $70 billion; there were 700,000 such organisations (Ferguson 2005). Within this sector are a significant number of groups advocating on behalf of various causes in areas such as medical research, environmental and social justice. These diverse groups
engage in a range of communicative actions which, while they might not be readily identified as public relations, are essentially that (Moloney 2006). Community groups promoting awareness of a disease, for instance, will lobby, provide information and engage with the media to influence policy decisions which support their interests. In this context, public relations offer “

a set of flexible techniques for the promotion of values by interest and cause groups, by associations, and by an individual alone. It can be used by them in paid professional form, or in “cottage industry” and “personal kit” forms. (Homan 2011, p.30–31)

There is no evidence that the down-market forms are less effective than professional public relations efforts (Moloney 2006), and so these efforts by small public interest groups embed public relations in the pluralism of values and behaviours associated with a neo-liberal political economy and civil society. Moloney cites Wernick (1991) who identified a promotional culture where self-advantaging communicative acts are practically co-extensive with the produced symbolic world. A society has such a culture when “the majority of messages circulating in it are self-interested” (Moloney 2006, p.32). The value of this promotional concept to an analysis of public relations is that it focuses on the self-interested nature of the process. When the majority of messages about any one issue are of this kind, questions need to be raised about the degree to which public discourse reflects the interests of society as a whole. The implications for public relations go to the heart of its claim to acknowledge public interest in the conduct of its professional work.

2.3.1.3 Media context

The case study examined in this thesis is a campaign conducted through mainstream media. While there are other means that are also deployed in the promotion of the company’s interests, the main driver for action in this case is the desire to influence political decision-making. Macnamara (2010) asserts that politics in contemporary Western democracies is largely mediated – that is, debate
and discussion are carried out through media more than face to face or through traditional institutions (Corner 2007; Louw 2005, cited Macnamara 2010, p.155).

The news media have been and still are major participants in this mediated landscape. In their traditional role as watchdog of corporate and government misdeeds, they are active in scrutinising the behaviour of organisations (Hanson & Stuart 2001; Neef 2003), revealing improprieties and seeking “newsworthy” items. While the media landscape has changed to incorporate digital technologies and the evolved practices of media consumers, the traditional media still wield considerable influence. This is not only due to technological imperatives, but also to the link between individuals and the institutions which govern them; the many layers of government and business present in modern democratic societies.

The case study explored in this thesis is specific to the Australian context, and while it is influenced by global issues, it is ultimately about Australian public policy discourse. While the Australian media context is similar to that of many Western-style democracies, certain characteristics are unique. One of the most important features of the Australian media market is its small size. The population of Australia is relatively small compared to markets such as Great Britain and the United States, and in the past the market was based around cities rather than a central national media network. A pattern of concentration of media ownership and reduced diversity led to a strong conservative leaning in mainstream media (Tiffen 2001), characterised by concentration of power in the hands of a few. This had the effect of limiting the ability of opposing voices to gain a hearing (Leigh 1947). The smallness and geographic dispersion of the Australian market, as well as the commercial realities of content production, affect policy formulation. The news market has been profoundly affected by the proliferation of global formats, and Australian media industries have endured a long period of innovation and expansion caused by technological change, globalisation and the expanding variety of media markets. Today the Australian media face the universal challenge of feeding a 24-hour, 7-day electronic news service with an insatiable appetite for content.
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This situation provides opportunities for public relations practitioners who are able to provide a large amount of "newsworthy' material, packaged ready to use. Such "information subsidies", a term coined by Gandy (1982), allow those with the resources to make information available to journalists quickly and cheaply; this increases their chances of having their voices heard in the media. Public relations use information subsidies to influence media content proactively by distributing information, and reactively by providing responses to journalists’ questions. This, while in some senses a convenient solution to the problem of finding fresh content, raises concerns about the effect that public relations has on media independence and objectivity. The practice is often portrayed as anathema to the idea, or ideal, of an unbiased press or a well-informed society. Moloney (2000, 2006) refers to this as “PR-isation of the media”.

In an ideal situation, public relations would advocate on behalf of special interests and ideas, and this would be moderated by the scrutiny of journalists (Moloney 2006). Indeed, while the media’s need for copy has shifted some of the power toward public relations, they do still reflect a range of competing voices (Morris & Goldsworthy 2008). Furthermore, some argue, “social responsibility theory, which accepts the role of the press in servicing the political system, in enlightening the public, and in safeguarding the liberties of the individual” (Johnston & Zawawi 2009, p.33) has extended this role to public relations practitioners in their dealings with the media, particularly given the amount of public relations-generated content that ends up as editorials.

Disputes on the influence of public relations information subsidies are exacerbated by the complex and interdependent relationship between journalism and public relations. Journalists want information available easily, but resent those who make it available: thus public relations is simultaneously condemned and embraced, with many journalists holding negative perceptions of and attitudes toward public relations (DeLorme & Fedler 2003; White & Shaw 2005). Social and professional conditions that affect journalistic practice are well acknowledged (Joye 2010; Macnamara 2010). Many of the problems faced by journalists working in modern media organisations, such as understaffing and the relentless need for content, have succumbed to using material supplied by public relations.
An important contextual dimension of news gathering “concerns the economy of news production, and access to information and footage” (Joye 2010, p.596), which needs to be dealt with together with the “rise of public relations and subsidized news” (Macnamara 2010, p.218).

The accelerated plurality in the political economy that Moloney (2006) identified has implications for media, with many individuals and organisations competing to have their voices heard in a constant babble of information. Cheney and Christensen suggest that the challenge for organisations in gaining a hearing in this crowded arena has elevated public relations, among other related fields, to become the chief architects of organisation identity. The challenge of having to break through the noise within the modern media environment means that practitioners are “continuously operating on the edge of established strategies and perspectives” (2001, p.242).

One way to overcome this is by using the strengths of public relations: the capacity to package information in an easily accessible form, create pseudo events and promote single issues. This trend towards the rise of single issues and the demise of political philosophies has been identified as a trend in modern mediated societies (Morris & Goldsworthy 2008). Voters, finding few distinctions between political parties, are turning their attention instead to single-issue causes. The profusion of groups attempting to garner support for these causes generates demand for public relations and adds to the crowded marketplace of ideas. This is accelerated by what Moloney (2006) terms the "tabloidisation" of the media, characterised by shorter stories, more pictures and a bias towards the emotional and sensational. Moloney (2006) notes that there has been a doubling of this tabloid coverage of politics – which may a positive thing in that more people are exposed to political ideas. The problem is that tabloids treat politics in the same way they treat all stories: they are personality-based and uncritical. Yet this too brings tabloid journalism and public relations closer together, as public relations are willing and able to provide these kinds of story. With so many column inches to fill and so little time for critical investigation, media are more than ready to reproduce material provided by public relations as single-issue stories.
These contextual issues have implications for public policy discourse: large issues, such as public health policy, are debated on an issue-by-issue basis rather than from a broader and more balanced perspective. The emphasis on the promotion of single issues is preferred by public relations, who are able to marshal a wide range of resources to be targeted at decidedly singular objectives. The narrowness of much debate affords public relations campaigns a level of prominence they might not achieve in a more pluralistic discourse space.

2.4 Summary

This literature review has revealed a number of competing views on what constitutes a legitimate social role for public relations which accurately reflects their role as discourse participants.

The first reflects a functionalist approach, where public relations advocates the voice of employer organisations and thus necessarily supports those powerful interests who can afford to pay for its services on a scale that smaller groups cannot. From this perspective, public relations has little power to influence the public interest other than through its choice of clients and the strategies employed on their behalf. This perspective provides a relatively neutral position for public relations self-determination – a tool to be deployed by various individuals, groups and institutions in furthering their interests.

The second perspective encompasses the boundary-spanning mediator role, which can be aligned with two-way symmetrical approaches and the mixed motive model. Here, public relations, practiced ethically and according to best practice principles, will deliver practice which accords with the public interest. This proposition finds an ethical approach for advocacy and the issue of advocacy coalitions. In supporting this theory, some locate public relations practice at the heart of democratic debate: the argument is that through their leadership role in defining issues and promoting preferred perspectives they are major contributors to public policy.
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The third perspective, drawn from critical and postmodern perspectives, sees public relations in a more integrated social role, as co-creational, cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984) functioning within a complex set of interdependencies. Macnamara (2012) supports Broom’s (2006) view of an ecological perspective which does not take sides but sees participants as interconnected and interdependent in complex social systems (Everett 2001). This perspective has the advantage of working within multiple theoretical perspectives, from sociology and cultural studies, for example, to develop a theory of the role of public relations in the public sphere.

Of these three overriding perspectives on the social role of public relations, the third perspective is newest and, as Taylor (2010) suggests, requires more research. This thesis responds to Taylor’s call.

From the discussion in this chapter three main gaps emerge in the literature. First is a lack of consensus on the real role played by public relations in the social context; greater clarity in establishing the boundaries of ethical professional conduct and the use of discursive power is needed. Second, considering the emergence of a critical turn in public relations research, there is a need for further research which investigates the power of public relations practice as it is exercised in public discourse. Third, arguing the importance of public relations work in the context of the mediated public sphere raises the need for a deeper understanding of the relationship between public relations and other discourse practitioners.

Fundamental to the enactment of civil society is an effective public sphere in which issues of public policy can be debated and discussed. The next chapter reviews conceptualisations of the public sphere, discourse and power relations, and proposes a conceptual framework through which the role of public relations professionals in discourse production will be examined.
Chapter 3       Public relations and the public sphere

3.1  Introduction

In this chapter, I make explicit the conceptual resources that have been used to frame my research, beginning with a review of the literature on normative conceptualisations of the public sphere as articulated by Habermas. To understand and evaluate the role of public relations as discourse producers a standard, or set of criteria, against which their influence can be tested is needed. This chapter reviews conceptualisations of the public sphere and their relevance to current public relations professional theory and practice.

While the value of a normative approach is acknowledged, so too are its limitations. Issues of discourse and power are addressed by drawing on the work of Foucault and Bourdieu, and from this I propose a perspective through which the media discourse of the case study may be examined. I also argue for the contemporary relevance of a normative model of a deliberative public sphere.

3.2  The challenge of competing interests in the public sphere

Participation in the public sphere is one means by which civil society functions, and participation in the public sphere is a form of democratic public participation. Here various discourse actors send messages and ideas in the hope of gaining information, debating issues, and having their voices heard and their interests prevail. To determine how discourse practice is enacted in the context of a mediated public sphere is the fundamental challenge of this thesis, which will address the question by examining a single strand of discourse practice: the role of public relations in political discourse.

Australia is governed by a representative democracy where decisions are made though elected officials via various forms of public participation. There are different models of democracy, each with a different understanding of the nature of citizens’ engagement in public debate and decision-making. Habermas (2006), whose conceptualisation of the public sphere underpins the theoretical framework
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of this thesis, identifies three forms: liberal democracy, which gives primacy to individual freedom and the collective views of private citizens through informal public opinion; republican democracy, similar to what has been termed a representative democracy (Macnamara 2010) where people engage through elected elites; and a deliberative model of democracy which stresses engagement. Carpentier (2007) sees deliberative models as requiring wide public engagement on issues, but with the implementation and management left to political actors. All models of democracy recognise some level of citizen engagement and participation as fundamental (Macnamara 2010).

A key requirement if democracy is to operate effectively is a forum for deliberation and engagement – as Habermas puts it, an effective “public sphere” – which is “part of the bedrock of liberal democracies” (2006, p.412). The meaning of “public sphere” and what constitutes an effective one have been the subject of much debate. Johnson (2006) discusses two meanings related to the term: the first is the idea of an open forum for members of a community to discuss issues of mutual concern, and implies a process of rational decision-making built on egalitarianism and pluralism; the second is a political legal paradigm (Wickham 2010) described as a “civil peace”, and relates to those activities of the state which are central to defining the society. Both interpretations raise questions about the extent to which collective discourse can determine the conditions of social life in a democracy. How effectively and efficiently does society deliberate over matters of shared interest; and how does government listen?

Who is the public in the public sphere? Johnson (2006) uses Dewey’s definition of public: “all of those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (1946, p.245). This implies a view of the public as a purposeful group comprising mutually dependent individuals who need to collaborate to respond to shared circumstances. For Johnson, the modern public is drawn from a “political process in which common cause is built through the search for solutions to problems initially encountered as private concerns” (2006, p.1). The modern public sphere becomes a mode of interaction rather than a physical space. “Private” means exclusive, and “public” looks to the shared
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grounds that encourage strangers to form coalitions. In a practical enactment of the public sphere, individuals have the opportunity to take private needs and concerns to a forum where they may be recognised as relevant for the collective society (Johnson 2006).

3.2.1 Development of the concept of the public sphere

Habermas and his critics have contributed most to the development of the concept of the public sphere. Habermas was one of the first to highlight the connection between an effective public sphere and the workings of a democratic society; the precursor to the formation of public opinion is the existence of a public able to engage in rational discussion.

In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas traced the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in Europe from the late 18th century, where social conditions for a short time facilitated an effective public sphere (Crossley & Roberts 2004), although it comprised only an elite of chiefly middle class men who came together to discuss issues of mutual concern. Initially conducted in salons and later enabled by printing technologies, the emerging public sphere expanded to include increasingly large numbers of people.

Drawing “from political and intellectual history certain core normative ideas about the nature of democracy” (Edgar 2005, p. 31), Habermas developed an historically grounded theory of the public sphere (Burkart 2009, p.142) which provides a space in which the art of public debate is cultivated – and which began to be undermined by social conditions from the moment of its inception (Crossley & Roberts 2004). This public sphere is separate from the state, the formal economy and the family, where private interests such as monetary gain and government administration, narrowly construed, are not primary concerns. In this model, private individuals rather than agents of the state come together to participate as citizens (Habermas 1999, pp.28–30).

For Habermas, public spheres mediate between the state and private individuals, and this assumes there are a private sphere and a private subjectivity. At the time
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in which Habermas described this early public space, home and work were beginning to become separate for the bourgeoisie; only by appreciating the emergence of individuality and the notion of privacy does the idea of a public make any sense (Crossly & Roberts 2004). Matters of public interest, which are discussed in the public sphere, are derived from private issues which are deemed significant enough to interest other members of the public sphere.

A number of factors work to undermine the idea of the public sphere. The first is a blurring of the boundaries between the state and society, whereby the state inserts itself into the private lives of citizens or where private interests infiltrate the state; and Habermas (1984) notes that citizens have increasingly become clients or consumers of services, and political debate has become a contest for resources rather than ideas. This effect is accentuated by the emergence of the professional politician, and by the fact that much policy debate takes place within the confines of government, leaving the focus of public debate on competition for votes and thereby power (Crossly & Roberts 2004). This is evident today in health policy and government communications on health issues, with the government insinuating itself into private concerns and decisions in an increasing range of scenarios; for example physical exercise, sun protection and healthy eating. Here too, public debate between private citizens is dominated by interest groups competing for public resources.

Another critical factor that has undermined the idea of an ideal public sphere is the development of an understanding of public opinion as a product which comes from opinion polls, rather than from argument and discourse. This view removes the idea of public opinion as the ultimate authority in democratic decision-making and replaces it with the idea of “an object and target for intervention strategies designed to control and manipulate it” (Crossley & Roberts 2004, p.6). Another factor is the relocation of much that was once public debate within the aegis of professional politicians, reducing debate to a contest between parties. The effect of this is compounded by the constitution of the electorate and the tendency for swing voters to be the most courted by politicians: Habermas saw this situation as encouraging tricks and tactics to attract the attention of the disinterested (Crossley & Roberts 2004).
Finally, a problem arises with the commodification of media markets, in which media are transformed from forums for the exchange of ideas to vehicles for the promotion of commercial interests. Habermas (1989) considers this to “dumb down” the level of public debate, as editors seeking wider and larger markets play to the lowest common denominator. The role of the press and other mass media is central to democratic debate, Habermas argues, but is “manipulable to the extent that it [becomes] commercialized” (1989, p.185) and is thus transformed from a forum for rational critical debate into a “platform for advertising” (1989, p.181). Political debate in this scenario is reduced to simplistic concepts, and politics becomes a stage show (Crossley & Roberts 2004).

A key idea Habermas articulates is a vision of “the rationality of processes of reaching understanding, which may be presumed to be universal because they are unavoidable” (1984, p.196). In this view, Habermas places communicative rationality and argumentation at the centre of social processes, because social life is based upon processes for establishing reciprocal understanding (Flyvbjerg 1998) and we are essentially democratic beings. While the forces of civic and political life, and of professionalised public relations, can undermine these processes, the outlook is not totally bleak. While public opinion (driven to a large degree by public relations) may be seen as having the upper hand, the forces of rational debate and critical argument have not been completely undermined. Habermas’ early pessimistic view of the public sphere was later revised to allow the possibility of social movements reclaiming the public sphere and forcing issues onto the public agenda (1996).

Critics have noted, and Habermas was concerned with, the empirical relevance of his normative model of the ideal public sphere. In *Discourse Ethics* he argues that publically binding norms can only make a legitimate claim to rationality if they emerge from open discourse and free argument among all interested parties affected by them (Habermas 1992, 1993). Normative claims must be subject to rational public scrutiny, and thereby assume a crucial role (Crossley & Roberts 2004). Habermas articulates five key principles for ethical discourse practice: no one who will be affected by the outcome of what is discussed should be excluded from the discourse (inclusiveness); all participants should have equal opportunity
to participate in the discourse (autonomy); participants must be willing to engage with the claims of others (ideal role taking); existing power differences between participants must be neutralised so that the differences do not affect the outcome of the discourse (power neutrality); and participants should openly explain their goals and intentions (1993, p.31). Under these conditions, participating in society is synonymous with taking part in public debate. Providing the circumstances which could realise these principles has proven difficult, and the challenge of empirical relevance remained a problem for Habermas. In later work he acknowledged the complexity of the modern public sphere while he continued to try to develop a model with empirical relevance. He argued that, for deliberative democracy to become an empirical reality, two conditions need to be met: the first is a self-regulating, independent, media system; the second, an inclusive civil society which empowers citizens to “participate in and respond to a public discourse that, in turn, must not degenerate into a colonizing mode of communication” (2006, p.420). While not all colonisation of discourse is necessarily the result of commercialisation, Habermas argues that the pressures of a market economy and of shareholders can influence the “internal logic” of the public sphere and influence the production of messages. It is then possible that “issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment” such as “personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarisation of conflicts [which] provide civic privatism and a mood of antipolitics” (2006, p.422). This resonates strongly with the character of debate over many issues in the modern Australian public sphere, and, as will be demonstrated in this thesis, holds true for the practices of both media and public relations professionals.

The model which Habermas finally produced, which was developed in Between Facts and Norms (1996) and presented in his 2002 keynote address to the ICA in Dresden, is based on the idea of inner and outer circles. The institutional “core” is the system of government, and the outer periphery the informal associations of the nations “private social spheres”. The role of the mass media is neutralised and becomes that of an intermediary, bringing ideas from the outer periphery into the centre. This is not without critics it contains many similarities to the earlier model
and Habermas has been accused of continuing to “understate and undertheorise the potential pro-active role of the media in the public sphere” (Crossley and Roberts 2004, p.182), particularly regarding his insistence on media’s self-regulation and neutral role.

The concept of the public sphere developed by Habermas has been widely acknowledged and also widely criticised. One of the most consistent, significant criticisms is the narrowness of his conception, with its focus only on bourgeois public spheres, the failure to acknowledge the existence of multiple public spheres (Breese 2011), and the focus on individual participation (Benson 2009). Habermas did ultimately move to an understanding of the modern public sphere as comprising several arenas where conflicting opinions are contested discursively, although his continued emphasis on rationality and consensus has continued to attract criticism (Crossley & Roberts, 2004). For instance, it has been argued that the focus on reasoned argument excludes both the personal narrative and the emotional content of engagement. As this thesis will demonstrate, both of these play a significant role in mediated public discourse.

A very significant criticism of Habermas’ approach is that his assumption of a rational public sphere is over-idealistic: he places too much faith in the public sphere as a site of free and equal access (Crossley & Roberts 2004), failing to bridge the gap between the idea and the reality. One reason for this basic weakness, according to Flybjerg (1998) is his insufficient conception of power. Furthermore, for there to be an achievable model of the public sphere, issues of social inequality, such as the wielding of power, need to be addressed (Foucault 1980, 1998). Restrictions on individuals, such as those imposed by differing degrees of social capital, or the domination of the discursive space by interest groups, mean that the basic conditions of Habermas’ model are unlikely to be achieved in reality.

Habermas is also criticised for idealism and insensitivity to context (Flybjerg 1998). The influence of outside forces such as government regulation, the agendas of non-profit organisations or commercial pressures, underscore the importance of considering context as a function of what occurs in the public sphere. Habermas
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acknowledges that discourse alone cannot guarantee that the conditions of discourse ethics and democracy are met; however, his critics claim that he still offers a utopian ideal, with little guidance for its achievement. Against this, Benson credits Habermas with having prompted vigorous debate, which continues to this day. He echoes the view of many scholars that “the notion of public sphere provides a widely known, legitimate theoretical framework that allows a new generation of media researchers to speak to one another across disciplines and specializations” (Benson 2009, p.180). In this thesis, Habermas’ concept of the public sphere is taken as a starting point from which to develop a framework for assessing discourse practice in the public sphere.

Habermas’ conceptualisation of the public sphere has guided much public relations research, particularly critical research reflecting on the social implications of practice. In most cases, this involves applying the ideal conditions set out by Habermas to the public relations process, with a view to formulating “an ethical imperative for public relations” (Pearson 1989a, p.27) or the necessary conditions for ethical public relations (Pearson 1989b). More recently Leeper (1996) relates Habermas’ theory to consider the importance of public relations ethics, Holmstrom (1997) to discuss normative ideals for public relations practice and Meisenbach (2006,) to develop a moral framework for discourse ethics. While the normative approach has not been realised in practice, there is still an argument to be made for the relevance of Habermas’ ideas to the analysis of public relations practice; for although the ideas have not been realised as Habermas conceptualised them, that does not deny that “the concepts and their preconditions are still relevant and should be further developed to reflect on public relations as a profession in its societal context” (Jensen 2001, p.134).

The degree to which public relations strategic communication practices have a legitimate place in the public sphere is debatable. The term “strategic communication” has been broadly applied in public relations literature, with recent work acknowledging lack of clarity regarding the concept in the context of public relations (Steyne 2007). “Strategic” in the broadest sense involves purposeful communication which is the basis of most, if not all, public relations work. This does not necessarily imply “manipulative or deviant communication
practices”, point out Hallahan et al. (2007, p. 4), who acknowledge that “strategic communication” emphasises the role of communication as a management practice. The traditional use of the term ‘strategic’ in public relations has been drawn from systems perspective and management disciplines, with a focus on planning, setting objectives and measuring outcomes. In this context, strategy is a big picture activity, future oriented and always outcome focused (Lukaszewski 2001). This use of the term is limiting, as it has “the potential to reinforce the perception that the practice of public relations and communication is merely tactical and not considerate of larger social, political and economic factors” (Hallahan et al. 2007, p. 14).

The concept of strategy as deliberate action, considered narrow by some, implies some degree of control: a strategy is designed to achieve outcomes which are, to a large degree, predetermined. This view makes public relations a management function and links it directly to the achievement of an organisation’s strategic goals. At an operational level, public relations strategy is then developed to implement the goals. Emergent strategy, in which communication is used to solve problems or capitalise on opportunities as they arise, is a more reflexive component of the wide definition of strategy; and it has been argued that attempts to link public relations strategy and goals to corporate strategy and goals is flawed because public relations can contribute more to emergent than to deliberate strategy (Likely 2005, p. 1). Steyne suggests that public relations is a combination of both deliberate and emergent strategy, practiced as a “strategic management function with a unique disciplinary identity … assisting an organisation to adapt to its environment by achieving a balance between the organization’s commercial imperatives and socially acceptable behaviours” (2007, p.158). By this means public relations is able to demonstrate strategic flexibility, a proactive adaptive capability, to match the organisation’s communication to the environment. Such adaptation implies listening and responding in ways which are socially acceptable, and is likely to be consensus oriented, transparent and considerate of the public interest.

Habermas distinguishes between “strategic” and “communicative action”, in which strategic action is success-oriented and behaviour is oriented exclusively
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towards the achievement of intended outcomes, with little regard for others involved. Habermas is critical of “publicity that is staged for show or manipulation” (1989, p.247), and of public relations that disguises the interests it represents and embellishes the claims it makes so that public debate is falsified. In contrast, “communicative action” is consensus oriented, undertaken with transparency and aligned with the intentions and interests of the opponent. This interpretation sees communication used for understanding, not influence. It implies a negative element to strategic communication, and those who practice it, which is not necessarily warranted.

Habermas does acknowledge that strategic communication in the public sphere is becoming increasingly important for all players (Hallahan et al. 2007). Even with the advantages in power and resources that members of the political economy have compared with members of civil society, the “common construct of ‘civil society’ certainly invites actors to intervene strategically in the public sphere” (Habermas 2006, p 16). A wider application of corporate communication methods so that actors from the civil society with less power have the opportunity to effect debate in the public sphere (Habermas 2006) could be a benefit to democratic debate.

This is an ideal vision. However, far from representing the normative ideal, the modern public sphere is contested territory in which some voices dominate and some are excluded. As Crossley and Roberts argue, modern communication techniques “are not simply a medium of thought and argument, but also a potential source for power, domination and oppression”, and “any consensus is accomplished through an evolving process of coercion and exclusion” (2004, p.11). A level playing field for the exchange of ideas cannot be assumed, and any exploration of how discourse is created and enacted in the public sphere needs to consider the reality of forces at play: what is excluded, which voices are not heard; and the different resources discourse participants can deploy to promote their interests.
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3.2.2 Discourse and the realities of power

A major criticism of Habermas is his promotion of a model which articulates a normative ideal and fails to address issues of power. To move from the Habermassian ideal towards a conceptualisation which enables democracy and a strong civil society, it is necessary to understand the realities of power (Flyvbjerg 1998), and this leads us to look to the work of Foucault. If Habermas’ ideas are around consensus and a normative ideal, Foucault’s bring consideration of conflict and real history.

Most relevant to the research question this thesis poses is Foucault’s work on discourse production and transformation. Foucault defines discourse as a set of statements and practices which “systematically forms the objects of which they speak” (1972, p.49). Through his problematisation of the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity and his insistence on the link between power and knowledge, Foucault comes to argue that discourse, is not a means of representing the “true” state of the object it is describing, but is, in fact, itself responsible for constructing the object. Meaning and meaningful practice are construed within discourse, and as we can only have knowledge of things if they have a meaning, knowledge is produced through discourse, not by the things themselves: thus subjects such as illness, meningococcal disease and even public relations exist only in the discourses about them.

Discourses for Foucault consist of highly regulated groups of statements backed by some institutional force and therefore validated by some form of authority, and following specific internal rules that render them comprehensible. These rules constitute “systems of thought” that determine what can be said, who can speak, the positions from which they can speak, the viewpoints that can be presented, and the interests, stakes, and institutional domains that are represented (Fairclough 2001). Engagement in the public sphere is more likely to be successful if discourse participants are able to use these systems to advantage. On the matter of the veracity of the viewpoints expressed, Foucault constructs a history of truth effects, asking how particular “truth effects” make subjects possible:
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What are the moral, the ethical, and the spiritual conditions which entitle someone to present himself and to be considered a truth teller? About what topics is it important to tell the truth? ...What are the consequences of telling the truth? ...What is the relation between the experience of telling the truth and the exercise of power? (Foucault 1988, p. 99)

According to Mumby (2011) this conceives of power as productive and not necessarily a top-down negative phenomenon. However, this confers considerable responsibility on those who able to exercise this power in discourse practice. Questions about power and truth go to the heart of the question this thesis asks of public relations: by which models of ethical practice and professional ideology can public relations practitioners claim a legitimate role in the public sphere? It is not expected that a definitive answer will be provided: what is important is that such questions be continuously explored.

To Foucault things are only true within a specific historical context; and, although he has been criticised for relativism, his contribution is important in that he contextualises language and discourse. His approach to context is relevant to the analysis of the case in this thesis as contextual factors, such as the trend toward branding in public health campaigns or the blurring of distinctions in people’s minds between government public health campaigns and corporate promotional campaigns, influence understanding of the discourse practices employed. Salmon and Atkin (2003) observe that a public health campaign will involve systematic communicative processes that aim to persuade a relatively large collection of individuals to adopt certain prescribed health messages and/or behaviours.

The public space where health communication voices are located is crowded with many offerings, an expansive spectrum of messages attempting to persuade the public to adopt a behaviour or buy a product. The sophistication of contemporary publics who use multiple pathways and multiple cues to negotiate a public domain that is saturated with messages, choices and emotional appeals means that sophisticated campaign strategies are needed. Soliciting participation of target publics in the campaign process, such as getting the parents of children who might receive a particular vaccine to petition the government so subsidise it, adds to the
complexity of the process, for as the campaign progresses, the users of the product became increasingly vocal advocates, calling on the main target, the government, to act.

Foucault’s conceptualisation of discourse allows for consideration of power relations: “the question at the centre of everything: what is power? And to be more specific; how is it exercised: what exactly happens when someone exercises power over another?” (Foucault 1988, p.101). Foucault advances two radically novel propositions, the first of which links knowledge, power, and truth. Knowledge linked to power not only assumes the authority of “the truth” but has the power to make itself true:

Truth isn’t outside power … Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned … the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (1980, p.131)

Our beliefs about an issue, what we think we know, will affect how we deal with it. Something may not be true, but if everyone believes and acts upon that belief, the consequences will have real effects and become true in that sense (Hall 2001).

The second radical proposition concerns a new conception of power, not as a linear force but circulating. Foucault argues that power, which permeates all levels of society, is not always negative and can be productive: “it needs to be thought of as a productive network which runs through the whole social body” (1980, p.119). Power is conceptualised as a complex network which need not emanate from central authorities, but can emerge from lower levels of civil society. As Motion and Doolin explain, “discourse and power are conceptualised as mutually interdependent in that discourse produces the concepts, objects and subjects that shape power and power influences discourse production” (2007, p.64).
Foucault has been criticised on both methodological and philosophical grounds. What may in one sense be considered innovative approaches are criticised for lacking systematic research methods and being factually inaccurate. He is also criticised for his relativist approach: that he does not provide a definitive theory but explores complex problems (Motion & Leitch 2007). Foucault has provided an alternative framework for critical researchers looking for different means of analysing public relations practice. Motion and Leitch advocate the use of his work to highlight some of the “deeply problematic, contradictory and even questionable aspects of this complex profession by placing meaning production, power effects, truth claims and knowledge systems at the centre of our thinking and investigation” (2007, p.263). They also argue for the relevance to public relations of Fairclough’s (1992) analysis of discourse transformation, which drew on Foucault’s work, to analyse deliberate attempts to transform discourse in order to engineer social change. Fairclough refers to such attempts as the “technologisation of discourse” by “professional technologists who research, design, and provide training in discourse practices” (1992, p.8; cited Motion & Leitch 2007, p.94). Motion and Leitch describe their use of these ideas in studies which focus on issues of truth, public interest and public engagement (2007, p.95) and note the application of Foucault’s work on discourse by other scholars (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002) as well as in studies of organisational discourse. The pneumococcal campaign, a complex discursive production, and the resultant media discourse, presents an excellent opportunity to explore “the nature, role and influence of power in public relations practice” (Motion & Leitch 2007, p.97).

3.2.3 Relational and dynamic aspects of discourse in context

A distinction can be noted between the term “discourse” in critical theory as promoted by Foucault and the way Fairclough (1995) uses the term to describe the action and interaction of people in real social situations. Bourdieu’s definition of discourse, to the degree that it indicates an understanding of social action that is neither completely free nor completely regulated by existing structures, combines elements of both. Bourdieu’s work, in a vein similar to Foucault’s, focuses on uncovering the ways in which, through individual and collective struggle, the
social world is structured, constituted and reproduced. Bourdieu too
acknowledges context, cautioning against looking at language or words in
isolation and recognising the need to look at the social and historical framework
in which the language takes shape (1991). Where Habermas sees the decline of
the “public sphere” as a result of institutionalisation (commercial or government
bureaucratic rationalisation), for Bourdieu the problem is not enough
institutionalisation. Where Habermas’ focus on the individual actor, Bourdieu
shifts the emphasis from the intimate life to institutional fields which provide a
more realistic “blueprint for progressive social reform” (Benson 2009, p.185). In
further contrast to Habermas, Bourdieu does not only look to the periphery of
society for democratic renewal, but looks to the complexity of interlocking,
autonomous fields. Nor is he as troubled by instrumental strategic action as
Habermas, seeing it not necessarily as domination but as a means to overcome
domination (Benson 2009).

Bourdieu is critical of Habermas, arguing that false universalisations are present
in his work and that Habermas fails to see the role of symbolic violence, which
includes access to resources or equality, in colonising the mind and affecting
reason (Fowler 2001). For Bourdieu, “Linguistic relations [are] always relations
of symbolic power” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p.142). He focuses not only on
language but also on objective structures to explain and understand these power
relations, concerned with the ways in which public communication can
systematically become distorted. He considers how “an individual’s social
position, which they carry in the form of embodied dispositions (habitus) and
effective resources (capital), shapes the forms of public participation they opt for,
the nature of their communications and the (socially sanctioned) authority with
which they speak” (Crossley & Roberts 2004, p.109).

A key part of Bourdieu’s sociology is his theory of practice, in which he grapples
with the dialectic of the objective and the subjective, finally constructing a
sociology that, he argues, makes the opposition between subjectivism and
objectivism obsolete. This sociology rests on the three concepts: habitus, field and
capital. Habitus is a structuring mechanism or set of dispositions through which
actors relate to the social world. For Bourdieu, habitus is central to generating and
regulating the practices that make up social life, an inbuilt predisposition, not necessarily conscious, to want only what the prevailing social conditions make possible. Habitus is constraining in its suggestion of what people should or should not do, and accumulates through all of the experiences of an individual’s lifetime (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, cited in Ihlen 2007). Ihlen notes that habitus should not assume intentionality (2009), but that “practices may be reasonable without being the product of a reasoned purpose, and, even less of a conscious computation” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p.120 cited in Ihlen 2009, p.65).

The second element in Bourdieu’s theory of practice is the concept of field, where actors and agents compete for space. This can be considered together with Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, in which voices compete to articulate their opinions (Ihlen 2007). A field is “a structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or capital” (Thompson 1991, p.14). The relationships between actors in a field are characterised by conflict and competition as they seek to accumulate and maintain different types of capital. The capital resources actors already possess assist them in this struggle for unequally shared resources (Ihlen 2009). In Bourdieu’s model, a field may need to grow bigger in order to amass the cultural and economic resources that will ensure its continued autonomy (Benson 2009, p.183). Field theory facilitates a more thorough mapping of the centre than that provided by Habermas as it incorporates non-government as well as government sectors. Bourdieu’s conception of what we might consider the contemporary “public sphere” would consist of a series of overlapping fields, such as political and advocacy organisations, with the journalistic field placed at the centre. While each field competes for influence, the journalistic field is distinguished as both a site in which struggle takes place and a field within its own right (Benson 2009, p.183).

The third element in Bourdieu’s sociology is capital, which he narrows down to three broad forms: economic capital in the form of money or property, such as corporate funds to finance a public relations campaign; cultural capital, which might take the form of knowledge, education or skills; and social capital, in the form of connections or membership of a group such as a professional association.
or advocacy group (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu acknowledged the reality that, even where there is free speech, economic capital may be needed to establish a substantial presence in the field. Ihlen (2009) identifies media relations as such a reality, and relates this to the information subsidies that public relations is able to provide and the deep pockets needed to hire such expertise. He notes two competing trends that public relations has given rise to: on the one hand already powerful sources have used public relations to consolidate their privileged access; and on the other hand alternative sources have been able to use public relations to gain access (Davis 2000). Deep pockets do not guarantee success.

Cultural capital may take the form of “legitimacy, authoritativeness, respectability and the contacts which these bring” (Schlesinger 1990, p.81, cited Ihlen 2009, p.72). The manifestation of this aspect of cultural capital is apparent in the Pneumococcal campaign, where knowing the culture of politics and media, knowing how things work and how the political process works, are important to achieving the campaign’s goals. The knowledge of how the media works, the appeal of news values, strategies for discourse legitimation and the coordination of resources, all are part of the expertise that public relations can bring to organisations. There is also knowledge in a wider sense: knowing enough to make “constructive criticism” and pose the right type of questions; being able to engage in public debate on an issue; or shifting emphasis as the issue proceeds through various stages toward resolution (Ihlen 2005).

Related to this is the idea of social capital, broadly defined as memberships or connections within a group. Bourdieu mentions “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1980; 1986, p. 248). Ihlen (2007) argues that, as a relational asset, social capital should not be confused with collective assets, such as culture and norms, but is found in individual interaction and networks.

Symbolic capital, defined as “a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability” (Bourdieu 1984, p.291), plays an important role in this case study. According to Ihlen, all other forms of capital may contribute to
the volume of symbolic capital, which can be considered in terms of social standing, prestige and legitimacy of the organisation, and is typically expressed through other actors or the media (Ihlen 2007, p.273).

In Bourdieu’s conceptualisation, the social world is made up of several fields that are more or less autonomous, but subsumed under the overarching field of power (Ihlen 2009, p.66). Capital might be specific to a certain field and relatively worthless in other fields. In the medical field, for example, scholarly research is a relatively more important form of capital than might be the case elsewhere; in the activist field, personal experience will be relatively more important than in other fields. Ihlen points out that an organisation such as a research centre might belong to the scientific field whereas a government department belongs to the bureaucratic field – and both of these may be part of several other larger fields, or contain sub-fields within themselves (2005, p.493). This idea can be extended to a large field such as immunisation and health policy, where actors bring the interests of specific sub-fields to cooperate with, or compete for dominance over, particular interests (Ihlen 2009, p.67).

Examining public relations practice through the work of Pierre Bourdieu may provide a perspective on public relations that is more realistic than can be achieved though other theories. Ihlen (2005, 2007) argues Bourdieu’s work offers the potential to develop a greater understanding of the practice of public relations in society, as well as providing insights which will enable practitioners to achieve greater cultural literacy and, therefore, develop strategies more likely to achieve their objectives. The main advantage of drawing on Bourdieu, as Ihlen points out, is his emphasis on relational and dynamic aspects. The positions of actors are seen in relation to each other and are explained as functions of the type and amount of capital they possess, the field-specific appreciation of these forms of capital, and the attempts to acquire, hold onto or convert it (2009, p.69). The distribution of capital becomes an expression of power relationships which, in turn, are expressed in rhetorical strategies. A focus on these aspects is helpful in grasping the struggle and social spaces within which actors are situated.
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Public relations practice fits into this picture if it is regarded as a practice that assists organisational actors in various fields to pursue their interests – in which case public relations should drop its “façade of disinterestedness” (Edwards 2006, p.3). Bourdieu identifies public relations as one of several professions that are symbolic producers, “transforming or disguising interests into disinterested meanings and legitimizing arbitrary power relations” so that they can exercise “symbolic violence on target audiences through misrepresentation which masks the real organizational interest in activities” (Edwards 2006, p.230).

By persuading audiences to a particular point of view, public relations works to maintain or improve the position of the organisations that employ them (Motion & Weaver 2005).

3.2.4 Normative approaches and the reality of practice

By drawing on theories of the public sphere and discourse engagement, this thesis seeks to develop a conceptualisation of the public sphere that will provide a benchmark against which to assess public relations discourse practice. There is no singular understanding of what should or does constitute a modern public sphere, and the foundational work of Habermas has been subjected to both criticism and modification. A normative approach is a necessary starting point in evaluating discourse practice as it enables insight into how practice may be improved, and indicates directions for developing theories of a workable, democratic space of public discourse. However, the gap between the ideal and the real needs to be acknowledged. The weakness of Habermas’ theories is evident in this area, so this thesis’ investigations into the outcomes of practice in context, the real, and issues of power also consider the work of Foucault and Bourdieu.

The work of Habermas and Foucault, in so far as it is concerned with civil society and democracy, highlights the tensions between the normative ideal and the empirical reality, between what should happen and what actually happens (Flyvberg 1998). A question Flyvberg asks when comparing the contribution of these two scholars is whether empowerment in civil society is best achieved in
terms of consensus or conflict, pointing out the differences and equivalences of the two scholars:

both Foucault and Habermas are political thinkers. Habermas is well developed in terms of political ideals but weak in understanding of actual political processes. Foucault in contrast is weak with reference to generalised ideas – a declared opponent of ideals. Both agree that in politics one must side with reason. (Flyvberg 1998, p.210)

Habermas’ main criticism of Foucault is related to what Habermas considers relativism, the lack of a normative foundation, but which Foucault chooses to refer to as situational ethics (Flyvbjerg 1998). Foucault explains his rejection of normative standards by arguing that “the search for a form of morality acceptable by everyone in the sense that everyone would have to submit to it seems catastrophic to me” (Foucault 1984, cited Flyvbjerg 1998, p.221). Thus, where Habermas provides a normative ideal against which to test ideas about an effective public sphere, Foucault argues for the real, the influences of power and the actual processes of discourse formation. Bourdieu may be thought of as adding to Foucault’s work through his theory of practice. By examining the interactions between habitus and social structure, Bourdieu is able to identify social agents and institutions responsible for the problems associated with relations of domination where Foucault’s discussion of power and subjectivity remains too abstract (Flyvberg 1998). For Bourdieu, discourse is the outcome of a number of factors: the competence of speakers in using language, their legitimacy within a particular field, and the social conditions at the time. This idea of discourse allows for the significance of power relations in addition to focusing on the specific site of the interaction. Thus Foucault and Bourdieu can be considered together, with Bourdieu “deepening Foucault’s account of how subjectivity is constructed through power relations by providing a more detailed sociological theory of this process” (Couzens 2004, p.101).

A weakness in Bourdieu’s approach is the “disempowerment of agency in the face of habitus which leaves unexplained questions of social change and questions of how and where the limits of public relations are set” (Edwards 2006, p.230).
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Edwards offers another interpretation which views fields as sites of continuous contestation and offers a new way of connecting agency and structure. Norms are always open to challenge, and “these challenges are evaluated according to Habermas’ criteria of truth, legitimacy and sincerity” (2006, p.230).

The Habermassian ideal “serves to highlight the forms of asymmetry, coercion, violence and communicative distortion that presently characterises our public realm” (Villa 1992, p. 712). Habermas suggests that in order for the democratic process to foster deliberative dialogue, it needs to take the form of free and open argumentation open to equal participation by all citizens. He acknowledges that this normative ideal is unlikely to be achieved, but argues that it has value as a critical benchmark for judging performance of institutions and practices. Political reforms, or critiques of practice, should seek to move things closer to the ideal where possible.

There are three sets of arguments favour of the normative deliberative ideal (Pennington, 2011). The first is that it produces better and more rational decisions. The inclusion of more discourse actors provides a more holistic perspective on issues, with the potential for better policy decisions. The second is that by requiring individuals and institutions to justify their decisions, context basis is established for control of power and greater transparency in decision-making; the third, that decisions arrived at via democratic deliberation more effectively represent the ethical and moral values of society than those which are arrived at by less inclusive means. Benson argues,

if Bourdieu reminds us that emancipatory politics are constructed not formed (in the life world), and new institutionalism calls our attention to state led reform we must return to Habermas and the normative debates he has inspired to help clarify the diverse purposes of media and how these might be institutionally secured. (2009, p.193)

What is most valuable about Habermas’ normative influence is that it helps to clarify issues, and determine the degree to which democratic ideals for the public sphere are being met.
3.3 Contemporary conceptualisations of the public sphere

The dominant means of participation in the public sphere in modern times has been through mass media, recently moderated by the Internet and other new media technologies. Each innovation in media technology has at once made democracy more possible and also immediately led to battles for control (Hiebert 2005). Just as radio and television in the twentieth century challenged the domination of newspapers, so the Internet in the twenty-first has challenged these media forms. Government deregulation and concentration of media ownership in countries such as America and Australia have continued the commercialisation and concentration of power: already, by the end of the twentieth century, global media companies dominated the public sphere. There are hopes that new technologies may provide innovations in public communication that will revitalise civil society, as earlier innovations have done (Hiebert 2005).

The impact of the Internet has been positive insofar as it is interactive and allows for a plurality of voices. However, there are fears that it can result in fragmentation, focusing only on narrow, specialised interests with no regard to wider public debate and with no editorial input. Although new technologies have the potential to liberalise bottom-up communication, bypass media, facilitate direct communication between stakeholders and enhance the public sphere, they also may be subverted to the interests of authoritarian, top-down communication. What enhances one side also enhances the other (Hiebert 2005): the open nature of the Internet works both for and against public debate. And may appear as “a cacophony of dissident voices, obstructing rather than facilitating a process of unrestricted debate” (Slevin 2000, p.182). This potential contribution to the fragmentation rather than the enablement of society has been noted, by Habermas (2006) and others (Jenkins 2006; Lovink 2007). A pessimistic view sees dominant forces colonising and dumbing down the Internet in the same way that traditional media have been (Macnamara 2010).

The multiplicity of media is balanced by the multiplicity of public spheres. Many scholars have abandoned the concept of the singular public sphere, preferring instead to consider the “manifold public spheres, counter-public spheres and
alternative discursive sites, each with varying relations to particular local and
global forces” (Couldry & Dreher 2007, pp.79–80). Multiple public sphere
activity provides alternative forums where citizens can participate in debate and
discussion on issues relevant to their personal interests, but as Macnamara notes,
“while engagement in politics appears to be increasing through what many
scholars call ‘public spherules’, qualitative analysis suggests that users tend to
seek out like minded communities on the Internet and engage in mutual
reinforcement” (2010, p.159).

In the immunisation discourse, the existence of what Fraser (1992) has called
“subaltern counter publics” is important. These are “parallel discursive arenas
where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter
discourses. Subaltern counter publics permit them to formulate oppositional
interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Crossley & Roberts 2004,
pp.14–15). The existence of subaltern publics in immunisation discourse is
significant in the context of the dominant discourse; the anti-immunisation
network is an example of a group which has a presence on the Internet as an
alternate voice in the media discourse on immunisation issues; however, the value
of the contribution it offers is questionable. They often present extremely radical
and unsubstantiated views which are at odds with the majority of the population.
James Bohman (2004) looks to the possibilities the new media landscape offers
and describes the conditions for a democratic sphere within it. These include a
social space where speakers engage in reciprocal dialogue, evidence of freedom
and equality in the forum, and that the public sphere “must address an indefinite
audience” (Bohman 2004, p.133–34). This conceptualisation of a public sphere
removes the connection between authoritative centres like the nation state and
replaces it with wider “public of publics” (Bohman & Roberts 2004, p.140).

There are challenges for citizens in knowing where “truth” lies. Previously
information about issues was sourced via the mass media, who were charged with
providing creditable news through journalists with professional integrity. Now
there are myriad options through the megasource that is the World Wide Web.
While relatively free, the Web requires a level of interactivity, of purpose. People
need to actively search; they need to participate in blogs and online discussion
forums, and to have some idea of the questions to ask when framing their searches.

The move away from the mass media to a multitude of special interest sites creates new challenges for communicators and for governments and organisations – the Internet allows like-minded individuals to find each other, without necessarily being a wide-reaching public forum. With such fragmentation, where do citizens find the space to talk about a single issue at times when this is necessary? Public health issues like immunisation are a case in point. It is crucial to reach large numbers in the population quickly and with accurate information. The mass media are fragmented and uncontrolled at present, and thus are not providing adequate forums for discussion.

The media are only one of the significant actors who contribute to public discourse, as will be shown in Chapter 6 in relation to the issue of immunisation for pneumococcal disease and the degree to which media fulfil a mainly ‘gatekeeper’ role. While there can be debate as to whether the media are generating their own discourses on issues, or are merely sites through which other actors deploy their discourses, the media still play a central role in the construction of public discourse.

But can the media be considered merely gatekeepers, neutral transmitters of information constructed by others; or do they play a pivotal role in the creation of meaning? Macdonald, while cautioning against extreme views in either direction, does agree that “in everyday conversations, and in the thinking of politicians and other opinion formers, the media still figure strongly as narrative makers, capable of influencing public perceptions of a reality beyond their borders” (2003, p.1). Furthermore, as the boundaries around public discourse and media discourse are not sharply defined, the media cannot always be the scapegoat for society’s problems (Macdonald 2003, p.11). An approach offered by Benson (2009) describes three broad models of the public sphere: elitist, deliberative and pluralist. In the elitist model, the role of the media is critically to examine elected officials and monitor policy proposals: that is, to be a watchdog on behalf of the public. The deliberative model sees the press working alongside the public to
Chapter 3: Public relations and the public sphere

“support reflection and value policy choice” (Baker 2002, pp.148–49; cited Benson 2009, p.177), with emphasis on investigation and focus on collaborative enquiry. Benson notes that this model provides a benchmark to judge both journalist and non-journalist material produced on the Internet and in other forums “in relation to such standards as civility, direct engagement of opposing viewpoints, and reasoned argumentation” (2009, p.178). The pluralist model places greatest emphasis on diversity and broadly inclusivity, seeking to include voices from the periphery and, in expanding the idea of what is political, including both personal narrative and emotion along with objective reason.

There is a substantial body of research on the role the media plays in producing and shaping public discourse; in particular, much of the research undertaken in Critical Discourse Analysis has focused on mass media. Dahlgren (1991) asks to what extent modern mass media enable members of a society to learn about matters of importance to them, debate their responses to these issues and reach an informed decision on how to act. While other forms of public communication, such as email, blogs and Facebook, have gained influence and modified the effect of their influence, mass media continue to dominate the way public policy decisions are made in Australia. Jaworski and Copeland note that “The mass media are the primary contemporary means of disseminating accounts of events and reactions, and in journalistic news reports “story telling” takes on new characteristics and emphases” (1999, p.216); this opinion retains currency today.

While the media certainly contribute to the way people understand the world, “current thinking about media recognises that perceptions cannot be viewed as being constructed by media representations alone” (Newbold, Boyd-Barrett & van den Bulk, 2002 p. 31). This thesis explores the role of the media in reproducing and reshaping public relations texts and thus acting as co-contributors to meaning construction in the political economy and civil society.

3.4 Summary

There are differing conceptualisations of the public sphere as a forum for deliberative democratic debate. Starting with the work of Habermas, the
Chapter 3: Public relations and the public sphere

normative ideal of the public sphere was discussed in terms of its evolution and relevance to the modern world. It was argued that, while there are limitations to the normative ideal, it still has value a sound basis from which to examine discourse in practice.

The limitations of a normative ideal were addressed insofar as it offers little of empirical relevance and deals with what should be rather than what is. To counter this limitation, the work of Foucault was reviewed with reference to his conceptualisation of power and the role of discourse in the social construction of knowledge, whereby discourse does not merely represent the “true” state of an object but is responsible for constructing the object. Bourdieu’s work, considered by some to extend Foucault’s, offers means by which to address criticisms of the abstract nature of Foucault’s approach, and provides a more detailed theory of the process of public discourse. Bourdieu’s theory of habitus enables real texts and individuals to be inserted into the discourse analysis.

The multiplicity of views provided in the literature creates a challenge in determining the most appropriate construction of the modern public sphere through which to assess the media discourse in this case study. A contemporary understanding of the public sphere requires consideration of a number of factors including the existence of multiple or overlapping public spheres, the impact of new media and the quality of public debate.

From this literature review, a set of criteria has been identified against which the media discourse will be assessed. The conditions needed for an effective democratic public sphere include information access and equality, argument based on reason, truthful communication that is sincere and morally appropriate, and the existence of independent, neutral media. These criteria are not selected as absolute measures, but as benchmarks for a discussion of the degree to which media discourse approaches an effective public sphere. This study will contribute to notions of the public sphere, power and discourse through a detailed examination of the means by which various interests seek to have their voices heard. It will reveal the manner in which the media discourse can be dominated by powerful private interests working in collusion with seemingly disinterested bodies, and
Chapter 3: Public relations and the public sphere

examine the degree to which the resulting public debate on an issue represents an effective democratic public sphere.

Before moving to Chapter 4, I would like to draw a link between the roles of public relations in society and their role as discourse participants in the public sphere. Chapters 2 and 3 have provided the main theoretical frameworks that will help to answer the research questions in this thesis: Chapter 2 focused on the social role of public relations, public interest, social ethics, and the role of public relations as discourse actors in the public sphere, while Chapter 3 explored a variety of conceptualisations of the public sphere as the context of public relations discourse practice and issues of discourse and power. The following chapter will set out the research methods and strategies that will be used to explore these issues in the case study.
Chapter 4  Research methodology

4.1 Objective and procedures

The objective of this chapter is to explain the research methodology for the thesis. Firstly I set out the theoretical perspective from which the research is undertaken and justify the choice of critical discourse analysis as a methodology. Secondly I summarise the key elements of the research design and then discuss techniques of data collection and data analysis. The final section of the chapter addresses the ethical considerations of the research process.

The choice of research methodology reflects both the research questions and the theoretical framework outlined in earlier chapters. Much empirical research undertaken in public relations has historically been undertaken from a more positivist perspective, although there have been many calls for an extension in the range of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches.

The chapter begins with an overview of the research approach, locating the research design within the field of critical research in public relations and discourse analysis. The research design, including data collection and coding methods, are explained. This chapter also provides an overview of approaches to data analysis adopted and sets out the criteria which are used to assess quality. Finally, the limitations of the research and ethical implications of the research design are discussed.

4.2 Overview of research approach

The purpose of this research is to illuminate the role and influence of public relations in public policy discourse, adopting a critical approach to the investigation. Motion and Weaver argue that the “key to understanding how public relations represents and promotes selected positions of truth and power is the examination of the discourse strategies deployed by practitioners” (2005, p.52). Public relations discourses are always deployed for a purpose which has
political, economic or social implications, and which may reinforce or reconstitute existing power relations.

Examining public relations work by focusing on outcome rather than process provides a number of methodological challenges. It can be difficult to obtain complete information about campaign strategies and texts, as so much public relations work is invisible; and direct effect is difficult to determine, as the body of research on media effects attests. Moreover, there has been little work that focuses on the social outcome of public relations’ engagement in the public sphere. This gap in the literature, identified in Chapter 2, has informed the choice of research design. This thesis adopts a critical perspective and the overall research design is a critical discourse analysis, following the idea that discourse analysis does not refer to a single methodology but to a range of styles and analytical techniques.

One of the methodological challenges in research of this kind is dealing with the complexities of the context of practice and linking public relations work to wider outcomes. Studies that have addressed this issue, include an examination of the role between public relations and democracy in Sweden (Larsson 2007), which involved interviewing practitioners and journalists for their views, and Weaver and Motion’s (2002) in attempting to provide a more comprehensive analysis of discourse practice, in which analysis of the political economic context of a campaign was combined with discourse analysis of the campaign texts. On the other side of production, a study of discourse legitimization strategies by Vaara, Tienari & Laurila (2006) critically examined media discourse to identify strategies used to legitimate contemporary organisational phenomena. The complex reality of public discourse typified by the case situation examined in this thesis requires both intensive and extensive information, to enable comprehending the media discourse over the period the campaign was active, and an in-depth study of some texts. This, together with the fact that, ultimately, the data set assembled comprises a range of data sources, suggests that a mixed methodology is most appropriate (Greene & Caracelli 1997). A qualitative approach, which explores the specific in depth but gives no sense of the whole, is not necessarily appropriate to complex situations. Conversely, reducing large amounts of text to
quantitative data does not provide a complete picture (Shoemaker & Reese 1996). This is particularly relevant to media text analysis providing a strong argument for the incorporation of qualitative approaches to media text analysis Macnamara (2005). Furthermore, as Newbold, Boyd-Barrett & van den Bulk (2002) argue:

the problem [with quantitative analysis] is the extent to which the quantitative indicators are interpreted as intensity of meaning, social impact and the like. There is no absolute relationship between media texts and their impact, and it would be too simplistic to base decisions in this regard on mere figures obtained from a statistical content analysis” (p.80).

According to these authors, quantitative content analysis alone cannot capture the context within which a media text becomes meaningful (2002 p.84). While an integrated, mixed method approach is methodologically challenging, there is much to be gained by examining the area where public relations practice meets the public sphere, and exploring the tensions this creates and the possible responses the industry might make.

The overall research question posed in Chapter 1 is: How do public relations campaigns shape and influence media discourse on health issues? To answer this, Chapter 5 provides a detailed content analysis of a set of public relations campaign texts. The results of this analysis – key elements, voices and discourse strategies – are then applied to the media discourse analysis, reported in Chapter 6. This current chapter reports the results of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the media discourse during the full period of the campaign.

4.2.1 Case study as the basis of an approach

This is a discourse analysis of a case study. Case studies are particularly appropriate, and even preferred, when exploring questions about how or why events or behaviours occur in contemporary situations, and where the researcher has little control (Yin 2009). Case studies are used in a range of contexts to build the body of knowledge by providing rich data and understanding that is not available through other methods (Stacks 2002). According to Yin (2009), a case study is appropriate when the study needs to cover contextual conditions which
Chapter 4: Research methodology

are highly pertinent to the problem under investigation. This applies to any investigation of public relations engagement with the public domain, and also where boundaries between a phenomenon and its context are unclear (Yin 2009). In the Pneumococcal Vaccine case, the boundaries between the communicative action of individuals and groups are extremely difficult to distinguish. Of great interest to this investigation is the way a complex set of behaviours and social actors can be orchestrated to bring about a change in social policy or behaviour.

The type of research question also guides methodological choice. As the research question this thesis asks is essentially a how question, a case study format is appropriate. Questions about contemporary phenomena are concerned with describing and explaining real-world cases rather than developing normative models (Yin 2009). Another benefit of a case study is its ability to deal with a variety of evidence, such as media texts, campaign documents and historical documents to situate the case in a sociopolitical context.

4.2.2 Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is frequently construed as both a discipline and a method. Van Dijk prefers the term Critical Discourse Studies to describe critical discourse approaches, arguing that this offers a mean of overcoming any misconception that a critical approach is a method of discourse analysis. In his view, this more general term conveys the idea that “a critical approach not only involves critical analysis, but also critical theory, as well as critical applications” (2009, p. 62). Van Dijk defines critical discourse studies as a “critical perspective, position or attitude within the discipline of multidisciplinary discourse studies (2009, p 62), and argues that scholars working in this field are distinguished more by a commitment to social equity issues than by a particular methodology.

CDA is problem oriented rather than discipline oriented, and is concerned with complex social issues. It addresses the broad agenda of discourse in context, working from the assumption that discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned. As Carvalho puts it, “each discursive event is dialectically tied to society insofar as it both constitutes and is constituted by social
Chapter 4: Research methodology

phenomena” (2008 p.162). One of the central notions of CDA, drawing on Foucault’s work, is that discourse is an integral aspect of power and control, and examines how discourse constructs objects and how the objects support certain institutions, ideologies and power relations. Wodak argues, “CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimised and so on by language use (or in discourse)” (2001 p.2). In her view, most critical discourse analysts would agree with Habermas’ claim that language is a medium of domination and social force, serving to legitimise organised power relations. More than purely a research methodology, CDA “sees itself as politically involved research with an emancipatory requirement” (Titscher et al. 2003, p.147), revealing the social dimensions of language used and also “exposing power abuse, and mobilizing people to remedy social wrongs” (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000, p. 449). Bloor et al. (2007) take the view that it can help raise awareness and point people in the direction of change. Overall, CDA aims to make visible and transparent the power that is inherent in discourse in modern societies.

As a crossdisciplinary approach, CDA shares interests and methods with disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, ethnography and ethnomethodology, and cognitive and social psychology; it also draws on literary theory and the philosophy of language and communication (Bloor & Bloor 2007). Fairclough’s (1992) distinctive approach to CDA views language in terms of meaning production, meaning circulation and socio-cultural context and interpretation. A distinguishing feature of discourse analysis is its combination of approaches that focus only on the text plus a critical approach which takes a wider view, theorising and describing the social processes and structures that give rise to the text and within which individuals consume texts (Wodak & Meyer 2001). Some of the methods used by CDA include context analysis, observational techniques, participant observation and the use of informants. Carvalho maintains that “CDA is the single most authoritative line of research regarding the study of media discourse” (2008, p.162), and identifies van Dijk, Fairclough and Wodak as the most prominent proponents of this approach to discourse analysis.
Chapter 4: Research methodology

For public relations scholars and practitioners, critical discourse analysis provides “an ability to conceptualise public relations within the context of culture as a symbolic system where that system is itself a site for the enactment of power relations” (Motion & Weaver 2005, p.50). These authors argue that the task for public relations scholars is to investigate how public relations uses particular discursive strategies to promote special interests, and to examine how these interests seek to gain public consent for their organisational goals.

The methodology adopted in this thesis draws on elements of the critical discourse approach developed by Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995, 2001), the work of researchers using this methodology in public relations research (Motion & Weaver 2005; Motion & Doolin 2007) and researchers examining immunisation discourse such as Leask and Chapman (2002) and Leask et al. (2006). The first step in Fairclough’s (2001) schema is to clarify the social problem. For whom is the situation a problem? In the case explored in this thesis, it is a problem for government and civil society, and for the professional aspirations of public relations. Underlying issues include concerns about democratic decision-making, health research funding, public health treatment decisions and the distribution of economic resources. Who are the losers? Ultimately society as a whole, if public debate on important social issues is distorted by special interests.

The second step in Fairclough’s schema is to analyse of the discourse and its social context to identify obstacles to tackling the problem. Fairclough outlines a three-dimensional framework for conceiving of and analysing discourse (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000; Jacobs 2004) whereby every discursive event is simultaneously text, discursive practice and social practice. The first dimension, discourse as text, involves examination of content and form. In this Fairclough emphasises the importance of linguistic analysis – grammar cohesion, vocabulary and the structure of text. This requires a systematic analysis of choices and patterns in vocabulary, grammar, cohesions and text structure (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000). For Fairclough, “textual analysis should mean analysis of the texture of texts, their form and organisation, and not just commentaries on the ‘content’ of texts which ignore texture” (1992, p.4).
The second dimension, which Fairclough describes as discursive practice, is the link between text and social practice. This includes not only an explanation of how participants in an interaction interpret and produce texts, but also considers interdiscursivity, defined as “the constitution of a text from diverse discourses and genres” (1993, p.138). To approach discourse as discursive practice means that, in addition to the analysis of linguistic features, there should be consideration of speech acts, coherence and intertextuality. Fairclough uses interaction broadly: a newspaper article can be considered an interaction even though the participants are remote (2001). The interactional analysis has two aspects. The first is interdiscursive analysis, which investigates “how ... particular types of interaction articulate together different genres, discourse and styles the assumption being that texts are hybrids and this form of analysis can unpick them” (Fairclough 1992, p.84). The second is intertextuality. Texts seldom reflect a single speaker or writer; they all “show traces of differing discourse, contending and struggling for dominance” (Kress 1989, p.32). Fairclough defines intertextuality as “the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo and so forth” (1992, p.84). Fairclough distinguishes between “manifest intertextuality” where another text is overtly referred to, and “interdiscursivity” where texts are made up of heterogeneous elements such as particular generic conventions or discourse types. All facts are open to a process of creation or re-creation in the text, according to changing cultural and historical contexts (Bloor & Bloor 2007) and this process of reiteration and recreation of texts Fairclough (2003) calls chains of texts; where these chains link across different media and contexts, networks of texts develop.

The third dimension is discourse – as social practice or as the ideological effects and hegemonic processes in which discourse is a feature. “Social practices networked in a particular way become orders of discourse and one aspect of ordering is dominance. Some ways of making meaning are dominant or mainstream and others are marginal” (Fairclough 2001, p.124). Fairclough utilises the concept of hegemony to analyse orders of discourse, where “a particular social structuring of semiotic difference may become hegemonic, become part of the
legitimising common sense which sustains relations of domination, but hegemony will always be contested to a greater or lesser extent, in hegemonic struggle” (2001, p.124). The way in which discourse is represented illuminates “the emergence of new orders of discourse, struggles over normativity, attempts at control and resistance against regimes of power” (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000 p. 449).

The third stage of Fairclough’s overall analytical approach is to ask whether the social order “needs” the problem in order to sustain itself. For example, could the promotion of vaccines and their acceptance in government policy be otherwise achieved to the benefit of the interests promoting them? The fourth stage investigates the possibilities for change in the way things are, and possible gaps in the research. In the fifth stage, the analysis turns back on itself, asking how effective the critique has been, and how it may have been compromised.

The relevance of Fairclough’s approach for this thesis is the emphasis he places on examining specific discourse practices in the context of their effects. His approach highlights how certain discursive strategies legitimate arguments and establishes the parameters for policy debate. Such a discourse-based approach has relevance for enhancing understanding of government policy-making (Jacobs 2004).

CDA has been criticised on a number of levels. There is a vagueness in some of the concepts used, a blurring of distinctions between concepts, disciplines and methodologies, argues Widdowson (1995,1996, 1998), who also argues that CDA interprets discourse under the guise of critical analysis despite theoretical claims to the opposite. In his view CDA ignores the many ways a text can be interpreted and the circumstances under which it is produced and consumed. This emphasis on interpretation raises questions about representation, selectivity, partiality and prejudice; selective texts do not necessarily represent the true situation, and can make some texts seem too significant (Widdowson 1998). Blommaert and Bulcaen find that the biggest methodological issue facing CDA is the treatment of context (2000). Much of the use of context in some CDA work qualifies only as narrative and backgrounding, and the “uncritical acceptance of particular
representations of history and social reality as background facts in analysis” (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000, p.460) is problematic. They note the danger of important material being neglected or too much significance made of specific words in texts whilst economic and political factors are overlooked. There is also criticism that CDA pays little attention to matters of distribution, the means by which communicative resources become available or accessible: “Only the texts become objects of a political economy; the conditions of production of texts and more specifically the way in which the resources that go into text are being managed in societies are rarely discussed” (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000, p.460).

Goodchild and Cole argue that “given the diversity of words in any policy context, discourse analysis risks degenerating into a confusing series of episodic narratives that cannot be put together” (Goodchild & Cole 2001, p.105).

The research design presented in this chapter seeks to address these concerns. Criteria for assessing quality are presented in Section 4.3. With respect to the issue of context, detailed analysis of the campaign context from academic and general media sources attempts to provide a rigorous analysis of the context for the campaign. Quantitative content analysis is used to locate specific texts within a wider discourse framework. These steps are designed to ensure that the social and political context of the campaign is presented in a balanced manner. It is also necessary to make clear the process of text selection, and to locate the significance of each in the structure of the discourse. Campaign documents have been obtained from the agency submission for national industry professional awards. Media texts have been obtained through Factiva searches. The total sample is described and quantified to illustrate the significance of the selected texts to the whole and to address the concerns about selectivity raised above.

4.2.3 The Pneumococcal Vaccine campaign

The case study examined in the thesis is a health promotion campaign; the texts examined are campaign documents and media texts arising from or related to public relations activities. There has long been a need for attention to communication practice in the health area, and for more cultural and critical studies of public relations discourse practice (Flora 1993). Most people accept
media messages concerning health at face value, which may not be in their best interest (Mickey 2002). The field of health communication in public relations includes campaigns designed to promote the public health agenda as well as those designed to promote the interests of the private sector, and particularly the pharmaceutical industry.

The selection of the case is purposive, and based on propositions emerging from the literature review. The unit of analysis is a two-stage campaign conducted with the objective of having a pharmaceutical product listed on the national immunisation schedule. The illness the vaccine aims to present is a serious one, and there is a legitimate reason to seek to prevent it. The campaign presents an opportunity for deep analysis of the issues raised in the literature review; it offers a range of complex issues concerning public policy-making and public relations practice, issues that polarise many in the field and attract criticism from journalists. The practices deployed by public relations in these types of campaign have been widely criticised in the media and academic journals, but are not seriously discussed within the professional area in Australia. In addition, some of these practices are used by activist groups without criticism. The selection of a health care issue highlights the importance of the role of practice to society, as here we are dealing with media messages that are accepted by most people as the way things are (Flora 1993), rendering them particularly vulnerable to influence.

4.3 Research design

This thesis pursues its objectives through a critical discourse analysis of a case study. Multiple methods of analysis are used and the results of these different research methods are integrated in the final discussion in Chapter 7.

Carvalho identifies three areas of discourse analysis of journalistic texts that have been largely unaccounted for in the existing literature. The first is that “most forms of analysis do not express awareness of the time sequence of texts nor do they clearly explained the implications of previous discursive positions on subsequent ones” (2008, p.163). Citing the work of Hyatt (2005) and Fairclough (1995), she argues that most analyses have not fully accomplished an effective
consideration of the sociocultural practice surrounding media discourse. The difficulties in limiting context, how to decide where to begin and where to end, have been acknowledged (van Dijk 2006). Carvalho also argues that intertextuality alone does not fully account for time: “most studies of media discourse are like snapshots, examining some items in detail but covering a short time span – most issues are longer ‘life’ which is tied to representations in the media (2008, p.164). In this thesis, the case study context has been defined by clearly identified discursive and social events. A timeline for the media discourse, setting out the main discursive events, clearly shows the sociopolitical changes occurring during the discourse period.

The second aspect that she feels needs attention is the discursive strategies of social actors. A good method of discourse analysis should take account of the intervention of social actors and journalists (Carvalho 2008). By comparing media discourse with the public relations campaign discourse, I am able to make apparent the degree to which “the media representation of social issues seems to be very much a function of the initiative of social actors to organise their claims and to project attention to ‘happenings’ and problems” (Carvalho 2008, p.164).

Thirdly, she asks about the consequences of text for the whole of a discursive field. How does discourse impact on and shape the evolution of social and political issues? Wodak and Meyer (2001) argue that there is a dialectical relationship between particular discursive practices and specific fields of action. In Chapter 7, I discuss the impact of the this practice on political debate and the potential to influence government policy-making.

4.3.1 Establishing the sociopolitical context of the campaign

The socioeconomic context of the campaign and a description of whose interests are represented (Motion & Weaver 2005) are described in the introduction to Chapter 5, where the background to the case is presented. Establishing this context sets out the nature of the communication taking place, its timing, and the participants and their roles in the event; the purpose of the campaign and the dynamics of the situation: that is, how do events, participants or topics change
during the course of the discourse event? (Bloor & Bloor 2007). This section also locates the campaign within the overall immunisation debate, particularly with regard to a controversial meningococcal vaccine campaign conducted just prior to the Pneumococcal Vaccine campaign.

4.3.2 Data collection

Data was derived from multiple sources. The primary data set consists of media texts drawn from newspapers and specialist magazines reflecting the media discourse around the case in question. These documents were selected systematically, for a specified period and from a range of media sources.

Table 1 Text Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text type</th>
<th>1 Jan 2001 to 31 Dec 2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campaign texts</td>
<td>Backgrounder</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biographies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Media releases</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Case studies</td>
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<td>Advertorial</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print news media texts</td>
<td>Sourced from Factiva data base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online media texts</td>
<td>Sourced from online newspapers and magazines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist magazines</td>
<td>From online sources and hard copy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade media</td>
<td>From online sources and hard copy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast media</td>
<td>Radio transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Current affairs news segments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Media texts were drawn from the Factiva database, covering all sources for the Australian region in the period 1 January 2001 to 1 July 2004. After the initial Factiva searches for data produced during the campaigns, the data set was further refined to remove duplicates and items of limited relevance. Articles were removed if they were considered neutral: that is, pneumococcal disease or the vaccine were mentioned in a routine way as part of a general immunisation notification or another general health matter. As there were a large number of community and regional newspapers reporting the issue, articles were removed where there was duplication of a story. Items from news service agencies such as AAP and Reuters were also removed to overcome the likelihood of duplication.
Chapter 4: Research methodology

Google was also used to research activist organisations, and articles relevant to the issue under study were selected. Television segments were obtained from public and commercial broadcasters. While the final data set is essentially a purposive sample, using multiple sources to supplement the primary data set enables a more comprehensive representation of the media discourse.

4.3.3 Analysis of campaign texts

The first stage of the analysis process was the examination of public relations campaign texts. A qualitative analysis of the data was undertaken to distil the key themes emerging from the campaign texts, which were examined to determine:

1. The key ideas that the campaign sought to communicate.
2. Strategies employed in the construction of the discourse.
3. Voices used to convey message elements: who is used to express a particular viewpoint, which institution they represent, and the positions from which they speak.
4. Legitimation strategies and rhetorical devices used to convey viewpoints.

The analysis identified the legitimising strategies used, with particular reference to van Leeuwin’s (2007) ideas of legitimation in discourse and communication which is concerned with how public relations discourse strategies attempt to legitimise the ideas and positions promoted in the discourse. According to Habermas (1979) the legitimacy of competing claims is decided by a process of discursive justifications or justificatory argumentation (Motion & Doolin 2007).

The process of attaining discursive legitimacy, from a more pragmatic perspective, is a power struggle to keep “dominant meanings in place” (Hardy & Phillips 2004, p.307).

4.3.4 Analysis of media discourse

The second stage of the analysis involved an examination of media discourse, to determine the degree to which public relations discourse is evident in the media discourse and to examine the character of the media treatment of the issue. Texts were drawn from the Australian news media, primarily newspapers. The nature of
the Australian newspaper market is characterised by population density, and more defined markets with fewer titles than other western economies, means that newspapers in Australia still have mass reach. For example, *The Age* and *Herald Sun* in Melbourne reach 72% of all people in a week (Newspaperworks, 2011). The influence of the news media on the process of parental decision-making has been acknowledged (Leask & Chapman 2002) in both positive and negative terms. Mass media campaigns can cause shifts in public confidence as a result of immunisation controversies and achieve positive results for public health immunisation campaigns.

Content analysis addresses the research question: How does the media discourse reflect the public relations campaign discourse strategy? This is addressed by the analysis of media articles (news stories, feature articles, opinion pieces and editorials) in the news print media between 1 January 2001 and 30 June 2004.

This study was conducted as an integrated quantitative and qualitative content analysis of a set of media texts, primarily print texts. A combination of methodologies is considered to offer the best possible approach (Macnamara 2005; Shoemaker & Reese 1996). Content analysis covers a wide range of methods, but its origins are in quantitative approaches (Neuendorf 2002; Titscher *et al.* 2003). Media content analysis is a specialised subset of content analysis which can be characterised as message-centred methodology for the study of texts (Macnamara 2005).

The purpose of this analysis is threefold: to demonstrate the scope of media discourse on the issue; to identify the character of the discourse, and to reveal the presence of public relations generated elements in the discourse. It is acknowledged that no assumptions can be made about the intentions of producers or the way audiences interpret the texts from content analysis alone (Neuendorf 2002), and it is not within the scope of this thesis to attempt such interpretation. The approach this study takes is to examine public relations texts and media texts, and let the evidence reveal the manner in which the discourse is replicated in the media. My approach, according to Neuendorf’s categorisation (2002) of the roles of and approaches to content analysis, is to be descriptive and inferential. Such an
approach is endorsed by Macnamara, who argues that “the inferential and predicative roles of content analysis, even though they are ‘facilitating’ rather than conclusive, allow researchers to go further and explore what media content says about a society and the potential effects mass media representations may have on audiences” (2005, p.4).

Although the research process is presented as a linear, structured procedure, in practice the analysis, with the exception of the quantitative content analysis, was an iterative and reflexive process, with themes refined and new ideas added as the analysis progressed. The first step in analysing the media texts was a thematic approach, searching for the emergence of themes that might be relevant to the research questions.

A coding template was developed based on the research question and the theoretical framework. The final coding framework reflected the themes which emerged from the first pass over the media texts and the discourse analysis of campaign texts. This was used to code data for quantitative analysis and tested for reliability. The coding template was then applied to the set of media text data.

The primary tool for analysis was NVivo, a qualitative data management software package. This software pertains to the CAQDAS typology (Computer-aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software), widely used in social science research to facilitate qualitative data analysis. NVivo allows the researcher to manage data and ideas, query data by asking simple or complex questions, and create graphic models and reports from the data (Bazeley 2007). Bazeley, while acknowledging a widely held belief that using computers helps to ensure rigor, makes the observation that, while it can help with issues like completeness of data, it cannot compensate for poorly constructed research or lack of interpretive capacity. Descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken with the analytical software package PASW Statistics 18 (formerly known as SPSS Statistics 18, or SPSS Base). The initial scan of the data revealed themes which were coded as free nodes. Later, as coding progressed through the media texts, these free nodes were reorganised into tree nodes. For quantification purposes, texts were also treated as cases and coded for attributes.
Chapter 4: Research methodology

Attributes were identified by label or name, a definition of what the attribute concerns, and a description of how to know when the attribute occurs. A table setting out the coding framework for attributes appears in Appendix 1. These attributes were used as the basis for quantitative content analysis, and the summary data was transferred to a statistical analysis package, PASW, and descriptive statistics generated. These results are reported in Chapter 6.

A total of 412 media articles were coded for 20 variables (Nvivo attributes). These were:

2. Discourse elements: information about pneumococcal disease, information about immunisation, information about the new vaccination, information about antibiotic resistance, personal experience stories, calls for government action. An attribute was included to account for “different view” and elements were coded here if they presented any opposing view or questioned the logic of the dominant theme.
3. Media text source type, geographic location (state), headline topic, journalist type and month of publication. During data analysis in PASW, another variable was created, which condensed the monthly time period to quarters: a means of condensing them to allow for the sporadic nature of the issue (Leask & Chapman 2002). This made the examination of discourse over time much more manageable and meaningful.
4. Qualitative coding of media texts continued in depth, the analysis exploring the way in which some factors appeared and looking for deeper exploration of themes and rhetorical strategies. Deeper analysis looked for language and expression, for how the media text differed from the campaign text. Analysis at this stage was guided but not constrained by the preliminary codes. Inductive codes were added when a new theme emerged and the previous data reviewed, in an iterative process.
5. Connecting the codes and identifying themes. While individual names of participants changed, the patterns of usage of various types of voice
continued to show consistency. Thus, one of the relevant findings to emerge was that the use of generic elements, the type of discourse component, was consistent regardless of the name of particular individual using it.

In seeking evidence of public relations influence in the media discourse I was not searching for repetition explicitly, but for recurrence; for “although ‘repetition’ looks at superficial/ explicit repeated use of the same wording, ‘recurrence’ addresses repetition of the text’s latent meaning, through perhaps different wording” (Mitra 2010, p.580). In considering the effects of public relations campaigns on newspaper content, Danowski defined framing as “the extent to which news stories are contextualised, including the reasoning, metaphors, or image characterization of actors or issues in the original public relations message. It produces a commonality of semantic association between the public relations messages and the media messages” (2008, p.288). This is a useful concept through which to consider the way the public relations campaign assembles resources and structures messages.

4.4 Criteria for assessing quality

While it is now generally agreed that qualitative research needs to apply concepts and criteria to assess the quality of its findings, there is also acceptance that the quantitative concepts of validity and reliability need to be modified when applied to qualitative research (Wodak & Meyer 2005). As an essentially qualitative research design, this project does not claim strict objectivity, which according to Wodak and Meyer (2005), cannot be achieved through discourse analysis as the beliefs and ideologies of the analyst will always be a source of potential bias. This research design has, through a formalised quantitative component, attempted to counter some of the elements of potential bias.

In discussing the question of criteria for assessing quality in discourse analysis, Jager suggests representativeness, reliability and validity and beyond this “completeness” (Jager 2005, p.51). Representativeness has been considered in the description of how the sample in this study was constructed.
Triangulation procedures are suggested to ensure validity (Wodak & Meyer 2005) whether the approach is qualitative or quantitative. The approach adopted in this thesis is based on the concept of context, reinforced by methodological triangulation using multi method designs and background information. Internal validity is maintained by constant reference to the research questions and the theoretical framework which informs the thesis.

External validity refers to the extent to which results can be generalised. As this is a single case study, the observations are limited to the texts selected for the study. Quantitative analysis in this case serves to describe the impact of public relations on media discourse and does not enable projection of the results. However, details based on the sources and analysis of texts enable the findings to be transferred and compared by another researcher.

Reliability is a critical matter in both qualitative and quantitative research. According to Neuendorf there is a growing acknowledgement that “the establishment of intercoder reliability is essential, a necessary criterion for valid and useful research when human coding is employed” (2002, p.42). Macnamara explains that, even when coding is done by the primary researcher, two or more coders should be used to code a “reliability sub-sample” to counter any subjectivity that might arise with only one coder (2005, p.15). Twenty documents were randomly selected and coded by a media studies graduate student. The results were compared using Holsti’s formula and showed 85% agreement, an acceptable result (Wimmer & Dominick 2001).

Another aspect of reliability is stability or intra-rater reliability. Does the one coder achieve the same results each time? As the primary coder of the data in this study I adopted an approach during the interrogative phase of the analysis that used Nvivo queries to check items coded for each attribute and cross check that the correct attribute had been recorded. By approaching the data from different directions and on a number of occasions, I was able to check for coding errors.

External replicability refers to the extent to which another researcher, using the same analytical methods, could obtain similar results. In order to ensure external
Chapter 4: Research methodology

reliability, sample texts and coding frames are provided in the appendices, and categories of analysis are explained in the methodology section.

On the question of completeness, Jager says “an analysis is complete when it reveals no further contents and formally new findings” (2005, p.51): this does not necessarily require a large sample, but quantitative aspects do play a part in that it is relevant to measure the frequency with which particular arguments emerge. This matter was addressed when designing the research: themes and sub-themes identified in an initial scan of the data were refined and explored in depth until there no new ideas emerged. Jager does make the point that often the number of ideas in any discourse can be surprisingly straightforward (2005); that was the case in this study.

4.5 Limitations of the research

The research is limited in that it focuses on campaign and media texts without interpretation from the individuals involved. It cannot be assumed that an intended meaning is understood by receivers of a message. However, the test of effect in this case was ultimately that a government policy change did occur, and the ultimate objective of the organisation was achieved.

Another limitation is the lack of perspectives from public relations professionals; however, the underlying purpose of the study is to let the evidence speak for itself. While the first stage of the Pneumococcal Vaccine campaign, the product launch, was openly acknowledged, the lobbying campaign took place through other, indirect, means in which the role of public relations was not directly acknowledged and was unlikely to be commented on by practitioners.

4.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the research design and methods of analysis and established a rationale for the research methodology, together with the research questions which guide the research. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies will enable me go deep into the protocol and analysis
Chapter 4: Research methodology

of the case study in order to address issues of validity and reliability. The next two chapters present the analysis of the campaign documents and the resultant media discourse, showing their relevance to the research issues and questions.
Chapter 5  

Campaign text analysis

5.1 Introduction: overview of the data analysis chapters

In this chapter I respond to the research questions:

1. How are public relations campaign message strategies constructed?
2. Which voices are deployed to carry them?
3. What legitimation strategies are used to support the campaign argument?

The context of the campaign is presented before proceeding to examine the public relations campaign texts. The analysis reveals the discourse elements assembled to build the campaign argument, the voice used to articulate these elements and the legitimation strategies used to give credibility to the organisation’s position.

In this campaign, the legitimacy of the disease and the value of the vaccine had to be established early, and once this was achieved the focus of effort moved to lobbying the government to fund universal provision of the vaccine. Campaign messages shifted from legitimating the threat of the disease and the need for the vaccine to legitimating cost and equity.

This analysis includes a quantitative assessment of the discourse to give an indication of the degree to which public relations messages dominated the discourse. There follows a qualitative discourse analysis of both those themes included in the campaign and additional themes which emerged elsewhere, the legitimation strategies evident in the media discourse, and the voices that participated. The approach of this data analysis moves from categorising data to discerning relationships and linkages in the data to emphasise the power effects of the works and the way the public relations themes are able to shape meaning in the discourse – both in terms of frequency and of the way they construct ideas and identities.
5.2 The Pneumococcal Vaccine case study

This case study analyses the discourse produced by a campaign to promote a new vaccine for the immunisation of children against invasive pneumococcal disease. The company sponsoring the initial product launch campaign was Wyeth Lederle Vaccines, and the major third party organisation participating in this campaign was The Meningitis Centre.

In July 2001, Wyeth Lederle Vaccines launched a vaccine to protect infants and young children from pneumococcal disease. The public relations agency responsible for the launch, Turnbull Porter Novelli, claimed a campaign reach of more than 11 million Australians, received thousands of calls from interested parents and reported strong early sales of the vaccine. This success was due to a 10-month communication program which combined the voices of leading consumer groups and health care providers to communicate the availability of a vaccine for a disease that parents had not heard of until that time. In their submission of the launch campaign to the PRIA Golden Target awards of 2001, the agency noted the efforts taken to ensure that both APMA and PRIA codes of conduct had been followed.

The second phase of the overall campaign was a “Free Pnuemo” campaign initiated by The Meningitis Centre with support from both Wyeth and Porter Novelli. This aspect of the campaign was less overt: Wyeth distanced itself from direct involvement, but did pay Porter Novelli to assist the Meningitis Centre with their campaign.

The parameters of the case study are set from the date of the initiation of the first product launch campaign to the announcement of the inclusion of pneumococcal vaccine on the national immunisation schedule in June 2004. This timeframe is relevant to the logic of the overall objectives of the campaign: the overall message strategy makes sense in this context.
5.2.1 Background to the campaign

The public relations agency was appointed to run a national pneumococcal campaign in Australia in June 2000. This followed an earlier appointment to run a similar campaign for Wyeth for meningococcal vaccination. Campaign documents state that the agency was appointed to “launch and encourage sales” of the first and only pneumococcal vaccine of its kind.

The agency established through Newspoll research that less than one year before the launch only two percent of Australian parents had heard of pneumococcal disease; even though it was claimed to have caused thousands of Australian infants to suffer illnesses including meningitis, bacteraemia (blood poisoning), pneumonia and severe middle ear infections. There was, however, broad public awareness of the meningococcal virus because of the earlier campaign, and the two campaigns did overlap. The meningococcal campaign was highly controversial and attracted a great deal of criticism from health professionals, media and other sources (Gordon & Wroe, 2002). There were claims that Wyeth had covertly funded the first meningococcal awareness week in June 2002, involving a range of parent groups and engaging the media to produce a large number of stories. Turnbull Porter Novelli also arranged for a video that highlighted the dangers of meningitis and the benefits of immunisation to be distributed to child care centres in early 2002 (Sweet 2002a). Funded by Wyeth, the video was also endorsed by the Meningitis Centre and other community groups. This campaign was highly successful in that it succeeded in raising awareness of the disease; however, it was criticised for the sensationalist nature of some of the material produced and the hyperbole it elicited from the media.

A new pneumococcal vaccine was subsequently released, called Prevnar, designed to be given to the under-two age group, and different from Pneumovax, a pneumococcal vaccine for children over the age of two and adults, which has been around for some years. No one vaccine covers all the pneumococci; Prevenar vaccine is a mixture of many vaccines designed for individual, clinically relevant serotypes. Prevnar covers seven serotypes (and is in reality seven vaccines in one) while the adult pneumonia vaccine, Pneumovax, covers 23 types (and is 23
vaccines in one). This helps to explain why the drugs are so expensive, and why they are attractive to the manufacturer.

There are now two vaccination programs related to these products:

- **Childhood meningococcal C vaccination program.** Since 2003, all children turning 12 months of age have been eligible to receive free meningococcal C vaccine under the National Immunisation Program. The program also will provide free meningococcal C vaccine for all children and adolescents who were one to 19 years old in 2003, until 30 June 2006.

- **Childhood pneumococcal vaccination program –** This program, which commenced on 1 January 2005, provides free pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (Prevenar®) for all children born on or after 1 January 2005, at two, four and six months of age.

It is necessary to mention the meningococcal campaign for, while the pneumococcal campaign did not employ the same level of sensationalism, it was conducted in the context of a heightened sense of fear that the earlier campaign had generated.

Figure 1 sets out the key discursive events which occurred during the campaign period. Each of these events represents a moment of shifting focus in the reporting of the campaign.
Federal government launches free vaccination for pneumococcal disease to high-risk Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. **March 2001**

Launch of new vaccine Prevenar and awareness campaign. Available on prescription for children under 2 years. **July 2001**

Wyeth spokesperson quoted in media advocating that the vaccine should be provided. **May 2002**

Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) recommends adding pneumococcal vaccine to scheme. **Oct 2002**

Free program extended to include all children at high risk. **Oct 2003**

Global shortage of pneumococcal vaccine Prevenar. **Feb 2004**

Federal Government announces Prevenar vaccine to be provided from Jan 2005. **June 2004**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>March 2001</strong></td>
<td>Federal government launches free vaccination for pneumococcal disease to high-risk Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>May 2002</strong></td>
<td>Wyeth spokesperson quoted in media advocating that the vaccine should be provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oct 2002</strong></td>
<td>Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) recommends adding pneumococcal vaccine to scheme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oct 2003</strong></td>
<td>Free program extended to include all children at high risk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feb 2004</strong></td>
<td>Global shortage of pneumococcal vaccine Prevenar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>June 2004</strong></td>
<td>Federal Government announces Prevenar vaccine to be provided from Jan 2005.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1** Campaign timeline

### 5.2.2 Phase 1: launch of Prevenar vaccine

The communications challenge as articulated by the agency in their submission to the Public Relations Institute of Australia Golden Target Awards (PRIA 2001)
was complex. While parents were aware of some of the illnesses caused by the disease at the start of the campaign, only 2% could identify the disease by name. Pneumococcal disease causes a range of illnesses with unfamiliar names, but pneumococcal disease is not the only cause of these illnesses. The agency pointed out that the campaign was conducted in an environment where levels of awareness were low and the illness being targeted was often confused with the similarly named, higher-profile meningococcal disease, and noted the sensitivity of the environment: communication was directed at parents of infants, so there was a need to represent the dangers of the disease accurately without scaremongering.

The campaign also had to work within the code of conduct of the APMA, which specifies that pharmaceutical companies cannot promote or initiate promotion of prescription products to consumers.

The communication objectives were to

- raise awareness of pneumococcal disease amongst health care professionals and consumers; and
- alert stakeholders to the availability of the new vaccine to encourage uptake.

The research undertaken by the agency and the organisation included:

- Newpoll study of parental awareness of pneumococcal disease;
- Newpoll study on GP understanding of pneumococcal disease;
- desk/informal research of channels to reach parents with health care messages;
- desk/informal research of media utilised by parents of young children;
- media analysis of past coverage on pneumococcal disease (none was available), meningitis, bacteraemia and otitis media.

This research confirms that before the campaign there was low awareness, and that there was no one way to reach all parents. The agency concluded that a multifaceted, multi-channel program was required.

The groups targeted by the campaign were:
Chapter 5: Campaign text analysis

- health care professionals: paediatricians and immunologists, general practitioners, child and family health nurses, pharmacists;
- parents with infants and young children, especially those aged under two years;
- carers of infants and young children such as childcare centres;
- information providers and influencers of parents with young children including media (medical and parenting journals), consumer groups (new and traditional), specialist health groups and advocates, child and family health centres, children’s hospital information units;
- Wyeth staff and sales representatives.

The communication strategy was to use a combination of direct and indirect media to communicate key messages to each group of stakeholders. A lynchpin of this strategy was to create a physical launch event supported by a package of materials to non-attending Sydney media, interstate mainstream media and specialty media, to maximise story pick-up. A toolkit of information materials was developed to communicate key messages either directly or indirectly. Key Wyeth staff and sales representatives were involved in program activities to ensure they fully understood the product information and campaign strategy.

While direct elements of the campaign can be readily traced, the indirect elements are not so easy to identify. This means that, by implication, these elements would be equally difficult for the target publics and others in the community to detect. The indirect elements used in this campaign were:

- The identification, briefing, and enlistment of advocates within the key influencer group for each audience, to tailor and help communicate messages. Turnbull Porter Novelli (TPN) worked with Wyeth to identify and recruit a panel of leading paediatricians and immunologists to assist in the development and distribution of information about pneumococcal disease to parents and health care providers.

The ways in which these health care professionals supported the communication campaign included participating in a TPN-conducted
media training session, speaking at meetings of key health care professionals (HCPs) and consumer groups, locating families willing to share their personal stories, providing independent third party quotes to media on the disease and the vaccine, and providing quotes for the launch media release.

• Advocacy group support. TPN secured the support of leading providers of infant care and information services in communicating campaign messages. Messages from these groups were transmitted through nurses at early childhood centres, childcare centre operators, paediatric and child health nurses, hospital information units and Wyeth sales teams. The agency submission to the Golden Target Awards states, “the assistance of these organizations added credibility and impact to the messages delivered to Australian parents” (PRIA 2001).

• The foundation for building consumer awareness of pneumococcal disease was achieved with an editorial drip-feed program, and “Ghost written and by-lined articles were prepared and placed by TPN in a variety of specialist and consumer media” (PRIA 2001).

These placements reached childhood nurses, childcare centre managers, pharmacists and parents and general readers. These indirect campaign elements make the actual impact of the public relations strategy in the resultant media discourse difficult to ascertain.

Other elements of the strategy included the registration announcement to key medical media at a function at Sydney’s Westin Hotel. TPN claimed a reach of 45,400 Australian HCPs through these stories. The support of the Meningitis Centre of Australia was important; they issued a media release calling for greater parental awareness of pneumococcal disease, which generated 12 additional stories in key mainstream, medical and consumer media. TPN also identified eight Australian families prepared to have their personal experiences of infant pneumococcal disease incorporated into campaign media releases. This extended the campaign’s ability to generate widespread media coverage to reach an estimated 4.6 million Australians (PRIA 2001).
Chapter 5: Campaign text analysis

The launch was hosted by the Cremorne Early Childhood Health Centre, thus providing a strong child and community context for the event. The Cremorne General Practice permitted television to film for one of the first vaccinations. Key spokespeople at the launch were Dr Michael Nissen, Director of the Department of Infectious Diseases, Royal Children’s Hospital, Brisbane; Dr Jamshed Ahmed, Medical Director, Wyeth Australia; and Mr Bruce Langoulant, Chair of the Meningitis Centre. Media attending the launch included AAP, Channel 7 News, Channel 9 News, Channel 10 News, The Australian, the Daily Telegraph and the Australian Journal of Pharmacy. Tailored media materials, and visual or broadcast tapes were distributed to more than 850 media outlets nationally.

The results of the 10-month campaign which culminated in the launch were outstanding, according to TPN. The active support of those organisations and individuals targeted for support, together with an effective media strategy, resulted in a well-informed network of HCPs, active support from paediatricians and immunologists, involvement by parents of sufferers of the disease, participation by leading childhood/health organisations, and more than 180 stories across a range of media reaching an estimated 11 million Australians. The launch alone reached ten million in less than 24 hours: 2.25 million through radio, 5+ million through television and 2.7 million through newspapers. The campaign generated wide national exposure and reportedly accurately the campaign’s key messages.

The campaign prompted several hundred calls to information lines including those at the Meningitis Centre and the Wyeth call centre. It resulted in 300 private sales in the first week and nearly 2000 in the first month. The day after the launch, the Victorian government leveraged the launch campaign to announce their plans to increase funding to state health laboratories.

The agency evaluated the success of the communications campaign in terms of media reach and use of the resources provided. The submission claims that

- more than 11 million Australians heard key messages about pneumococcal disease;
more than 10 million Australians heard key messages about the vaccine at the time of the launch;
• 78% or stories up to the date of the submission had quoted at least one of the designated spokespeople;
• 50% of television and print coverage used one of the eight personal stories provided;
• 74% of television coverage used broadcast footage provided by the agency (PRIA 2001).

Consumer enquiries were tracked, as was feedback from involved third parties. Vaccine sales were an important benchmark.

The campaign submission made a considered statement about ethics, acknowledging the context in which the campaign took place. Codes of conduct for the PRIA and the APMA were cited and assurances given as to their responsibility to communicate messages sensitively. The use of independent specialists ensured accurate representation of information, and no information was used that could not be referenced back to published clinical data:

Given recent industry debate about the appropriate role of the pharmaceutical industry in public health care education campaigns, charter documents were developed and made publicly available to clearly outline the objectives of the program and the role of individual organisations. All efforts were made to maintain maximum transparency in program activities. (PRIA 2001)

5.2.3 Phase 2: ‘Free Pneumo’ campaign

In December 2003, The Meningitis Centre conducted a national lobbying campaign to encourage the Federal Government to introduce universal immunisation against pneumococcal disease.

The central element of this campaign was a publicity event in which parents of child victims of the disease flew to Canberra to call for a broad immunisation program. While The Meningitis Centre was the public face of the campaign,
Wyeth provided support through assistance with funding for airfares of the parents and paying for the public relations agency TPN to assist the not-for-profit support group with their efforts: the chairman of The Meningitis Centre, Bruce Langoulant, said that “Wyeth chipped in for the air fares ... It was a good opportunity to get to Canberra” (Hughes 2003).

A media release on The Meningitis Centre letterhead was distributed by TPN to publicise the event. Wyeth’s role in funding the trip or paying for TPN’s services was not disclosed (Hughes 2003). The trip achieved significant publicity and resulted in Mr Langoulant and The Meningitis Centre’s chief executive officer, Barry Thornton, meeting Health Minister Tony Abbott for 15 minutes. *The Age* claimed that the Meningitis Centre received approximately 30% of its funding from Wyeth, and while Mr Langoulant did not reveal the actual amount, he commented that it was not in the realm of “hundreds of thousands of dollars” (Hughes 2003). The Meningitis Centre’s website at the time stated that it had received an unconditional educational grant from Wyeth to conduct a wide range of public awareness activities. This came to include internal and external lobbying activities. A booklet was sent to members of the Federal Parliament from the Meningitis Centre.

*The Age*, at the time, was running a series of articles on drug company promotional activities, and the pneumococcal campaign came under scrutiny in this context. In his interview, Mr Langoulant defended the centre’s decision to accept funding from Wyeth to help run the campaign, “I have no qualms about the fact that if I can get some help and get us the right result and there happens to be one bloke in benefit, well good luck to him” (Hughes 2003).

Rachel David, the Wyeth spokesperson, said that the company did not specifically provide funding for The Meningitis Centre to run campaigns. She said that it was “obviously one of our goals” to ensure that the government fully fund pneumococcal immunisation as recommended by the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation. “If they (The Meningitis Centre) consider it is appropriate, we do pay for air fares and other things so that they can take their message forward. But we don’t stipulate what that message needs to be. We leave
that up to them” (quoted Hughes 2003). While Wyeth paid for Porter Novelli to help with the Free Pneumo campaign, the company was not directly involved in running the campaign: “We are not in control of what they (Porter Novelli) may or may not say to an organisation like The Meningitis Centre” (David, quoted Hughes 2003).

While there may not be many source documents on which to base analysis of the second stage of the campaign, it will be demonstrated that the same message strategies and to a significant extent, key players, are used in both campaigns.

5.2.4 Key stakeholders in the pneumococcal vaccine issue

The assessment of the legitimacy and importance of stakeholders in this issue is based on the foundational work on stakeholder analysis developed by Freeman, who defined stakeholders as “all of those groups and individuals who can affect or are affected by, the accomplishment of organizational purpose” (1984, p.46). A narrow view of stakeholder relevance might focus on the economic element alone (Mitchell, Agle & Wood 1997): In the Pneumococcal Vaccine campaign the public relations agency, acting on behalf of the client company, defines target groups: the seller, the promoter and the purchasers all have an economic stake in the production of the vaccine as sellers, influencers and buyers. However, stakeholder interest cannot be limited to economic interest alone, as Mitchell points out, because “the empirical reality [is] that companies can ... be vitally affected by, or vitally affect, almost anyone” (p.857). Without being all-inclusive, an examination of the public relations practice in political debate requires that the range of stakeholders be extended to groups with interests that are not economically based. For the purposes of this study, the primary stakeholders were considered to be those groups listed in Table 2.

Table 2 Stakeholders in the pneumococcal vaccine issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Interests and concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product manufacturer</td>
<td>Wyeth Lederale Vaccines manufacture vaccine Prevenar to protect infants and young children from pneumococcal disease. The company also Promotion of the vaccine as the solution to the risk of pneumococcal virus Inclusion of vaccine on Australian Childhood Vaccination Schedule</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Stakeholder Interests and concerns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Interests and concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>manufactures vaccines which protect against meningococcal disease.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advocacy support groups</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary group –The Meningitis Centre funded by an “education grant” from Wyeth.</td>
<td>Increased awareness in minimisation of harm from pneumococcal disease.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meningococcal Australia Inc.</td>
<td>Provision of vaccine through the Australian Childhood Vaccination Schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dedicated to fight meningococcal disease through education and research. Coordinating body for smaller foundations established in Australia by individuals directly affected by the disease. General Manager was heavily involved in the earlier meningococcal awareness campaign, but criticised for his overly emotional approach to the issue and contribution to social panic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health care professionals</strong></td>
<td>Promotion of public health policy including good immunisation practices in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paediatricians and immunologists, general practitioners, child and family health nurses and pharmacists</td>
<td>Safety and wellbeing of their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to reliable and timely information to facilitate decisions about their children’s health. Reliant on the medical profession and government policy-makers for decisions which will affect their children. Reliant on a variety of information sources; concerns are likely to be fuelled by media treatment of the issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents of infants and young children</strong></td>
<td>Group includes childcare centres and other informal carers of infants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A primary stakeholder. The target of the campaign, and the group ultimately responsible for making decisions about treatment for their children.</td>
<td>Safety and wellbeing of their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to reliable and timely information to facilitate decisions about their children’s health. Reliant on the medical profession and government policy-makers for decisions which will affect their children. Reliant on a variety of information sources; concerns are likely to be fuelled by media treatment of the issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Carers of infants and young children</strong></td>
<td>Group includes childcare centres and other informal carers of infants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promotion of good public health practices and providing a safe environment for children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government health officials</strong></td>
<td>Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provides advice to the Minister for Health and Ageing on the Immunise Australia Program and other related issues. In addition to technical experts, ATAGI’s membership includes consumers and general practitioners. Provides technical advice to the Minister for Health and Ageing on the medical administration of vaccines available in Australia, including those on the National Immunisation Program. Advises the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee on matters pertaining to existing, new and emerging vaccines and to their effectiveness and use in Australian populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. The media</strong></td>
<td>National, regional and community newspapers, television and radio broadcast media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interest in a strong issue with compelling images and dramatic stories as well as the currency of being a serious health problem. The media have a responsibility to communicate public health initiatives and present policy issues to the public.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Interests and concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Groups opposed to immunisation</strong></td>
<td>Australian Vaccination Network – a non-profit organisation that acts to address the pressure put on parents and others to vaccinate their children. Provide and alternative position on the issue and resources to inform parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **6. Federal Government policy makers and politicians** | Federal Minister for Health and Ageing
Opposition Health spokesperson Need to implement economically sound health policies
Need to respond to community concerns where appropriate |

5.2.5 Sociopolitical context of the campaign

An effective analysis of any discourse practice needs to take account of the context within which the discursive events are enacted (Fairclough 2001, 2003). The sociopolitical context in which a campaign is launched is crucial in developing an understanding of the reasons for particular discursive strategies.

The situation with commercial vaccines and public health is complex. As Streefland argues, “immunisation is a provider driven medical intervention, but its remarkable stability is rooted in wide popular acceptance. Popular adherence to childhood vaccination schedules must always be understood, however, in relation to its social and political context” (2001, p.161). He points out that the information that guides people’s everyday lives has become increasingly medicalised (p.162).

5.2.6 Government economic policy and the role of the state

As the aim of the campaign is to have universal vaccination funded through government programs, debate about the appropriate role of the state in health policy is relevant to this discussion. Where should decisions about which medicines to provide be made? Should the government have the final say in the light of budgetary constraints, or should it accept all recommendations from independent advisory bodies?
This brings into play choices about the costs of various vaccines and other health treatments made possible by technological advances. The government must make difficult choices between options, and formulate a basis on which to judge their relative value: should it be by numbers of lives saved, or percentage of lives, or some compromise involving cost and numbers? Governments need to assess the social cost of a vaccination program and of the diversion of resources into this area: that is, the opportunity costs in directing limited public resources away from more serious diseases.

Governments face difficult choices in determining the best use of finite public resources. There is also the problem of defining the nature of any debate on public health issues and determining the role of industry in providing material for the discussion: who frames the way the discussion takes place and, ultimately, what solution is being debated? How appropriate is a pharmacological solution to a health issue, and should vested interests who generate community fears influence the disposition of public monies? Corporations as funding sources are particularly problematic, whether their contributions are transparent or otherwise, as corporations are not likely to support, through sponsorship, donation or research contracts, anything that does not support their market interests. Proactive disclosure of funding sources for “opinion leaders, non-profit groups or journalists with financial ties to drug companies” (Burton & Rowell 2003, p.3) is an important component of a public discourse that allows the public to make informed assessments of the information with which they are presented.

There is also the problem of the role of the state and “of state control, and about the limits of individual liberties” (Streefland 2001, p.164). Who will ultimately choose a course of action when there is both community and individual risk and benefit? The value of herd immunity is only gained when all choose to act individually for the communal good. A question those opposed to, or questioning immunisation raise, is doubt about the legitimacy of the state as the keeper of public health. There is, too, a conviction that ultimately parents should decide (Streefland 2001, p.167).
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5.2.6.1 The role of “big pharma”

An issue that became the subject of media investigation and academic debate during the time of the campaign was the involvement of large pharmaceutical companies in promoting pharmacological solutions to health concerns. Who is driving the agenda for the direction of health resources? This includes concerns about the creation of diseases for which cures are then provided, and the creation of public panic about diseases which are relatively uncommon. Pharmaceutical manufacturers, doctors and patients groups combine to use the media to portray diseases as more pervasive and severe than they really are (Moynihan, Heath & Henry 2002). Aligned with these concerns are questions about the values that drive news production, and about the role of journalists in reproducing alarmist material provided by vested interests. There is a concern that “the mechanics of corporate backed disease mongering, and its impact on public consciousness, medical practice, human health, and national budgets have attracted limited critical scrutiny” (Moynihan, Heath & Henry 2002, p.886).

A wider concern is about the lack of transparency in drug sponsorship. Such sponsorship takes many forms, from providing collaborative forums at major universities endorsed by medical groups to provide legitimacy to the discussion of new medicines, to funding community groups lobbying for new medicines to be subsidised on the publicly funded Federal Government Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. The public relations agency sought to address this issue in their campaign submission by acknowledging “recent industry debate about the appropriate role of the pharmaceutical industry in public health care campaigns” and describing the efforts that were made to “ensure maximum transparency in program activities” (PRIA 2001); however, this related only to the first stage of the campaign and not to the subsequent Free Pnuemo campaign.

5.2.6.2 Debate on childhood immunisation

While immunisation has proven an invaluable health policy, there remain concerns and questions about some aspects of the practice. One is related to the risk of unnecessary vaccination (Barotsy 2004) and its effects on the immune
system: while this may be manageable there should reasonably be some discussion of the cost/benefit of the vaccination load and of longer-term concerns about the rapidly expanding childhood immunisation program (Robotham 2007). There are concerns about the extent of medical knowledge regarding the way different vaccines work on the human system, and how long they remain effective. Australia has no new disease-causing stains for meningococcal, pneumococcal or the meningitis-causing Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) bacteria. However, this situation may change at any time. Bugs do compete with each other, and strain replacements are a real possibility. A more immediate worry is the length of time the immunisation will last as the children who are immunised grow to adulthood. The assumption of lifelong protection may not be correct: individuals vary in the degree to which a vaccine produces an immune response, and there is a gradual diminution of its effect as people age.

5.2.6.3 Meningococcal vaccination campaign

As mentioned earlier, the pneumococcal campaign was conducted in the wake of the meningococcal campaign, and some aspects of the way the pneumococcal campaign was conducted need to be understood in this context. The campaign documents make very clear the ethical guidelines and standards that are followed, and this is significant in the light of the controversy around the meningococcal campaign. As will be seen in the analysis of media texts, meningococcal is mentioned frequently, thereby associating the two diseases whose names sound similar. Meningococcal is a very invasive disease with potentially grave consequences. During the campaign promoting the meningococcal vaccine there was criticism of panic caused by the media, whose sensationalist coverage generated fear in the general community.

In 2003, a national vaccination program costed at $300 million was implemented to safeguard young people in high-risk groups against meningococcal disease. The first phase targeted 16 to 19 year olds, considered to be most at risk. The second high-risk group is children aged one to five. This was one of the largest vaccination programs undertaken in Australia and involved 1.2 million school students and more than 300 schools.
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The rationale for the program as described by government sources was to:

- reduce the illness and death in the population at highest risk of meningococcal disease;
- induce long term immunity in those who are vaccinated;
- reduce the population incidence of disease through reduced carrier rates of meningococcal group C (Queensland Health, 2006).

Even though meningococcal disease is rare and most people recover completely if treated appropriately, it became a major concern for many parents. This was due in no small part to the infection itself: it acts with terrifying speed and can be disfiguring and deadly. This is exemplified in a documentary profile produced by the ABC, relating the experience of a young man who survived but only after the amputation of all four limbs. Media reports of the disease reflected the sensational nature of the illness. There was public debate about the impact of these types of campaign on public policy decisions; questions were raised about the difficulty of deciding to whether or not to approve funding. Other recommendations for changes to the national immunisation schedule, less well publicised, had not received the same attention.

5.3 Public relations texts content analysis

This section reports the analysis of the public relations campaign texts produced for the first stage of the campaign.

5.3.1 Campaign texts

The collection of texts assembled to promote Prevenar vaccine presents a particular perspective on the problem of pneumococcal disease and the most appropriate way to deal with it. Overall, the campaign presents a positive discourse with what are commonly accepted as legitimate justifications for immunisation. This way of making meaning is what Fairclough calls an “order of discourse” (2001, in Wodak & Meyer 2001, p.127): social practices which, when networked in a particular way, constitute a social order.
I focus my analysis on the following argumentative strategies that lie behind the positive campaign discourse: (1) presenting pneumococcal disease as a serious threat, (2) dismissing treatment with antibiotics as ineffective, (3) championing immunisation as an effective public health strategy, (4) promoting Prevenar vaccine as the solution to the threat, (5) using victims’ stories to portray the emotional side, and (6) invoking government involvement.

In this chapter I use the campaign texts to investigate how various rhetorical and legitimation techniques are deployed to implement the campaign argumentative strategies. Section 5.2.2 presents a conceptual framework presents a summary of the discourse arguments identified in the campaign texts.
Table 3 Conceptual framework for pneumococcal campaign discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Argument</th>
<th>Minor theme</th>
<th>Legitimation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Pneumococcal disease     | 1. Severe illness  
2. Social and economic cost  
3. Worse than meningococcal  
4. Who is at risk  
5. Parents unaware        | 1. Rational authority: scientific research, quantifiable data  
2. Expert authority  
3. Personal experience authority  
4. Personal status         |
| 2. Antibiotic resistance    | 1. Reduced effect of antibiotic  
2. Overuse limits benefits  
3. Side effects  
4. Timing            | 1. Rational authority - scientific research, quantifiable data  
2. Expert authority  
3. Personal experience authority  
4. Personal status         |
| 3. Immunisation             | 1. Important public health strategy  
2. Prevention better than treatment  
3. Cost effective public health strategy  
4. “Grand” history     | 1. Rational authority - scientific research, quantifiable data  
2. Expert authority  
3. Rational authority – economic argument  
4. Moral evaluation – the right thing to do         |
| 4. Prevenar vaccine         | 1. Scientifically proven  
2. Solution to disease threat  
3. Value for money  
4. Affordability  
5. Relative benefit | 1. Rational authority – medical scientific research, quantifiable data  
2. Expert authority – economic argument  
3. Intertextuality – history of immunisation success  
4. Personal status         |
| 5. Personal experience stories | 1. Reduced effect of antibiotic  
2. Severe illness  
3. Advice to other parents  
2. Role model authority  
3. Personal experience authority  
4. Conformity authority         |
| 6. Government funding role  | 1. Act on expert advice  
2. Ensure safe medicines  
3. Social equity  
4. Responsibility for public health  
5. Economic responsibility | 1. Expert authority  
2. Impersonal authority  
3. Traditional authority         |

5.3.2 Key arguments in the campaign discourse

The texts were examined to determine the key discourse arguments of the public relations campaign story and the minor themes that supported these arguments. A second analysis considered the voices used to carry the arguments, which social actors’ voices are used to articulate the messages, what interests they advance and what power they convey.
5.3.2.1 Pneumococcal disease – the problem

This idea focused on how severe the disease was and how little public awareness there was of the way this “potentially deadly disease” could affect children. This was important to the whole campaign – the severity of the threat of pneumococcal disease needed to be established to justify the use of a vaccine in the first instance, and the provision of this vaccine to the whole community in the second. This was communicated through a media release and background fact sheets provided by the company; statistics and scientific facts about the disease were presented. The most dramatic aspects of the disease were presented by the Meningitis Centre through its spokesperson, Mr Langoulant, and through personal case studies.

Thus, in the first phase of the campaign, the public were made aware of the disease:

The health of Australian children could be at risk due to low levels of awareness of infant pneumococcal disease – a major cause of death and illness among infants. (Meningitis Australia Media Release 2001; see Appendix 3)

The initial campaign media kit contained information about pneumococcal disease.

- The disease is described as potentially life-threatening. It is stated to be a substantial cause of death and disease amongst children, including meningitis, pneumonia, bacteriama, acute otitis media, sinusitis.
- Untreated it can lead to hearing loss, mental retardation, permanent brain damage or even death. All this information is supported by reference to independent scientific studies.
- Statistics on the rate of incidence of the disease are provided, demonstrating increasing incidence.
- What causes it; how the disease is spread; symptoms of the disease, onset, treatment, effects, and prevention are included
“Infants and young children are among the most vulnerable for contracting serious pneumococcal disease” (Dr Jameshed Ahmed, Wyeth Australia, (Media release 1; see Appendix 3). The progression of the disease was graphically illustrated in the initial launch by the case study of Ashleigh Langoulant, who was left severely disabled after contracting the illness.

A significant amount of material to support the claims of the seriousness of the disease and solutions contained quantifiable information. Thus, there is the release of statistical survey results reporting the low public awareness of the disease:

the warning followed research that found only 43% of Australian parents had heard of the disease and of those, very few could name the cause or even the symptoms. (Media release 1; see Appendix 3)

Rates of disease and related conditions were presented:

It is estimated that pneumococcal disease is responsible for the death of approximately five Australian children under five each year. In addition, it is estimated that more than 40,000 children aged one–two years contract pneumococcal ear infections and 1,300 children under five are admitted to hospital with pneumococcal pneumonia. (Pneumococcal disease backgrounder; see Appendix 4)

Leask and Chapman (2002) note that the choice of reporting statistics can be highly subjective. In this instance, reporting actual numbers rather than incident rates can make the disease appear more severe in a country like Australia with good health care and low disease incident rates. In all instances during the campaign the statistics on the disease were reported in this format.

Personalisation of the disease is another rhetorical strategy employed in this discourse. Leask and Chapman describe this as occurring where the disease is referred to in the active voice as if it is able to act with malevolent intent: such language “constructs an intentionality that animates what might otherwise be described as drier, less engaging language” (2002, p.447). It is notable that this
language, through the voice of parents, is reserved for personal story case studies, while the voice of the company uses more measured language to convey facts:

Pneumococcal disease strikes so fast. All parents should ensure they find out more about the pneumococcal bug (Coast Case Study; see Appendix 6 Sunshine).

Meningitis can kill in 24 hours (Meningitis Australia Media Release; see Appendix 3).

5.3.2.2 Antibiotic resistance

In addition to establishing the severity of the disease, the campaign needed to establish that there was no effective treatment. Vaccines are not without risk, so to support the case for a vaccine for all, the reduced effect of antibiotics had to be established. A key part of the message strategy aimed to communicate the idea that, in dealing with this illness, antibiotics might be unable to work in time or that particularly strong antibiotics, carrying their own risks, might be required.

A fact sheet was produced, reporting findings from a World Health Report on Infectious Diseases 2000 which focused on the role of immunisation in preventing infection and the emergence of antibiotic resistance. This drew in the wider discourse on the problem of antibiotic resistance while building the argument that vaccines present a solution not only to preventing the onset of the disease, but to minimising the number of infected individuals. In the campaign backgrounder about pneumococcal disease, antibiotics are mentioned, in a non-emotive way, as being prescribed on an individual basis by doctor to patient.

The way this works in practice is described in the case studies, where outcomes from antibiotic use are varied and portrayed as part of a highly traumatic hospital scenario:

“Thankfully, Daria is not dreadfully ill like she was in the hospital, but meningitis and the side effects of large doses of antibiotics have lowered her immune response. Every week she seems to get some new illness –
whatever is going around and it takes her longer to recover. She used to be really healthy,” Hans said. (Victorian Case Study; see Appendix 5)

Liam’s treatment was complicated by the fact that he had a penicillin-resistant strain of the pneumococcal bacteria. Because of this, he had to be treated with another much stronger antibiotic to combat the bug. “This medication was so strong that it had to be carefully monitored to ensure that Liam did not suffer any drug-related side-effects”, Rob said. (Sunshine Coast Case Study; see Appendix 5)

5.3.2.3 Immunisation

Campaign documents use immunisation discourse to position vaccination as a form of risk management. This element relates to the general discourse of immunisation as a strategy for disease management. A case is assembled using a number of related ideas – as previously mentioned, antibiotic resistance is a reason to look to other solutions. The nature of the nature of the disease is also a factor in supporting prevention rather than cure – the way it strikes, the difficulty in making a correct diagnosis in time. Thus a number of key ideas are collected within this element. Firstly, vaccines are vital in that they are needed to deal with resistant bacteria “as once-effective treatments become impotent in the face of ever-evolving resistant microbes” (Antibiotic resistance fact sheet). These drugs either do not work or work too slowly to stop the damage caused by the disease. Secondly, vaccines prevent disease by preventing people from getting sick in the first place and, therefore, reduce the need for treatment drugs. Thirdly, vaccines have an economic advantage in that they save lost time at work and school through illness.

The “grand” discourse of immunisation is invoked together with its history of success reaching as far back as the eighteenth century; for example, “Smallpox eradication and a reduction of deaths due to measles has been made possible by the introduction of widespread immunisation campaigns” (Antibiotic resistance factsheet). A separate factsheet on immunisation described some of the historic milestones in the development of vaccines and located the new vaccine within this
narrative. This also linked the advances in immunisation practice with the
capacity of science to deliver solutions to public health problems.

Using the body’s immune system was described as a “natural” approach, they
argue the body can readily acquire immunity from natural sources as well as from
vaccines. Evidence was provided for the argument that constant research into new
antimicrobials and vaccines is vital to combat the continued threat of bacteria.
Overall, the combined message was “Prevention is the best form of management”,
as expressed by Mr Langoulant in the Perth case study – an idea that is reflected
in a number of the campaign materials.

5.3.2.4 Prevenar as a safe and worthwhile vaccine

The aim of the first campaign was to announce the launch of the new vaccine.
Having established the threat and the problems with existing treatments, the
campaign documents introduced the solution – the new vaccine. The credentials
of the vaccine were established through its performance in clinical trials, cited in
the media release, and information was provided about its availability,
administration and cost. The media release from Wyeth described this as “the first
and only vaccine specifically developed to help protect children under the age of
two from pneumococcal disease” (2001). Even at this stage it was indicated that
there would be efforts to have it provided on the national immunisation schedule.
Subsequent efforts were directed to the fact that, while it might be available, its
cost effectively made it available only to some. Claims about the degree of
protection the vaccine would offer were supported by reference to independent
studies.

The vaccine was justified in three main ways – first as a scientifically reliable
product, safe to use, tested overseas and used in other part of the world; second as
the best solution to a significant threat and changing conditions in the efficacy of
other treatments; and third, as an economically viable decision. The vaccine was
defended not just in terms of lives saved, as the campaign wore on, but also in
terms of total health care costs saved by this preventative measure.
5.3.2.5 Personal experience stories

Even though the function of personal experience stories was to deliver messages relating to other elements, they are included as a separate element as they played a distinctive role throughout the campaign. They contributed the idea of personal suffering. Personal experience stories provided narratives of parents’ direct experience of the disease: its sudden onset, the challenge for hospitals in diagnosis, and the suffering of children experiencing the disease and enduring treatment. These stories made the experience of the disease real. Parents spoke directly to other parents, talking of their experience, giving advice and warnings.

The first stage of the campaign produced case studies for each state and organised advocacy groups to make more available. The stories are framed as moral tales, with descriptions of what can happen if a child is not immunised. The stories were either highly emotive accounts from parents whose child had been disabled or died, or tales of close encounters which had happy outcomes. In all cases, the stories concluded with advice to other parents:

Watching Jack so ill in hospital was a harrowing experience. Pneumococcal disease is definitely not something you would want your child to go through. (Brisbane Case Study; see Appendix 5)

“Pneumococcal meningitis strikes so fast. All parents should ensure they find out more about the pneumococcal bug so they can take the necessary action to protect their children,” he said. (Langoulant, Perth Case Study; see Appendix 5)

While the language used is not as emotive as some that later appeared in tabloid newspapers, there was an “implied sense of general drama” (Leask & Chapman 2002, p.447).

“Parents can’t afford to be in the dark about this disease – they should not hesitate to seek medical advice if they suspect a child in their care may have any form of pneumococcal disease as deterioration can be very rapid. For
example, Meningitis can kill in 24 hours,” he said. (Meningitis Australia Media Release, Mr Langoulant; see Appendix 2)

There are phrases such as “parent struggling to cope”, or the number of children “killed by the disease” each year. In the case studies, parents describe “traumatic experiences”, “harrowing experiences” and graphic descriptions of the medical procedures undergone. A recurrent theme in the stories is the degree to which parents and individual doctors are powerless in the face of such a terrible illness. Against this helplessness is presented a manifestation of power – the story as constructed conveys the image of all-powerful science providing a solution to the threat.

5.3.2.6 The role of government

In the early stages of the campaign, the government was mentioned only as the registering body for the new vaccine and as providing the free vaccine to indigenous children and other high-risk groups under the Governments’ National Childhood Pneumococcal Vaccination Program. As the campaign developed, increasing attention was given to the responsibility of the government to make the vaccine available to all. By the time the campaign reached its climax and the need for the vaccine had been established, the role of the government was of paramount importance. In the campaign discourse, the role of the state was assumed, in terms of provision and recommendation, but the ultimate authority was attributed to the parent, as was the responsibility to act.

Those promoting the campaign message criticised the government of the day for, as they saw it, departing from normal practice in deciding what to place on the national immunisation schedule. A strong card in the campaign suit was the recommendation of the vaccine by the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation Practice. Similar recommendations had, in other instances, resulted in almost automatic inclusion. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 6, where issues arising from the media discourse are addressed.
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5.4 Social actors – Voices in the discourse

The ideas of the campaign were articulated through a number of voices coordinated to achieve a unified message strategy. The choice of which voice to use to carry particular messages is a strategic choice; each “voice” was selected to play a specific role in the construction of the discourse argument. The roles assigned promoted a unified diversity in the discourse by integrating multiple viewpoints (Eisenberg 1984) but leaving individual viewpoints distinct. This enabled the campaign to occupy a number of discursive positions in the political discourse on the issue and assume a greater presence in the media discourse overall.

5.4.1 The parental voice

This is one of the primary voices and one of the most consistent, used to carry the emotive elements of the message. Parents provide legitimisation for the company’s perspective, illustrating the practical effects of the points being made. An argument supported by scientific data, while valid, may appear remote. The parental voices personalise the disease graphically, providing highly emotional descriptions of its progress.

The stories are presented as narratives, each parent telling what happened to them, in their own words. The parental voice does not use highly scientific language, but speaks as one parent to another with the authority of direct experience. When the parents speak they give advice to other parents based on their experience. In this they advance the interests of the campaign message and also the wider community interest: for immunisation to be successful there needs to be widespread compliance. These parents’ perspectives carry a powerful message about the consequences of not taking individual action that also enhances the public good.

The parental voice is the voice of the “good parent”, and there is a strong emphasis on the fact that they are caring and do all possible for their children. This disease is not something that might strike only the children of negligent or disadvantaged parents. The parental voice is that of an excellent parent who is
suddenly in a situation out of control. There is considerable detail in the experience which models what a good parent does:

We did all the right things by taking her straight to the doctor when she first got sick but it just didn’t help. (Beth Egan, NSW Case Study; see Appendix 5)

It was obvious she had become much worse so we took her straight to the local hospital. (Hans, Victorian Case Study; see Appendix 5)

Where parents speak about the illness, they provide details of the treatment experience that their children, and by inference any children, face:

He was placed in an isolation room and was given a range of additional tests to find out why he couldn’t walk. (Jo McDowell, Brisbane Case Study; see Appendix 5)

“Basically, the neuro-surgeon had to drill a hole through Sophie’s skull to relieve the pressure on her brain,” Beth explained. (Beth Egan, NSW Case Study; see Appendix 5)

The parental voice adds support to the idea that parents know best. In a paid advertorial, campaign spokesperson Bruce Langoulant said, “Parents know their children best”; and this theme is affirmed through the voice of the parent. The way parents know best is different to scientific knowledge; “maternal instinct” is offered as a reasonable basis on which to make decisions:

Instinctively, I just knew that this was different. (Christine, Adelaide Case Study; see Appendix 5)

I am so thankful that I went with my instincts when he first got sick and I knew something was not right. (Jo McDowell, Brisbane Case Study; see Appendix 5).
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The parental voice is also used to empower parents to take charge in a highly stressed situation. In this aspect the voice has agency (van Leeuwin 2008): the parent is in control and speaks directly to the reader; the same is found when parents encourage other parents to vaccinate their children:

“You can’t wrap your kids in cotton wool, but you owe it to them to protect them. I encourage all parents to vaccinate their kids for pneumococcal disease now that there is a vaccine available – it’s just common sense,” she said. (Christine, Adelaide Case Study; see Appendix 5)

Here is an aspect where the parent can exercise control in dealing with their child’s health. In contrast, when the parent speaks of the onset of the disease, the voice is that of a passive victim: the parent acts to take the ill child to hospital, but there the medical system takes over and the parent becomes passive:

Daria was admitted and given oxygen and a broad-spectrum antibiotic. She was then transferred to an Intensive Care Unit. (Hans Worth, Victorian Case Study; see Appendix 5)

5.4.2 The medical voice

The support of medical professionals is of fundamental importance to this campaign. As Angelmar and Morgan argue “whether or not a health care professional recommends vaccination, and the strength of the recommendation, has a lasting impact on a consumer’s vaccination decision” (2012 p. 13)

A panel of leading paediatricians and immunologists was assembled to assist in the development and distribution of information about pneumococcal disease to parents and health care providers.

The voice of the doctor is used as a trusted advisor who conveys expert information to parents. Doctors as a professional group have a reputation for high
standards of ethical practice and a commitment to the public interest. For this reason their support gives the campaign a high level of credibility.

The company uses the voice of medical employees to make claims about the disease and the need for the vaccine; in this case the doctor is not independent, but his professional status enhances the credibility of his message. The use of apparently independent health professionals does raise questions about transparency of interests. There is a conflict of interest for medical specialists in situations where staff and organisations sponsored by a drug company are helping to shape medical and public opinion about a disease for which the company is marketing a new product it (Moynahan, Heath & Henry, 2002). As these authors argue, the company’s primary interest is to shape opinion about the disease in a way which will maximise sales of its product. However, it is also the case that “some physicians see themselves as proactive advocates for vaccination and others as reactors to consumer requests” (Angelmar and Morgan 2012, p. 17).

The medical voice uses a formal tone; its assertions are grounded in verifiable data; it speaks with authority on issues of science which lay people find difficult to understand. In this sense the voice of the doctor is fundamental to building trust.

"It is also possible that the new vaccine may lead to a reduction in the number of cases of severe middle ear infections and surgical ear tube insertions in infants, because pneumococcal disease is also one of the causes of otitis media," Dr Ahmed said.

Supported by reference to: Approved Prescribing Information for Wyeth Australia's Pneumococcal 7-Valent Conjugate Vaccine (Wyeth Media Release; see Appendix 3)

They are able to speak with authority on issues of science which lay people would find difficult to understand. In this sense the voice of the doctor is fundamental to building trust. The medical expert is quoted to add legitimacy to the statements made in other campaign texts. This is usually identified as a doctor, but may be at
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other times referred to as a professor or person with a particular title at a hospital. For example,

Dr Michael Nissen is the Director of the Department of Infectious Diseases at the Royal Children's Hospital in Brisbane. He also holds the position of Senior Lecturer in Paediatrics and Infectious Diseases at the University of Queensland. (Campaign biography; see Appendix 4)

The medical expert is quoted to add legitimacy to the statements made in the campaign texts. This expert is usually identified as a doctor, but at other times may be referred to as a professor or person with a particular title at a hospital: Dr John Morton, director of respiratory medicine at Sydney Children’s Hospital, Randwick; Jonathan Carapetis, an infectious disease specialist at the Royal Children’s Hospital; UK-based Professor Keith Cartwright. In each of these instances, there is an additional legitimation of the voice of the doctor by his association with a reputable hospital, government department or academic institution.

5.4.3 The professional voice

The voice of other health professionals is also employed. This is provided by community nurses, child and family nurses and pharmacists. This voice supplements the voice of the doctor and, when employed, speaks to the effectiveness of vaccines, health recovery options and the effectiveness of immunisation. As health professionals who are already trusted by the publics the campaign is targeting, their endorsement of the campaign exploits this trust. The groups who make up the health professional voice are often involved in political discourse in health policy debates, with professional organisations that are active in the public sphere and whose views the government needs to consider.

Leading providers of infant care and information services were recruited to support the campaign, including The Australian Federation of Child Care Associations, The Children’s Hospital, Westmead, and the Australian Confederation of Paediatric and Child Health Nurses. Representatives from these organisations were quoted throughout the campaign. The deployment of this voice
is exemplified by a paid advertorial that appeared in the official journal of the Child and Family Health Nurses Association NSW, which also reproduced other campaign information after an introductory statement endorsing the campaign.

5.4.4 The advocacy voice

A number of advocacy groups were involved in the campaign. The leading party was The Meningitis Centre; however, a number of others were also recruited: The Cerebral Palsy Foundation, the Child and Family Health Nurses Association, The Deafness Foundation, and the Deafness Forum of Australia. In addition to their use of the Turnbull Porter Novelli campaign materials, these groups generated their own editorial, distributed campaign materials and addressed their organisational networks.

The boundary between public relations influence and advocacy organisation is blurred. The value the advocacy voice brings to the campaign is the independent voice of concerned citizens and in this role they are a powerful discourse actor. As part of civil society, advocacy organisations bring another dimension to debate on distributive issues in the political economy. They promote interests which have elements in common with the company but are not necessarily totally aligned. The power of these voices is diminished where their independence can be questioned, for example, through evidence of direct support from corporate interests.

The primary advocate group involved in this campaign was The Meningitis Centre, described as the “peak meningitis body in Australia” (Meningitis Centre Media Release). The chairman of this group was able to speak from a number of perspectives as he was the parent of an affected child; however, his primary role was as the voice of this organisation:

Mr Langoulant’s experience with Ashleigh encouraged him, as the father of three daughters, to provide support for other parents in similar
circumstances by becoming chairman of the Meningitis Centre (Meningitis Centre Media Release; see Appendix 3).

Advocate organisations speak to the urgency of an issue, and it is through them that individual parents speak. In the first stage of the meningococcal campaign they stressed the lack of awareness of the disease amongst parents, and urged them to be aware and vigilant. As the campaign progressed, their voice was heard more in calls to the government to fund the vaccine.

5.4.5 The corporate voice

Wyeth featured prominently in the launch campaign, then moved to the background, funding the advocacy group indirectly via the public relations agency (Hughes 2003). There were legitimate reasons for them to take a low-key approach. There is ongoing controversy about the role of pharmaceutical companies in public health education (Sweet 2004), which can erode public trust. In addition, the Medicines Australia code of conduct specifies that pharmaceutical companies cannot promote, or initiate the promotion of, prescription products to consumers (Medicines Australia, 2012). The voice of the company in the launch campaign materials is restrained, and at all times supported by clinical evidence or independent statistics. It is articulated through the medical director, a doctor. The company voice speaks to advance its own interests in launching a new product, although the justification for the product is framed not in these terms but in terms of the social good.

The company voice speaks to advance its own interests in launching a new product however the justification for the product is framed in terms of the social good.

New infant vaccine to help protect Australian infants from potentially deadly disease. The first and only vaccine specifically developed to help protect children under the age of two years from pneumococcal disease was launched in Australia today by Wyeth Lederle Vaccines. (Wyeth Media Release 2; see Appendix 3)
Analysis of voices deployed in the campaign reveals the roles assigned to the range of discourse participants assembled to promote the campaign message. Who is chosen to speak, and what they speak about, reveals much about the intentions of the campaign strategy and the sociopolitical context in which it is enacted. The voices in this campaign reflect the expectations of society but also, in reproducing these expectations, contribute to constructions of identity which favour the interests the campaign underwriters represent.

5.5 Legitimation

Legitimacy is a vital topic for public relations (Heath & Palenchar 2009; Vaara, Tienari & Laurila 2006); it has been argued that legitimacy is at the core of what public relations is about (Waeraas 2009). Organisations frequently seek to influence the conduct of others but are not in a position to impose demands on them, and even those that can, such as governments and the law, seek compliance before coercion. Successful organisations rely on voluntary compliance, which is an acceptance of their legitimacy: “when organisations have an acknowledged right to rule, they are seen as legitimate” (Waeraas 2009, p. 303). An organisation can undertake efforts to gain legitimacy but only achieve it if publics recognise them. It follows, therefore, that identification is a requirement for political discourses to be regarded as legitimate; only discourses which resonate with social norms will be considered legitimate (Habermas 1976; Rahaman, Lawrence, & Roper 2004).

As Motion and Doolan explain, “legitimacy is a central concept for understanding how discourse participants attempt to guarantee the influence of a discourse” (2007, p. 64). They cite the Habermassian (1979) view that the legitimacy of competing claims is decided by compromise and argumentation, from which a solution in the public interest emerges. To address the idealism of the Habermassian position they offer a perspective which sees the process of gaining legitimacy in public discourse as a power struggle to keep “dominant meanings in place” (Hardy & Philips 2004, p. 307).
Chapter 5: Campaign text analysis

One of the stated objectives of the Prevenar campaign was to establish organisational credibility: that the overall aim of the company and the public relations agency was to legitimise the organisation’s claims in the public sphere; to provide a credible argument that would be trusted by the public. Through its strategies the organisation hoped to establish its identity as a trustworthy source and assume a position of dominance in the discursive space. The concept of position and positioning introduced by Davies and Harré (1990) is most commonly related to marketing, and in this context allows products to be placed in a market relative to the competition. This idea has application to the political context, where organisations and actors seek to establish distinct and superior positions in relation to other discourse participants. In the pneumococcal case study, legitimation strategies are used to position the promoters of the new vaccine in the discursive space as the authoritative voice on the issue. They may also seek, as the campaign strategy does, to position opposition views as less credible and peripheral to the debate.

Van Leeuwen (2008) sets out a framework for analysing the language of legitimation, drawing on Habermas who expressed this process as “demarcating types of legitimate authority according to the forms and contents of legitimation” (1976, p.97) as they occur in public communication. In this section, I apply van Leeuwen’s four categories of legitimation to the texts produced for the pneumococcal launch campaign.

5.5.1 Authorisation

The first form of legitimation to be discussed, and the one used most prominently in this campaign, is authorisation. This refers to the authority of tradition, custom and law, or of persons in whom institutional authority is vested (van Leeuwen 2008). Van Leeuwen notes that “in the age of professionalism, expertise has acquired authority in many domains of activity that had previously been the province of families” (2008, p.107). The dominance of experts in the family domain is clear in the construction of the campaign arguments.
This campaign relies on various forms of personal authority. Legitimating personal authority, is done by stressing the institutional status or role the speaker has, or the possession of technical or scientific knowledge. Personal authority is also represented in other ways: parents speak with the authority derived from having direct personal experience of the disease. A discourse actor may encapsulate multiple forms of authority; for example, Bruce Langoulant employs his personal authority both as the head of an advocacy organisation and as a parent whose child has suffered the disease. Dr Daryl Price, a leading medical advocate for the vaccine, was legitimised in the discourse by his position as a public health professional, by the area of his professional specialty, by the length of his experience and by his record of community activities in support of disadvantaged children. His qualifications as a medical professional with particular status in the field of children’s health made him a legitimate voice to advocate both equality in access to the vaccine and the validity of the vaccine as a solution to a particular childhood problem.

Expert authority is central to the legitimation of the campaign discourse argument. Medical authority, as would be reasonably expected in a health issue, is the most prominent expertise used – in all the campaign documents, all actors speaking on a medical aspect had medical qualifications and could quote independent scientific research in support of their argument. Science is presented as central to the issue, conveyed in the language of certainty. The use of independent scientists speaks to a faith that science can be trusted in a way that does not necessarily apply to the pharmaceutical industry or the government (Irwin 2008).

In this construction, consumers are to be protected rather than consulted, reflecting an asymmetrical approach to communication. Irwin (2008) argues that this kind of top-down approach to risk communication does not take account of the knowledge ability of publics. This argument is relevant to the issue of immunisation, where the assumption of an uninformed public may not be appropriate and may contribute to increased public questioning of immunisation policies. The way the public takes up and generates knowledge is more than simply a capacity to understand technical information. Wynne (1992, 1993) claims that the public also experience science as a social package comprising
material social relations, interactions and interests. Parents making vaccination decisions rely on a variety of sources, of which official scientific and government sources are only one. For Wynne (1992) the central issue becomes the extent to which the public is prepared to invest trust and credibility in scientific spokespersons and institutions because their uptake of scientific information is mediated by trust and credibility, not by their capacity to understand technical information. Ambivalence in the attitude to experts reflects the complex social networks, relations, and identities that people inhabit. This understanding of consumers of scientific expertise portrays them as reflexive autonomous agents, and is a useful window through which to view the dynamics involved in receiving health communication messages. This is important when interpreting the construction of the discourse argument in this campaign, where experts’ legitimacy is a vital component but other forms of legitimacy are also incorporated into the arguments, in the form of personal experience and the perspective of parents. People do not need to base their decision on science alone; they can trust in the experience of parents like themselves.

Notable in the campaign discourse are two portrayals of the doctor as professional experts – the first, those representing the campaign whose professional advice should be accepted without question; the other, the hapless doctors in public hospitals who are unable to diagnose this terrible disease in time. There is no actual criticism of their expertise; they are victims of the disease and the inadequacy of current treatment options. These two representations are contradictory in that they provide different interpretations of professional competence. That these divergent views are able to co-exist in the discourse is an example of what Eisenberg (1984) has termed ‘strategic ambiguity’: an instance where language is used in ambiguous ways to achieve campaign goals. What may initially appear to be discordant portrayals are actually an effective means of allowing differing conceptualisations of doctors to work in parallel.

According to van Leeuwen, authorisation legitimation may also be impersonal; people are told to behave in certain ways “because it is written” – for instance “because the law says so”. Impersonal authority is communicated not through any particular actor, but through reference to official government committees. This is
used in the campaign, where first a recommendation by a government committee and then a demand for inclusion on the funded immunisation schedule are used to legitimise calls for people to take up the vaccine: it should happen because the government committee recommends it. There is no spokesperson from this committee, which is referred to as an abstract, faceless entity; however, its presence in the discourse is very real. In the late stages of the campaign an argument is made by some proponents that without the committee’s endorsement parents will not feel that the vaccine is essential: the authority of tradition is invoked and the question “why?” is answered: because until this time, this is the way it has always been done.

This argument is extended by the deployment of the history of immunisation, what could be described as a “grand narrative of immunisation” whereby claims for the new vaccine as a solution to the problem are legitimised by past successes. This can invoke what is known as the halo effect, a bias whereby perceptions of the positive effects of one outcome influence further judgments. By association, the reader is invited to consider the pneumococcal vaccine in the same light as those for polio and smallpox, for example; there is an unspoken assumption that the threats and impacts are similar. In another way, however, the strategy challenges “traditional” means of dealing with these types of illnesses through antibiotics, which are positioned as outdated and problematic.

Conformity as a form of authoritative legitimation tells people to do things “because that is what everybody does” (van Leeuwen 2008, p.109). Instructions to follow government health recommendations, where the message is consistently one of reinforcing public health policy concerning what vaccinations children should receive, conveys this authority. This endorsement was critical to the message strategy of this campaign – to have it meant that most parents were likely to conform and take up the vaccine. Later in the campaign equity became an issue because of the cost of the vaccine, as a high cost meant that low-income families would be disadvantaged.

Role models provide examples for people to follow and can be celebrities or peer group leaders of some kind (van Leeuwen 2008). Role model authority is
Chapter 5: Campaign text analysis

communicated through personal stories of parents; the stories either tell of close encounters with a lucky outcome or of tragic consequences. The parents narrating these experiences, by describing how they behaved, provide a role model for what a good parent should do; this establishes them as role models, and allows them to conclude, as they invariably do, with direct advice to other parents. This is particularly the case in dealing with doctors and hospitals, parents are advised to follow their instincts and insist on more investigation.

The authority of government is invoked through reference to government departments and authorities, whose names add credibility to the arguments of the campaign. Statistics on the prevalence of the disease were sourced from the Commonwealth department of Health and Aged Care, which gave them powerful credibility. The most powerful agent mentioned, however, is the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), which endorsed a recommendation from the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation Practices that the vaccine be placed on the immunisation schedule.

5.5.2 Moral evaluation

Van Leeuwen explains moral evaluation as legitimation by reference to values systems rather than imposition by some form of authority. And so the answer to the question “why” becomes that it is the “right” or “normal” thing to do. “These are not necessarily made explicit but hinted at by means of adjectives, they transmute moral discourses into the kind of generalised motives which are widely used to ensure mass loyalty” (van Leeuwen 2008, p.110). Moral values are difficult to codify, but some themes emerge: the good parent, as portrayed in case studies, models the preferred vaccine behaviour, and the question of what is the right thing to do is clearly answered. Sometimes the “right thing” is construed as “common sense” – in this instance it is for parents to follow their instinct in pursuing treatment and following the guidelines.

If we are to look for moral values in the campaign discourse, the most clear evidence is embedded in the case studies. The moral to the stories is that if parents fail in their duty their child may suffer terrible consequences: death or disability.
Van Leeuwin talks about evaluation adjectives which “communicate both concrete qualities of actions or objects and commend them in terms of some domain of values ... which makes moral evaluation covert and seeks to shield it from debate and argument” (2008, p.120). The adjectives used to describe the families are evaluative “normal average middle-class family” and “relaxing family holiday at the beach”, connoting an ideal type of family. These are not disadvantaged groups or others who could be thought of as living in unhygienic circumstances and partially to blame for their children’s illness.

The response of the parents to the onset of illness is set out in terms that constitute “normal” behaviour, and what we might consider the actions of a good parent. The child is taken to the doctor “immediately”, as a precaution. There is an evaluative component in this establishment of the appropriate behaviour to take: it is “normal” to react in the way that they do, and this is what any good parent would do in the situation:

“Mia was a little flushed and unsettled that morning and seemed a bit unresponsive. She didn’t have a temperature but I wanted to be sure so I took her to the GP., (Christine, Adelaide Case Study; see Appendix 4).

Later in the story a new evaluation is made – the parent is told that the right thing to do is to vaccinate and given a reason: “why take the risk, it’s not worth the grief”.

5.5.3 Rationalisation

Rationalisation is legitimation “by reference to the goals and issues of institutionalised action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity” (van Leeuwen 2008, p.113): in the presentation of the campaign case, the legitimation of logic and rational argument.

The threat from the disease is substantiated by scientific studies and government health statistics. The argument that the vaccine is the solution is built on the history of vaccine success, the results of trials of the vaccine overseas and the recommendation of infectious disease experts and the government committee.
Empirical evidence supports the contention that antibiotics are increasingly ineffective. The rational argument rests upon a solid base of scientific research and expert opinion.

What is the purpose of vaccinating against this disease? The answer the campaign discourse offers is that children will be spared. Each story gives an illustration of the way the experience unfolded for a particular individual, but this outcome is generalised to all parents in the warning call at the end. The personal, the specific, becomes the generalised. While there is no specific prediction that this will happen to their child, readers are warned that it is possible and that they take unnecessary risks in not vaccinating their child.

5.5.4 Mythopoesis

Mythopoesis relates to legitimation conveyed through narratives where legitimate actions are rewarded and non-legitimate actions punished. The moral tales in the personal case studies are essentially cautionary tales: this is what will happen if you do not take action. In this case the tales do not punish deviant behaviour because the parents have not done anything wrong. They are dealing with a problem not of their making, and they behave “normally” in responding to it. The cautionary aspect is the capacity of a seemingly routine illness to develop into something much more serious, despite all that medical specialists have to offer. The solution is to avoid the likely occurrence of the problem in the first place. Once there is knowledge, failure to act appropriately implies a deviant parent.

The cases studies produced for the campaign were analysed to distil the key elements of their structure using the approach proposed by van Leeuwen (2008, pp.16–17) and reveal a generic framework. While exactly the same case names were not always used during the full campaign, there were numerous examples which followed the same format and only the names changed. These cases studies did not always emanate directly from the public relations agency; advocacy organisations produced their own and made them available on their web sites.

This process is illustrated by the following example:
The generic structure of this personal experience narrative can be represented as follows. The location of this generic structure in media texts is discussed in Chapter 6 where I look for consistent replication of the structure as well as direct use of text in media stories. Here, the numbers refer to the progress in the story that follows:

![Diagram of generic structure of personal narrative]

**Figure 2 Generic structure of the personal narrative**

**A NSW Family’s Experience of Pneumococcal Disease**

A relaxing family vacation at the beach ended in a two-week hospital stay for one NSW family ....

1. In October 1997 the Egan family packed their bags and flew to Queensland for a relaxing family holiday at the beach. 
2. Soon after arrival however, youngest daughter, seven and a half month old Sophie, became unwell and irritable. 
3. According to Sophie’s mum Beth, over the following three days Sophie experienced night fevers. 
4. "With the exception of a runny nose the previous week, Sophie had been well. 
5. On arriving in Queensland, she was fine during the day but developed a temperature at night. 
6. With four children, it is not uncommon to be up at
night for a child with a virus, so her father and I presumed this was the same,” she said.

(7) By the fourth day, Sophie had stopped feeding, was vomiting and her temperature was very high. (8) “Naturally we were very worried and became concerned that she would dehydrate so we immediately flew back to Sydney and went straight from the airport to the hospital,” Beth said.

(9) “By the time we reached the hospital Sophie’s condition had worsened.

(10) She was taken for a wide range a tests and following a lumbar puncture was diagnosed with pneumococcal meningitis.” (11) Sophie was immediately admitted and spent the next two weeks in hospital receiving antibiotics intravenously.

(12) “It was an enormous two weeks out of our lives. I stayed with Sophie during the entire ordeal. (13) She was desperately ill already, so anything like changing her drip was an awful experience,” Beth explained.

(14) “Unfortunately, after a week of antibiotics Sophie had not improved and developed a weakness down her right-side. She is right-handed but had stopped reaching for things.”

(15) A cat-scan confirmed that Sophie required surgery to correct the problem. (16) ”Basically, the neuro-surgeon had to drill a hole through Sophie’s skull to relieve the pressure on her brain,” Beth explained. (17) “The thought that she required potentially life-threatening surgery was devastating. We just couldn’t believe it.”

(18) Thankfully, Sophie went on to make a complete recovery. (19) “Sophie bounced back eventually, but the fact of the matter is that she was incredibly lucky,” Beth said.

(20) “I recommend all parents vaccinate their children against pneumococcal disease. (21) The symptoms are easy to miss so by the time you realise your child has a form of pneumococcal disease, considerable damage may already have occurred.” (23) “We have now vaccinated our children.” (24) “To not vaccinate them is to put them at unnecessary and enormous risk.” (25) “No child should suffer what Sophie has.” (26) “I think this vaccine is a wonderful breakthrough.”
Within each of these stages, there are consistent patterns across all the case studies. In some instances there is a different emphasis in the subject matter: for example, early case studies focused on awareness of the disease or problems with antibiotic resistance rather than recommending vaccination, but the discursive structure still followed the same format. As these case studies are designed to be used directly in news articles, the construction of the text is in a reportage form. The parents do not speak directly to the reader but are presented as if talking to a reporter. This, as van Leeuwen says, “can be read as two discursive practices, as a journalistic report and a piece of expert guidance” (2008, p.17). It assumes in this instance that the expertise of the parents has been established.

Personal experience stories are strong elements throughout the campaign and exemplify a form of generic public relations product. They are easily replicated by others such as advocacy groups, who learn the techniques and apply them independently even when not acting as part of an orchestrated campaign. The use of language in these case studies, in contrast to the more measured, scientific discourse in the media releases and backgrounders, fills out the narrative elements of the overall story.

Van Leeuwen explains that discursive legitimation can answer questions, whether explicitly or implicitly, of why: “why should we do this?; and why should we do this in this way?” (2008, p.105). As a public health issue, immunisation is a shared concern; the action (or inaction) of one person can affect the whole community. Immunisation as a public health policy requires wide community adoption of vaccination, the performance of behaviours with potential individual risk for the general good, and is therefore an area where arguments as to why need to be made.

Adopting Van Leeuwen’s (2008) legitimation as a framework through which to interrogate the campaign reveals the architecture of the legitimation strategy. It enables scrutiny of the individual components to reveal the way the discursive argument is constructed to deploy various forms of legitimation and co-opt wider discourses and actors to the interests of the company. The result is a multidimensional argument embedded in existing social discourses and narratives.
Chapter 5: Campaign text analysis

5.6 Summary

The first research question this analysis chapter addresses is how public relations campaign message strategies are constructed. The analysis identifies a number of key discourse elements: pneumococcal disease, antibiotic resistance, immunisation, Prevenar vaccine, personal experience stories and government. These provide the framework for the overall message strategy. The analysis of the Pneumococcal campaigns reveals a sophisticated practice which combines scientific data, personal testimony and a range of credible sources to build a consistent and effective message strategy.

This analysis also considers the sociopolitical context in which the campaign was conceived and conducted. It argues that the success of the campaign needs to be understood in the context of a government increasingly dependent on and influenced by pharmaceutical companies in the delivery of public health policy. As an essentially commercial campaign, this campaign benefits from its similarity to existing public immunisation information campaigns and other public health discourse, and boundaries between these discourses are blurred.

Other research questions addressed in this chapter relate to the voices used to articulate the message strategies and the way the campaign seeks to legitimise its discourse position. Ideas are articulated through the voices of parents, doctors and medical specialists, health professionals, advocacy groups and the company. A range of legitimation strategies are deployed, the primary strategy in various forms of authorisation, although, rational argument and mythopoesis also are brought into play.

The overall question this thesis seeks to answer is: How do public relations campaigns shape and influence public discourse on health issues? This analysis contributes to this investigation by revealing the sophisticated combination of message elements which enable the public relations agency to reflect key campaign ideas in different ways, using different voices and different rhetorical strategies, to build a multidimensional picture of the issue. It also demonstrates the way that public relations brings together a range of interest groups and
individuals to cooperate and thereby amplify the power of a message. This coalition of interests can be coordinated by public relations, but is not totally within its control. All are able to act independently and have the potential to affect the campaign outcomes. All too are able to take the public relations techniques they have learned and apply them in other situations.
Chapter 6  Analysis of media discourse

I became a journalist because I did not want to rely on newspapers for information. – Christopher Hitchen

6.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the results of the discourse analysis of the media texts addressing the research question: How do the media discourse reflect the public relations campaign message?

The purpose of this analysis is to locate the campaign discourse within the broader context of the media discourse around the issue. The analysis reveals the degree to which the campaign message has been adopted and the effects of mediatisation on the message. The research questions are answered by undertaking quantitative and qualitative content analyses of the media texts, coded for story elements, voices and legitimation strategies consistent with elements of the public relations campaign. Thematic coding revealed additional elements in the media discourse, which were included in the quantitative analysis. Thus, the media discourse was examined to identify the degree to which it was consistent with public relations campaign messaging strategy, offered additional elements which added weight to the argument, and provided room for “other views”, views opposed to those promoted by the public relations campaign. An assessment was also made of issues which were part of the wider debates, but not addressed in media reporting.

The first section of this chapter presents an overview of the media discourse. A timeline, indicating the key discursive events of the campaign, was presented in Chapter 5 (see Figure 1). Quantitative data reveals the extent to which public relations themes dominate the media discourse. The incorporation of key story elements in media texts is analysed and the strategic deployment of message elements is illustrated as well as the impact of journalists on the way information is presented.
The final section of this chapter presents an analysis of the key social actors whose voices are represented in the discourse. The way the voices contribute to the media discourse is illustrated for each key theme, together with the legitimation strategies and minor discourse themes employed.

6.2 Overview of the media discourse

The first step in this analysis was to present a general characterisation of the media discourse (Teo 2000) to establish an overall picture of the discourse, to gain an understanding of the relative importance of voices identified, and to gain an appreciation of the consistency of messaging in the overall discourse. Initial scanning of the data set identified the themes and voices present in the dialogue. While no claims are made about statistical validity of the sample, the quantification of these broad themes serves to establish the impact of the campaign.

Categories were established to record the type of media source, the voices used, whether the perspective in the article supported or contradicted the main message of the campaign and the headline topic. A final sample of 412 media texts was analysed. The distribution of these texts on a geographic basis is shown in Table 4 below. This is not in direct proportion to national population distribution; an initial scan of campaign texts revealed that there was more focus on the issue in some states than others, and the sample size was not adjusted, as representation of the discourse rather than generalisation of the results was the objective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>412</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 6: Analysis of media discourse

The chief source of media texts were news print media, supplemented by broadcast media and other specialist sources. Table 5 illustrates the composition of the sample by media type. Online versions of the mainstream media were included. Tabloids are distinguished from broadsheet newspapers by their smaller format, a more condensed form of the news and usually highly illustrated, sensationalist material.

Table 5 Publication sources of data set

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>412</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total campaign was conducted over four years, and during this time the issue was more prominent in some media than others. Some of this can be explained by the nature of the issue; for example, as a community health issue concerning young children it was more likely to be aired by community presses than other issues might be. Figure 3 below shows the distribution of the major media texts over the period that the issue was current. There was a large spike in the number of articles in early 2004 as the issue became a topic of contention in the lead up to the federal election, however, momentum had continued to build from the launch of the new vaccine.
Chapter 6: Analysis of media discourse

Figure 3 Publications source during the discourse period

The tabloids ran the story most consistently over the whole period of the campaign. When it became an item of contention in the federal election, it received more attention in regional and broadsheet newspapers.

What was the focus of media reports? Newspaper headlines provide, in a highly concise form, the crux of the event the story is reporting. They also signal what the newspaper considers the most important aspect of the story, placing the most important news at the top and the less important news further down the article. The results of quantitative coding for headline topic appear in Table 6, illustrating the focus of newspaper headlines for the issue.

According to van Dijk, “headlines are typically used to express topics and to signal the most important information of a text, and may thus be used to assign (extra) weight to events that in themselves would not be so important” (2006, p.373). He notes that the opposite can also apply, and so there are unlikely to be headlines that relate to the negative characteristics of dominant groups, even if this is in the interests of the general citizenry. With the need to use the minimum number of words, every word of a headline is carefully chosen and structured for maximum effect (Teo 2000); and observation supported by the data in this study.
Table 6 Frequency of headline topics in media discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline topic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General health/flu</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government funding</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunisation</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous &gt;/=65yr vac</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meningococcal l dis/vac</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience story</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneu disease plus vaccine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumococcal disease</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumococcal vaccine</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaccine cost</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>412</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thematic coding of headline topics reveals the shifting emphasis of the campaign at different times during the campaign. Headlines relating to the severity of the disease appeared most frequently during the first campaign, with a gradual shift in emphasis to vaccine availability. As the second stage of the campaign became established, story emphasis moved to vaccine cost. Headlines relating to the federal budget, in which funding the pneumococcal vaccine on the national immunisation schedule was a major issue, appeared during the first half of 2004.

Sources varied by type in terms of headline topic. Tabloids featured calls for government funding (20.75%) and immunisation (18.23%), the vaccine (16.98%) and a personal case study (14.46%). Even though 25% of tabloid texts contained personal experience stories they did not always feature as the lead. Not unexpectedly, tabloids were sensationalist in their treatment of some of the issues. For example, they referred to pneumococcal as a deadly disease and a killer bug, much more dramatic terms than the phrase “potentially fatal” used in the campaign documents: “Babies safe from a deadly disease” (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 2001) now that there is a vaccine available.

The same pattern was evident in calls for government action and claims that inaction was putting lives in peril: “Children are dying but Howard refuses to help” (*Courier Mail*, 13 April 2004), and “Dad’s plea for deadly disease vaccine” (*Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 2004) catch this sentiment. Chemists were also in the
Chapter 6: Analysis of media discourse

firing line: “Chemists put our kids in peril” (Gold Coast Bulletin, 25 October 2003) related to claims that chemists were overcharging for the vaccine in a time of short supply.

Fear of an unseen killer was another theme of the tabloids: “Mystery illness scares parents” (Daily Telegraph, 12 August 2003); “Parents don’t know signs of killer bug” (Herald Sun, 10 May 2001). This also illustrates the personalisation of the disease, characterised as something with free will or the intent of acting against children: “Killer disease vaccine for tots” (The West Australian, 6 July 2001); “Vaccine rush but killer strikes again” (Gold Cost Bulletin, 30 June 2004).

These examples illustrate the tenor of newspaper headlines on various aspects of the issue. This series of newspaper headlines presents a number of aspects of the character of newspaper reporting on the issue and highlights the polarisation of portrayals positioning the “killer disease” against the “lifesaving vaccine”.

6.3 Discursive features of the media discourse

Certain discursive features distinguish the media discourse from the campaign discourse. As illustrated in the headlines analysis above, the media add a level of drama through embellishments, added metaphors and hyperbole. The approach taken in most articles was a highly simplified interpretation and selection of facts; what was actually part of a complex public issue was reduced in the media to a few key points. Media articles also used more emotive language and anthropomorphised of the disease.

Metaphors are a proven device for creating vivid imagery, and were used to intensify the impression of the severity of the disease and the scale of the problem that children and parents were facing. Military metaphors appear in the media discourse more than in campaign texts, invoking a heightened sense of urgency and severity about the risks the disease presents. “Babies join front line in war on meningitis” (The West Australian, 9 May 2003) and “Shots fired in immunisation battle with Government Vaccination disaster” (Gold Coast Bulletin, 27 November
2003) are typical of this style of presentation. The most emotive language was used where the effects on children were described.

While the basic argument was presented simplistically, scientific facts were presented in formal language. The full weight of scientific language is brought to bear in a description of the drug: “Prevnar, the brand name of the US vaccine, is a seven valent conjugate pneumococcus vaccine, meaning it is effective on seven strains of the disease” (Daily Telegraph, 23 June 2000).

Another characteristic of newspaper discourse is the reliance on expert and other sources of information from which to construct articles (Teo 2000). This is evident in the media discourse in this case study, where articles are constructed around various quotations. Teo notes that this is designed to give the article authenticity; however, he adds that this dependence on legitimised sources results in a predominantly establishment view of the world. Only those with established credentials and experience are entitled to speak. Lay people are entitled to express their experiences but not their opinions, a pattern that is replicated in the media discourse and campaign discourse. Teo also notes that the powerful, or in this case expert, are further enhanced in status and visibility though quotations that both draw on their expertise and simultaneously promote it in the public sphere.

Table 7 shows a cross-tabulation of texts coded for specific voices and story elements. Stories contained multiple combinations of discourse arguments, and therefore the total percentages are not significant. As can be seen in this data, the voices allowed to speak on particular topics in the media discourse follow patterns established in the campaign and support the comments made by Teo (2000) and others about the support of established systems of influence and power.
Table 7 Cross tabulation: voices and story elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story elements</th>
<th>Advocacy group</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Doctor</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Politician</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antibiotics</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt funding</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different view</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience story</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>91.8%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunisation</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumococcal</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>56.1%</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
<td>92.9%</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previnar vaccine</td>
<td>86.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>98.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.4 Key themes identified in the media discourse

Key themes identified in the media discourse are presented in Table 8. Following the methodology set out in Chapter 4, the data set was coded for the message elements identified in the campaign documents as well as for any other themes which emerged from an initial qualitative scan. The consistency of the media text content with the campaign message elements meant that the number of story elements did not expand significantly. The purpose of this quantitative analysis is to demonstrate the degree to which the campaign strategy was reflected in the resulting media discourse and, as can be seen in Table 8, this effect is comprehensive. Only 10% of cases departed in any way from the established campaign line.

Quantitative coding within particular story elements was not undertaken, but this was dealt with by default; anything which deviated from the main campaign theme was recorded in this category. A number of texts were selected to examine the representation of public relations text information in detail.

Table 8 Frequency of themes in media discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story elements</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Percentage of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antibiotics</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call for govt funding</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different viewpoint</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience story</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunisation</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumococcal disease</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaccine</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>90.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1114</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 5 illustrates the frequency with which each story element appeared in the discourse over the duration of the campaign. Stories contained multiple combinations of discourse arguments and therefore the total percentage is not significant. As can be seen, the total effort reached a peak in late 2003 and early 2004, when the disease, the vaccine and calls to the government to fund it were in all stories. Other elements, used to establish the legitimacy of the vaccine earlier in the campaign, were much less prominent.

![Graph showing the frequency of key story elements over time]

**Figure 4 Appearance of key story elements over time**

Promotion of the message that the vaccine was the solution, pneumococcal disease, and calls for government funding were the three most frequently occurring elements. Ninety percent of stories contained the vaccine element, and when it appeared it was with linked with pneumococcal disease in 70% of articles, and with government funding in 52%. The element of recounted personal experiences appeared frequently with the mention of antibiotics (13% of personal experience stories), which be explained by the number of personal experience stories which, in recounting treatment, make mention of the use of antibiotics and their efficacy. Mention of antibiotics was most frequently associated with
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Pneumococcal disease (91.7%) and the vaccine (79.2%) and only appeared early in the campaign.

Apart from two long investigative articles which presented a critical perspective, the different viewpoint element was remarkably small and always was located half way down or lower in the article, an indication of its perceived unimportance.

6.5 Pneumococcal disease: the problem

The representation of pneumococcal disease in the media discourse very closely mirrored the public relations campaign elements. The coded items represent factual information about the disease: description, symptoms, incidence, onset etc. The greatest number of articles in which this type of information was given appeared at the start of the campaign. By the time activity reached its peak in the lead-up to the Federal budget and election in late 2003–04, the vaccine itself was more frequently mentioned, and in some articles knowledge of the disease was taken as given. This can be inferred by the omission of information that had been included earlier; in addition, the amount of factual information about the disease and vaccine decreased over time.

Journalists occasionally sought additional information and interviewed experts, but in most cases these served to support the campaign’s arguments. For example, the campaign backgrounder on pneumococcal disease contained the statement, “It is estimated that pneumococcal disease is responsible for the death of approximately five Australian children under five each year” (Pneumococcal Disease backgrounder; see Appendix 4.) and cited research conducted by Professor Peter McIntyre; and in a story in the Daily Telegraph (6 July 2001) Professor McIntyre is quoted repeating this information and expanding on it: thus, while additional research has been undertaken by the journalist, it follows the line the campaign presents. The other expert quoted in this article is a director of respiratory medicine at Sydney Children’s Hospital, who also endorses the vaccine. This story appeared in other newspapers in a similar form. The lead paragraph, “Pneumococcal disease kills between five and six children every year, but for the first time, parents now can immunise their offspring aged under two to
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prevent it” (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 2001), reflects the emphasis of the first stage of the campaign.

Further thematic coding revealed the language and form in which the information presented by the public relations campaign about the disease appeared throughout the media discourse. While there were minor changes to wording or emphasis, and additional research as described above, the overall message was consistent: information about the disease was presented in a factual manner, and supported with scientific data and statistical information from campaign documents and other public health sources such as government reports on notifiable diseases.

Actual manifestation and experience with the disease was communicated through personal case studies, such as that of Ashleigh Langoulant who was left severely disabled after contracting the illness. The campaign described the disease as “potentially life threatening” and a “potentially deadly disease”. In the media discourse a number of articles changed this to “killer” and “deadly” without the precursor “potential”. Some headlines illustrate this point: “Free jabs pledge for killer disease”, “Watch for signs of killer illness”, “Riddles of a lurking killer”; so there was some escalation of the emotive content in media reporting.

Overall the media discourse faithfully reported the factual scientific information provided. Following the criticisms of sensationalist reporting on meningococcal disease, there appeared to be more restraint in presentation of the disease, but there remains a strong emphasis on the potential of the disease to kill and the actual number of deaths. As noted in the campaign analysis, these are reported as numbers rather than percentages, as this conveys a greater impression of severity.

While the disease was not described in extreme terms, the idea of extreme threat was invoked by intertextual reference to the meningococcal disease discourse. Images of the spectre of meningococcal disease were invoked, too, by association, adding to the severity of the problem pneumococcal disease presents. Of note here is the pattern of what Fairclough refers to as collocations, “more or less regular patterns of co-concurrence between words” (2003, p.13). The campaign’s support
documents referred to this cross-over as a problem: the fear associated with meningococcal would have added to the fear of pneumococcal disease.

6.5.1 Antibiotic resistance

There were 28 texts coded for mention of antibiotics, and within these three broad themes were addressed. First was the issue of antibiotic resistance as a growing phenomenon, with some articles giving advice to parents about the misuse of antibiotics and the problems this can cause. The second theme was the role of vaccines in preventing illnesses such as pneumococcal disease as drugs “lose their potency”. Pneumococcal disease is described as a “potentially fatal antibiotic-resistant bacterium”. Quotes were obtained from doctors and researchers in Australia and overseas, and from advocacy group officials. This was consistent with the campaign message. The third main theme was the description of parents’ experience of the disease and hospital treatment involving high-dosage antibiotics. Whatever the outcome, the impression conveyed was of a difficult, traumatic experience. The patient needed to be diagnosed in time and correctly for antibiotics to be effective, bringing an element of chance into the equation. A lot can go wrong; and while one doctor is quoted as saying, “the bottom line is that if antibiotics are given in time they will cure it,” the parent experience stories suggest otherwise: “She was put on antibiotics immediately, but three hours later she stopped breathing and was put on life support. She never woke up.” (Ms Houldsworth, quoted Daily Telegraph, 30 May 2002). Even if the antibiotics work the effect may not last: “after more antibiotics he was sent home for a second time, but 48 hours later he was back again”; and the process is painful: “It was distressing to see what he was going through with the drugs” (Karen, quoted Gold Coast Bulletin, 8 April 2004).

Two investigative reports in 2001 discussed the antibiotic issue and in this context mentioned the increased resistance of pneumococcal disease to antibiotics. One argument presented in these articles was that antibiotic misuse was the problem, and that better management of this would mean an extended life for existing antibiotics. This argument did not feature in further reporting during the campaign.
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The issue of antibiotics and antibiotic resistance was less prominent than other elements during the campaign. The dominant theme in those articles that dealt with the issue was that a vaccine presented the best solution to the problem of antibiotic resistance in the case of pneumococcal disease.

6.5.2 Immunisation

Campaign documents suggested immunisation as a form of risk management. Media texts were coded for this variable where there was wide mention of the national immunisation program and immunisation, not specifically related to the pneumococcal vaccine. Ninety-one texts coded for this throughout the discourse. Thematic coding of these texts revealed a number of related themes.

First, campaign documents seek to invoke the discourse of immunisation as risk prevention, supporting this by alluding to the historical success of immunisation in treating diseases such as smallpox and polio. This idea was faithfully reproduced in the media discourse. Similar claims are made for the new vaccine: “without vaccination against pneumococcal diseases it is estimated that in the next year at least 13 Australian children will die while tens of thousands will suffer needlessly from illnesses such as meningitis and pneumonia” (Gold Coast Bulletin, 12 June 2004). Another theme, which reflects the context at the time, is the importance of immunisation in preventative health. The importance of “herd immunisation”, for reasons of both economy and patient treatment, was stressed. A number of general health promotion articles promoted good immunisation practice, and in these general articles vaccination against pneumococcal disease was mentioned as one of the regular recommended vaccinations. These articles reflected routine public health announcements designed to maintain high rates of immunisation in the community. The pneumococcal vaccine was introduced at the same time as other changes to the childhood immunisation schedule, and several articles told parents to have their children immunised, updating them on new mechanisms for reporting immunisation status and reassuring them that immunisation was safe. This thesis does not argue that this is directly related to the public relations campaign, but that the campaign occurred in the context of
other activities such as government immunisation information campaigns, and leveraged this to advantage.

Results of a poll of Australian parents in 2003 revealed a lack of awareness about what was required for effective immunisation. In these articles pneumococcal is mentioned as one of a list of vaccines available for children and there is a discussion of the program as a whole. It is asked why people may have been reluctant to immunise their children; the complexity of the scheme, with some vaccines funded and some not, was reported as one reason. Not all vaccines on the schedule were funded; and a new six-in-one combination vaccine, which became available in early 2004, was also expensive. Some articles suggest that the number of shots babies now need can be overwhelming for parents and may cause them to delay the whole program: “‘Taking babies along for immunisation can be an overwhelming and emotional experience for both parents and the babies – especially in view of the potentially daunting number of shots they need to have in their first year of life’ Professor Ziegler said” (Home Hill Observer, 16 September 2004).

These articles acknowledge the complexity of the immunisation schedule and some of the concerns of parents. Side effects were mentioned, although these were described as minimal and the risk assessed as worthwhile. There was some reporting of anti-vaccination groups’ concerns, but this reporting was minimal. Whenever anti-immunisation concerns were presented, the articles included counter-arguments from doctors. The language used to describe those opposed to immunisation is telling: they are described as “anti-immunisation zealots”.

Another theme, appearing particularly later in the campaign, relates to economic management issues in government policy-making. The Federal Government was under pressure to fund a number of new medical procedures, and the issue of balance was discussed in a few articles. There are also several articles which discuss the way funding decisions are made. It was reported that a consulting group, acting on behalf of Glaxo Smith Kline, had proposed that all vaccines recommended by independent medical advisers should be funded without question by government. This issue is debated in a number of articles, with the
government of the time arguing that this is not one but two decisions – a medical decision and an economic management and resource sharing decision. An issue central to this debate is the increasing number and cost of vaccines coming on to the market and the need for the government to make choices about which to provide at taxpayer expense.

A number of doctors are quoted saying that just having a vaccine on the immunisation schedule as recommended is not enough to make parents believe it is necessary – only the fact that the government is prepared to fund it conveys this.

6.5.3 The new vaccine (Prevenar)

The vaccine was mentioned in ninety percent of media articles. As the campaign progressed and emphasis shifted to securing government funding, the vaccine was often mentioned without any accompanying details about the disease. Articles were selected for the total sample only if they contained the word “pneumococcal”; they were only coded to a node for vaccine when both words appeared.

Again the representation of the vaccine in the media reflects the campaign line. Thematic coding reveals a number of themes. The campaign was launched with the announcement of a new vaccine which would protect children against a serious disease caused by an antibiotic-resistant strain of bacteria. The vaccine would “protect infants from the potentially fatal pneumococcal disease” (Townsville Bulletin, 6 July 2001). It was reported that vaccine would, as stated in the campaign discourse, “help provide protection against 8 to 85% of the bacterial strains that most commonly cause infant pneumococcal illnesses” (The Australian, 6 July 2001).

As the campaign proceeded there was general reporting of the uptake of the new vaccine; high-risk groups were urged to get the vaccine. This was mentioned as part of the general immunisation program targeted particularly at Aboriginal and senior citizen high-risk groups and in conjunction with specific flu warnings. A
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number of articles included details of how the vaccine is administered and when booster shots are needed – routine information which is included in regular public health campaigns.

The vaccine was frequently mentioned in the context of the meningococcal vaccine, which had been rolled out in a very expensive program which was overlapping the “Free Pneumo” campaign. The emphasis in this instance was on the vaccine’s ability to protect against a wide range of illnesses, for a greater number of children, than the meningococcal vaccine. Additional benefits such as reducing the number of middle ear infections were also cited.

At the start of 2004, a global shortage of the vaccine was reported. This was a problem for those who had commenced the series of injections but might have been unable to complete it, and also for those who might need to start.

A very prominent theme was the need for the government to fund the vaccine and, together with this, the prohibitive cost of the vaccine for individuals. At one stage chemists were accused of placing children in peril because they were overcharging for an already expensive vaccine. The argument was that all children needed the vaccination and the government should pay for it, as it did for all other vaccines on the Australian Standard Vaccination Schedule. The cost of the vaccine was a significant issue – prohibitively expensive and beyond the means of most parents.

The value of the vaccine was reported – the economic benefits in terms of public health cost-saving due to less illness, the reduction in children’s suffering, disability and death, and the capacity to prevent a range of childhood illnesses.

While all of this is consistent with the campaign materials, and could be considered reasonable in a wider sense, the omissions are more interesting. The media offer little discussion of the vaccine itself – its relative safety, where it was tested, where it is endorsed. A small number of articles reported the US experience with the vaccine, but this was the only comment on any testing of the vaccine’s safety and efficacy. For local endorsement, the articles relied on a
government committee recommendation but did not question how this had been obtained.

6.5.4 Experience story

These are used throughout the media and closely resemble the structure of those prepared by the public relations agency for the first part of the campaign. In one sense they represent a genre in their own right. They were tailored to the geographic region of the media text for local relevance, although the essential elements of every narrative fitted the pattern illustrated in Chapter 5. Personal experience stories were headline topics for 51 (12.4%) articles and appeared in 93 (22.6%) of stories in total. These were distributed relatively evenly over the period, and all followed the same format. This story element appeared together with calls for government funding (57%), pneumococcal disease (92%) and the vaccine (80%). The role played by this element was to add human experience to other elements of the rational argument. The emotional content of the campaign was carried through this element.

6.5.5 Government funding

This idea refers to the theme of government responsibility for funding the provision of the pneumococcal vaccine through the national immunisation schedule. In the total sample, nearly half (48.3%) of stories contained a reference to the need for the Federal Government to fund the vaccine.

While there was some early mention of the intention of the manufacturer to have the government place this vaccine on the schedule immediately after the launch, this element became increasingly prominent as the campaign progressed. It was brought into play after the danger of the illness, and the efficacy of the vaccine, had been legitimised in the early phases. Articles still included information about the disease and the new vaccine, but these were to support the idea that the vaccine should be funded. Wyeth was not frequently quoted on this aspect of the campaign.
Just before the government agreed to fund the vaccine the issue had become the
centre of a power struggle which ultimately played out in the lead-up to an
election. The Federal Opposition was reported as agreeing to fund it if elected, in
the face of government resistance. Media reporting of this aspect of the campaign
still leaned strongly to the main idea, although there was some reporting of the
government’s reasons for not complying. When advocates talked of government
responsibility at this stage in the campaign, it was in terms of lives saved and
equity obligations: “We all know that with that kind of money, it will be the most
needy kids who miss out” (Dr Daryl Price, quoted Gold Coast Bulletin, 21
February 2004).

When Federal Government politicians talked of government responsibility, there
were attempts to place the vaccine in the context of the bigger picture of national
budgets. Federal opposition politicians used the issue as an election tool and
supported claims from advocates for funding, even resorting to tactics similar to
the public relations campaign. Opposition Leader Mark Latham, who travelled to
Canberra with a sick child to draw attention to the issue, attracted criticism from
political opponents and the media for going a step too far. This is an interesting
comment from the media, given that the same tactic had been used during the
campaign and had been uncritically reported.

Campaign proponents used a number of rhetorical strategies to address how the
government should exercise its responsibility. One argued that the cost of private
supply was prohibitive and confusing to some parents, who would judge the
importance of a vaccine by whether or not it was on the national immunisation
schedule. The question then becomes one of social equity. Another maintained
that the government is responsible for providing equal access to health care for all
and thus if the product is there, it should be available to all and provided by the
government free of charge. Further, it was argued, immunisation against
pneumococcal disease made economic sense when the total cost to society for
treating the range of illnesses it prevents are considered.
6.6 Different viewpoints

The analysis so far has identified the degree to which the media discourse has been consistent with the message strategies of the public relations campaign. It is also important to identify the presence of other discourse actors and perspectives, not related to the campaign discourse but relevant to the wider debate on the issue. Part of the logic behind this case selection was that it was not a black and white situation. There are merits to immunisation programs for public health, although it cannot be assumed that every proposed vaccine is of equal value, or should be accepted without question. Judgments about health funding require a response to competing interests and issues and it is reasonable, in a balanced public sphere, to consider all aspects of the issue. This case is useful because it enables the complexities of real life practice to be examined, shades of grey rather than absolutes.

6.6.1 Pressure on government decision-making

Of the total sample, only 41 articles (10%) contained anything that questioned or contradicted the main argument of the campaign or added to the debate. The first issue these articles addressed was the pressure on government decision-making. Some reported on the fact that fear and media pressure had forced government action on the earlier meningococcal vaccine. While comparisons were made between the two illnesses during the campaign, only two articles raised any questions about media-generated fear:

Some doctors stress meningococcal infection is rare and suggest that public fear and the flurry of media activity that accompanies every outbreak have pushed the Federal Government to fund this program. They say the $290 million Australia’s most expensive vaccination campaign could be better spent. (Sydney Morning Herald, 27 March 2003)

This statement, part of a longer article (1444 words) in the Health and Science section of the paper, discusses the issue of the cost of the meningococcal program with reference to the pneumococcal campaign. It highlights one of the key
dilemmas in public health funding – how to prioritise spending. In essence it becomes a matter of judgement; and the argument in this instance is how to judge between the relatively rare but very serious meningococcal disease, and the more prevalent but less severe pneumococcal disease. The $290 million cost of the meningococcal vaccination drive was Australia’s most expensive; and the article questions whether this was the best use of money. In another article, Julie Leask argues that the risks of pneumococcal disease do not justify the inevitable trade-offs that would need to occur to provide public immunity. Increasingly, government funding decisions need to prioritise value for money and risk management; these are not easy decisions, but need to be addressed:

The question is whether diseases which affect the young and provide graphic images of disabled victims create sufficient community distress for the alleviation of that distress to have high value. (Julie Leask, quoted by Rowbotham, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 September 2003)

In this article Julie Leask also clarifies the role of the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI), which is to endorse a new vaccine without any part in determining equitable funding allocation. This is the only article that made this point; all other articles in the sample promoted the idea that the ATAGI recommendation should be an automatic signal to the government to fund the vaccine for all children.

Related to this issue of prioritising illness is the issue of cost and affordability. While cost was mentioned in many articles, it most often occurred only in terms of affordability to individual parents. The issue of cost to the community was mentioned infrequently, appearing in only four articles: “How do we deliver it at a cost the community can afford? I don’t believe anyone has a simple answer to that” (Dr Peter Collignon, quoted *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 March 2003). In May 2004, Health Minister Tony Abbott is quoted in the SMH as saying, “Obviously we want it to go ahead, but we’re not going to write a blank cheque for a multinational pharmaceutical company”. This alludes to the distinction between government decision-making and advisory group recommendation, which is not clearly drawn in most articles in the media discourse.
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This point is further emphasised in an article in *The Age* which queried the allocation of forty-one million dollars to a drug to treat an extremely rare disease with just forty sufferers. The crux of the article was the debate about the basis on which to allocate resources: it asked if, in debating value for money, there “a danger of putting a dollar value on a life” (29 May 2004)? This will be an ongoing debate as new drugs are released on the market. A similar article appeared in *The Australian* on 29 May 2004; both articles argued that pneumococcal vaccine represented better value.

In late 2004, a report from a consulting firm hired by Glaxo Smith Kline recommended that the government should be obliged to fund vaccines recommended to it by independent medical advisors, or explain why it would not. At that time, Cabinet approval was required for any vaccine estimated to cost over 10 million dollars per year, and there was a drive from manufacturers and the public to have vaccines exempted from the cap.

Governments find themselves in an increasingly difficult juggling act, balancing the needs of an aging population, exponential advances in medical technology and limited budgets. For example, government expenditure on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, which subsidises many commonly used medications, has almost doubled in real terms in the past decade. Any call to fund a new vaccine needs to establish its legitimacy within the wider contest of government health policy.

6.6.2 Efficacy of the vaccine

In one instance an article questioned the efficacy claims of the vaccine. Overseas evidence suggested that while pneumococcal immunisation can reduce the likelihood of ear infections caused by the bug, it does not substantially reduce the rate of ear infections overall (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 March 2003). The campaign documents only claimed that pneumococcus is “one of the causes of otitis media” and did acknowledge that other viruses and bacteria can cause the condition. There was, however, consistent media reporting of the benefits of the vaccine in terms of the number of middle ear infections that children would suffer as a result of pneumococcal disease, but no mention of the proportion of total
middle ear infections this involved. This detail is necessary to any consideration of public spending on the vaccine in the context of overall cost benefits.

Prior to the introduction of universal availability of the vaccine in January 2005, the Daily Telegraph reported that “two children developed the deadly pneumococcal disease, despite receiving very expensive vaccinations meant to prevent it” (8 October 2004). A company spokesperson attributed this to inappropriate administration. Vaccine efficacy was mentioned in a few cases when neither of the pneumococcal vaccines available prevented particular strains of the diseases:

There was a vaccine for pneumococcal, but it only worked for the nine most common strains of the bug, not all 90 strains. (Herald Sun, 19 May 2002)

Before the vaccine was registered, early reports mentioned tracking pneumococcus in NSW to make sure that the vaccine, which had been effective overseas, was also effective in Australia. This was the only mention of Australian testing. Opposition to immunisation

The other main theme in the different view articles is opposition to immunisation. This includes general opposition to immunisation, or questions regarding the number of vaccines used. In a letter to the editor in the Townsville Bulletin a Doctor Ebringer challenges “anti-immunisation zealots” (Townsville Bulletin, 6 December 2003). His language is particularly dismissive, accusing the anti-immunisation lobby of “peddling” dangerous misinformation and replacing “reason and logic with confused dogma and scientific naivety”. He argues that the newspaper, by editorialising an earlier letter from these “bigots”, adding background highlighting and a photo of an apprehensive child, will lead readers “to believe the paper condones the alarming views of this minority” and expresses the view that, in the future, the newspaper should support community efforts to maintain high vaccine coverage. The paper published a response from the opposition, a rare instance where the issue was debated.

A longer article (1734 words) which appeared in the Cairns Post on 25 August 2003 dealt with the issue of the discrediting of some research by Andrew
Wakefield in Great Britain, who reported links between autism and MMR vaccine. This article discussed the importance of valid and transparent scientific research and emphasised the damaging effects of unfounded criticism of immunisation on population immunisation rates and subsequent control of preventable disease. The Australian Vaccination Network (AVN), an anti-vaccination organisation, president Meryl Dorey was quoted in *The Age* (15 September 2004), and in a number of other major broadsheet papers, on the issue of vaccine safety. Her comments related to the issue of immunisation overall and did not mention pneumococcal directly. The articles also mentioned growing resistance to the combined vaccines coming onto the market.

The AVN received relatively generous space in those articles where it was mentioned. In an article of 876 words in the *Herald Sun* (6 July 2001) they had 98 words written about them. Other mentions of opposition tended to state what was being opposed and then caution against it:

> In her column, Ms Scarborough, representing Vaccination Information, did not give all the relevant information and we encourage people to consider all the facts with regard to vaccination. (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 17 November 2002)

Other researchers have noted (Leask & Chapman 2002) that anti-vaccination claims tend to be carried within other more “newsworthy” discourses such as cover-ups or conspiracies in private interest and government cover-ups. Here, claims of inadequate testing by government authorities and pharmaceutical disease-mongering linked with the anti-immunisation discourse.

### 6.6.3 Pharmaceutical company promotional methods

The most significant commentary on the issue of drug companies and immunisation was an investigative article written by Gary Hughes for *The Age* on 22 December 2003. This was published at a peak time in the pneumococcal campaign, which was the focus of the article. The activities of Wyeth, in “helping to fund a lobbying campaign by a supposedly independent health group to get the Federal Government to introduce immunisation against pneumococcal disease”
were revealed. The article named the Meningitis Centre and its chairman, Bruce Langoulant, who admitted that Wyeth paid the public relations company Porter Novelli to help with the campaign. This included the trip to Canberra in early December by 12 parents of child victims of the disease to lobby the government; Hughes pointed out that the assistance to the group from Wyeth through Porter Novelli was not disclosed. This article followed an earlier series of similar articles revealing that “international pharmaceutical companies were pouring millions of dollars into supposedly independent patient groups in Australia to help market products” (Canberra Times, 23 August 2003).

This issue was taken up in other media outlets. Medical writer Judy Skatssoon talked about the financial side of health campaigns: “for every disease and disorder, there seems to be a support group and an awareness week”. She noted that all these activities need funds, and “health professionals are becoming concerned that drug company funding is turning them into unwitting ‘brokers’ for the pharmaceutical industry” (Illawarra Mercury, 23 August 2003). The same article raised the issue of “the risk of false and exaggerated health claims”, an issue which had appeared frequently in criticisms of pharmaceutical company marketing campaigns. This criticism did not relate specifically to pneumococcal disease; the author was talking in general terms and using specific examples to illustrate her points.

Another issue this article raised was the fundamental interest of pharmaceutical companies in pharmaceutical solutions to health problems. When, through powerful interests lobbying for influence, public health debate is framed in these terms, other non-pharmaceutical solutions may not be explored. Skatssoon (2003) argued that there is a trend for diseases to be turned into industries, with their own support groups, organisations, etc. Organisations on the receiving end of support are seriously compromised, however much they stress their independence and insist that they rely on donations to offer their services. In this context, the pneumococcal campaign and the arrangement between Wyeth and the advocacy group are mentioned.
Perth GP Joe Kosterich raised the point that immunisation for high-risk diseases like tetanus and rubella is warranted, but the need for vaccines against diseases like chicken pox, where risks are lower, should be questioned: “If people start to weigh up the risk of adverse reactions against the likely benefit they might decide to take their chances and go without”. There was a risk of “killing the goose that laid the golden egg” by “disease-mongering” (The West Australian, 2 September 2004).

The issue of professional autonomy is relevant to this case. Journalist Judy Skatssoon argues that consumer groups are not the only ones benefiting from the largesse of drug companies. Professional associations and medical professionals regularly receive “educational grants” and other research support, which may compromise their independence. Professor David Henry, Professor of Pharmacology, is quoted warning that “organisations too ready to embrace the generosity of pharmaceutical sponsors risk disadvantaging those they purport to represent” (Canberra Times 23 August 2003).

Criticisms were also levelled at the media. In the lead-up to the 2004 federal election, Federal Opposition Leader Mark Latham had taken an aggressive approach to the promotion of the Labor Party promise to fund the vaccine for all children. As part of his campaign, he had taken a sick child and her parents to Canberra to draw attention to the disease. The use of a child for political ends was noted in The Australian (15 May 2004) as “stunning media management”, producing an image of Latham as soft and caring. This is one of the rare examples in the media discourse where any comment is made on the use of children in the promotion of political messages. As the promotional campaign overall was a political campaign some mention of the use of children by the interests promoting the vaccine would have been warranted. The Australian’s remark was not endorsed by other media, but was described as “the most shameless politicisation of a child in the history of Australian politics” (Daily Telegraph, 18 May 2004), which argued that the press should be able to look beyond the emotional sight of a sick child and be more questioning. It also questioned Latham’s claim about the numbers dying, and remonstrated with the media at large for not challenging the figures. As opposed to the fifty deaths Latham attributed to pneumococcal
disease, *The Sydney Morning Herald* had increased this figure to 60 a year, a number that went “unchallenged in the flood of media tears”. The *Daily Telegraph* article offered statistics from the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System, operated under the auspices of the Federal Department of Health: 10 deaths of children under five from pneumococcal disease in 2003, nine in 2002, and five in 2001—a mortality rate of between 1 and 1.5 per cent of those who developed the disease at that age. This article talked of the difficulty in making public policy, arguing that “the death of one child is unacceptable, of course, but governments must also exercise a degree of control when spending public money, be it on health treatment, roads, or any other item” (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 2003). This argument continued in *The Australian*, which recognised that, while it may be unthinkable to some that a vaccine should not be freely available, all medical interventions needed to be assessed in terms of relative cost and finite budgets. They balanced this view by adding, “the ATAGI’s rationale for public funding of the vaccine were not only the lives saved but the costs of treatment and after-care of survivors” (29 May 2004).

Where is public relations mentioned in these investigative articles? Surprisingly, they are not blamed directly for the company’s deceptive practices. The only mention is indirect: “There's a trend towards ... PR being pummelled through organisations that wouldn’t exist were it not for the commercial interest” campaigns are “driven by a public relations company” (*Canberra Times*, 23 August 2003). Porter Novelli is described as “arranging a publicity stunt” in the form of an awareness campaign (*The Age*, 22 December 2003). Public relations is not mentioned in any independent professional capacity but in terms of a “gun for hire” to commercial interests. Nowhere was their professional opinion on the conduct of the campaign or the wider issues is sought or reported.

6.7 Social actors: who speaks in the media discourse?

The discussion so far has identified and analysed the appearance of campaign discourse themes and other ideas related to the issue of pneumococcal vaccination in the media discourse. The other key element of the discourse strategy, identified in Chapter 5, was the use of social actors whose voices would articulate the ideas
being promoted by the campaign. This section reports on the manner in which those voices appear in the discourse, the degree to which their messages are consistently reproduced, and evidence of legitimisation strategies used by these voices. The section begins with a general overview of the appearance of social actors in the discourse and proceeds to a detailed explanation of the ideas promoted and the legitimisation strategies used. Social actors appeared at different times during the campaign, and in different combinations, depending on the intent of the article in which they appeared and the stage of the campaign.

It is notable that direct company engagement in the discourse is little and infrequent. The only major departure from this is during the first quarter of 2004; this can be explained by their need to respond to questions about product supply shortages. At no time are they reported as directly urging the government to fund provision of their product. It is also notable that the representation of politicians in this debate is extremely high. This unusual feature probably occurs because 2004 was an election year and thus presented an opportunity for lobbyists to approach politicians and for politicians to use this emotive issue in their election campaigns. The engagement of politicians was actively pursued by the “Free Pneumo” campaign, whose voices were most dominant when the campaign was at its peak (followed by doctors, parents, professional associations and finally advocate groups). If we can say that the politicians are involved differently to the other actors because they are debating, from different sides of the political fence, an issue that has garnered public attention then we can identify the other four voices as the main drivers of the medical campaign. The company voice remains small in the debate at this time.

**Table 9 Frequency of voices in media discourse**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voices</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Percentage of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy group</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health professional</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional association</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>862</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While the frequency table above presents simple descriptive statistics, it does illustrate the pivotal role of doctors in this media discourse. Virtually all doctors quoted in the discourse were taking a pro-pneumococcal stance, using the legitimacy derived from their professional capacity as medical practitioners and, at times, as doctors representing organisations. Nearly half the sample texts (45.9%) contain a call to the government to provide funding for the provision of the vaccine. The voices of doctors and parents are the most prominent in these articles, after that of politicians. Not surprisingly, nearly 90% of stories containing a personal experience story (89.65%) contained the voice of a parent, with 19.54% also containing the voice of advocacy groups and 39.08% the voice of doctors. Social actors appear according to their expertise and authority: for example, the wider topic of immunisation is most addressed by doctors (57.65%), politicians (18.82%) and professional associations (28.24%).

The variable of “voice” was only coded when discourse actors were quoted, whether directly or indirectly. A notable exception is the degree to which the authority of official government bodies was evoked to legitimise the position for calls for government funding: a form of “expert authority”. Direct reference to the Australian Technical Advisory Committee appeared in 62 articles and the National Health and Medical Research Council in 67 articles; more than 70% of these in 2003–04.

The following section presents a detailed discussion of the role of the voices used in media discourse. The character of each voice is described, and the role is illustrated in relation to key themes in the discourse and to the use of discourse features and legitimation strategies.

6.7.1 The parental voice

The parental voice features prominently throughout the campaign, appearing in 20.6% of stories. In all instances, the parents participating in the discourse had directly experienced pneumococcal disease in their young children. Their participation in the discourse is legitimised by their personal experience of the disease, which gives them the authority to warn and advise other parents.
Not all of the parents quoted in media texts are directly locatable in campaign texts as many emerged during the course of the campaign. What is noteworthy is that for the duration of the campaign the voice of the parent in the discourse plays a consistent role, and is consistent with the model produced in the campaign texts. Only the names change.

The parental voice appears most frequently in articles together with the voice of advocacy groups (18.8%), the voice of the doctor (35.3%) and the voice of politicians (29.4%). In each instance, the parental voice is employed to perform the same role; different articles use other voices depending on the emphasis of the story. Early in the campaign this focused on awareness of the disease; later it turned to calls to politicians to fund the vaccine.

The role of the parental voice in media reports is to portray the direct personal experience of pneumococcal disease. Through the narrative of their experience, their voice provides the colour to the whole experience. They recount in detail the suffering endured by their children during an attack and the kinds of extreme medical interventions needed in hospital, as well as the outcomes and their impact on the family. In this respect, as in the case studies prepared by public relations for the campaign, they provide information with which other parents can identify. They are normal families experiencing a traumatic illness which changes their lives. They add the emotional component to the overall message and speak from a narrower perspective than other voices such as the Australian Medical Association (AMA). They do not speak in broad policy terms but express the perspective of individual experience and of “families”. They describe doctors’ difficulties in diagnosing the disease in time, and problems with antibiotics; they endorse policy initiatives to make the vaccine freely available. In this they illustrate the implications of the broad principles set out by other discourse participants. All parental voices appearing in the media discourse are in support of the new vaccine. Once the vaccine becomes available, the issue of affordability is raised. For some, paying for the vaccine is a financial struggle; however, they think it worth the sacrifice. Others who cannot afford it claim to be fearful for their child’s safety. The two issues they drive home are funding and awareness.
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The parental voice also supports the need for the government to assume responsibility for the risk. They use strong language to articulate their anger at the government’s delay in funding – a stance that is “devastating”, and which leaves them “shocked and terrified. They claim no political agenda; they just want the government to do the right thing”. The argument is not sophisticated and can even be considered naïve or disingenuous.

The parental voice is allowed to be emotional. Their children’s experience and their personal trauma are described in graphic terms. They “battle” with an “insidious infection” – a child is “struck down, fighting a bacteria” and the whole experience is “horrendous”, a “nightmare”. A strong theme found in the parental voice is the expressed desire to help others so that they will not have to go through the same suffering and loss. They also want to build awareness of the disease, support other parents and ensure that their child’s suffering was not in vain.

The way the parental voice is presented constructs an idea of the appropriate role of the parent. They give advice to other parents and this, together with their response to the illness, models the ideal behaviour of parents. They are ultimately responsible for their children and must trust their instincts; they know best. For example, “Mrs Hearn has a mother’s intuition that her son has survived his ordeal unscathed, but has become a ‘super-paranoid parent’” (Daily Telegraph, 9 May 2003). The discourse works to construct an object in the discourse, the “good parent”: fearful, intuitive, vigilant in the face of an unseen enemy.

Table 10 sets out examples of the parental voice as they appear in the discourse relating to core themes in the media and campaign discourses, as well as to minor discourse themes and legitimation strategies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Discourse/legitimation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 Caleb’s mother, Faith, said there had been no warning Caleb could develop a life-threatening illness from the symptoms he presented. (<em>Gold Coast Bulletin</em>, 17 July 2003).</td>
<td>1.2 Legitimation through use of moral tale. Discourse theme of severe illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3 “This is something that could take a life away,” she said. (<em>Wannamie, Gold Coast Bulletin</em>, 17 July 2003)</td>
<td>1.3 Dramatisation of disease.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5 “They ran out of places to put the catheters in his little arms...he just screamed and screamed.” (<em>Sunday Tasmanian</em>, 14 December 2003))</td>
<td>1.5 Graphic description of disease. Discourse theme of severe illness, social &amp; economic cost.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Antibiotic resistance</td>
<td>2.1 “Unfortunately, the treatment came too late,” Rudnick says. “At around 10am, just 30 minutes after the antibiotics treatment was started, Nathan went into toxic shock and suffered a cardiac arrest.” (<em>Susan Rudnick, Daily Telegraph</em>, 6 October 2003)</td>
<td>2.1 Personal legitimation, logical experiential argument. Discourse theme of reduced effect of antibiotics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Immunisation</td>
<td>3.1 “It’s frustrating as a parent, I didn’t know about (the disease or vaccination) with Hayden and still two years later awareness of the disease and the vaccination is still quite low,” she said. (<em>Joanna McCosker-Rees, Courier Mail</em>, 19 May 2003)</td>
<td>3.1 Personal legitimation, role model legitimation on benefits of immunisation. Discourse theme of prevention of disease.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Prevenar vaccine</td>
<td>4.1 “I couldn’t think of anything worse than a parent suffering the loss of a child, like I did, and finding out there was a vaccine they could have got,” Mrs Houldsworth of Nowra said. (<em>Daily Telegraph</em>, 8 December 2003)</td>
<td>4.1 Legitimation via cautionary tale. Discourse theme of prevention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 Westlake mother Kate Wentz said she would have no qualms about paying $500 to $700 to vaccinate daughter Elizabeth, 3, and her baby due in seven weeks. (<em>South West News</em>, 1 October 2003)</td>
<td>4.2 Legitimation via personal status and role model. Discourse theme of value for money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.7 “No parent should have to go through this. If I’d known there was a vaccine I would have bought it. I don’t want Jacob to die in vain,” said Stacey, of Claremont. (<em>Hobart Mercury</em>, 9 January 2004)</td>
<td>4.7 Legitimation via cautionary tale, emotional language, moral argument. Discourse theme of solution to disease threat.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                              | 4.8 “What worries me is that all our friends know                                                                                                                                                      | 4.9 Legitimation via personal

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Table 10 The parental voice
## Theme | Examples | Discourse/legitimation strategies
--- | --- | ---
what we’ve been through but only one has vaccinated their child, solely because of the cost.” (Danzi, *The West Australian*, 14 May 2004) | experience as disease victim and cautionary tale.

### 5. Experience story

5.1 Mrs Cornish said despite doctors’ assurances her son was only suffering from a virus, she knew something was “not quite right”. (Robina Cornish, *Gold Coast Bulletin* 9 July 2001)

5.2 “I would like to say to parents that if their child has a persisting cold or are just not being themselves, take them to a doctor,” she said. (Karen Sharpe, *City Leader*, 12 August 2003)

5.3 “What we have been through is nothing short of a nightmare, it has just been horrendous.” (Graham Roberts, *Sunday Telegraph*, 6 July 2003)

5.4 “I was told I was going to lose my daughter,” Tamara’s mother, Erzsebet, said. “I was very frightened. She didn’t even recognise me.” (*The West Australian*, 29 August 2001)

### 6. Government funding

6.1 “It’s not a privilege to have your children immunised, it’s a necessity.” (Ms Johnston, *Southern News*, 2 October 2003)

6.2 “I don’t think it’s fair on kids like Tiara that have had it and those who are at risk of getting it,” Ms Wedlock said. “The Government really needs to have another hard look at it and maybe think about putting a bit more into the budget into caring for … our children by putting it on the list, or making it a lot cheaper.” (*Townsville Bulletin*, 5 June 2004)

6.3 Mrs Evans said it was frustrating that the meningococcal C vaccine had been funded by the Government when pneumococcal was much more prevalent and more preventable. (*Gold Coast Bulletin*, 20 September 2003)

### 6.7.2 The corporate voice

Wyeth, the company producing the vaccine, are not a prominent voice and are only directly quoted in 10% of media texts. When they do speak, it is to launch the product, provide scientific data to support it and present facts about the disease and vaccination. Spokespeople for the company are most frequently employees...
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with medical or scientific qualifications. After the launch of the vaccine, whenever their voice is heard directly, it is to support or respond to questions posed by other discourse actors.

Other voices in the discourse with which the company appear most frequently are doctors (56%) – here medical spokespeople endorse the new product, expanding on the illness and the benefits of the vaccine. In 19.5% of articles, the company voice appears with the voice of the politician, but this is later in the campaign and related to issues of shortages and pricing negotiations with the government. Similarly, the company voice appears with spokespeople from professional associations in 22% of articles; and in another 22% where the company voice appears, the voice of the parent is present. Many of these later articles relate to supply shortages.

Wyeth adhere to scientific discourse and distance themselves from the emotional, human side of the campaign. They take the position of a technically expert but indifferent provider of a scientific product; impassioned pleas and calls for the government to purchase the product come from others. This position is most evident in their response to product shortages: the company takes no responsibility for making the product available. While the product is deemed essential to public health, in this situation the problem is with government inaction. The company also comment in investigative articles by The Age in December 2003, on pharmaceutical company sponsorship of advocacy groups. The language used by company spokespeople is formal, brief and unemotional, and all claims about the disease and the vaccine are supported by scientific evidence.

This highlights the delicate balance in relationships between the government and commercial interests in the provision of public health. Endorsement for the product is provided by third parties: advocacy groups, medical professionals and independent advisory committees who carry the argument to the government and the wider public. The company remains in the background, not entering the public debate except where requested to respond. The company’s responsibility appears to be limited to delivering a product which is technically capable of meeting
public health standards for usage, and ensuring delivery. This is not unusual: Leask and Chapman (2002), in a study reviewing positive news coverage of immunisation over a four year period, report that providers were not apportioned any degree of responsibility for low immunisation rates.

The interdependence of state and private interests in public health presents challenges in building and maintaining public trust in the processes by which medicines and services are provided. The public need to trust that commercial interests are not unduly influencing the decisions government bodies make, and the company in this case is making the effort to maintain the impression that they are not.

Table 11 The corporate voice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Discourse/legitimation strategies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. According to Wyeth Lederle Vaccines, pneumococcal disease is becoming increasingly difficult to treat due to rapidly emerging antibiotic-resistant strains of the disease. <em>(Gold Coast Bulletin, 9 July 2001)</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 “Pneumococcal is a serious hidden threat because it’s becoming more resistant to antibiotics, making it more serious,” Dr David said. <em>(Courier Mail, 22 August 2002)</em></td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Immunisation</td>
<td>3.1 Prevenar appears to be an effective solution to this serious health concern, stimulating the immune system of infants and also affecting immune system memory,” Dr Ahmed said. <em>(Australian Pharmacy Trade, 22 February 2001)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Prevenar vaccine</td>
<td>4.1 “Wyeth medical director Dr Ahmed said ”... As pneumococcal disease is a growing threat to children worldwide, Prevenar offers protection to children from this potentially devastating illness”. <em>(Australian Pharmacy Trade, 22 February 2001)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 “According to Wyeth, Prevenar is expected to cover 81% to 89% of the invasive pneumococcal isolates known to cause pneumococcal illnesses in urban Australian children and the seven serotypes in Prevenar represent more than 80% of antibiotic resistance”</td>
<td>4.1 Legitimation via personal authority, organisation position. Discourse theme of prevention better than treatment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 Legitimation via scientific rationalisation. Use of statistical evidence to support claim, use of scientific language. Discourse theme of scientifically proven product.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Theme | Examples | Discourse/legitimation strategies
---|---|---
| | resistant serotypes throughout the world. *(Australian Pharmacy Trade, 22 February 2001)* | 4.3 Legitimation via personal authority as doctor and company position. Unemotional statement of fact, no opinion. Discourse theme of economic value. |
| Theme | Examples | Discourse/legitimation strategies
---|---|---
| | 4.3 Dr Jamshed Ahmed, medical director of Wyeth, the company which developed the vaccine said it would cost between $100–$150 per shot when privately prescribed by a GP. *(Townsville Bulletin, 6 July 2001)* | |
| 5. Experience story | The company did not comment on personal experience stories. | |
| 6. Government funding | 6.1 A spokeswoman for the vaccine’s makers, Wyeth Lederle Vaccines – a division of American Home Products Corporation, said the company would try to have it listed on the PBS. *(Adelaide Advertiser, 6 July 2001)* | 6.1 Legitimation via personal authority. Discourse theme of government funding role. |
| | 6.2 Wyeth’s director of corporate affairs, Rachel David, said the company did not provide funding specifically to the Meningitis Centre to run campaigns. However, she said it was “obviously one of our goals” to ensure that the Government fully fund pneumococcal immunisation as recommended by the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation. *(The Age, 22 December 2003).* | 6.2 Legitimation via personal authority and impersonal authority of an official body. Discourse theme of government funding role to act on expert advice. |
| | 6.3 Wyeth corporate affairs manager Dr Rachel David said the Government’s failure to fund the vaccine had pushed Australia well down the list, as government–funded programs were supplied before private markets. *(Courier Mail, 23 February 2004)* | 6.3 Legitimation via personal authority as a doctor and organisational status. Discourse theme of government funding role. |
| 7. Different viewpoint | 7.1 “If they (the Meningitis Centre) consider it is appropriate, we do pay for air fares and other things, so that they can take their message forward. But we don’t stipulate what that message needs to be. We leave that up to them,” Dr David said. *(The Age, 22 December 2003)* | 7.1 Legitimation via personal authority and moral argument. Discourse theme of private interest influence. |

#### 6.7.3 The advocacy voice

Advocacy groups played a prominent role in the media discourse on this issue. As has been established in Chapter 5, the primary advocacy voice for the public relations campaign was the West Australian Meningitis Centre.
Chapter 6: Analysis of media discourse

The chairman of this group, Mr Langoulant, played a large role in the campaign, from its launch until the final approval for funding. His voice appears most frequently as an advocate group spokesperson and victim parent, these two roles not always appearing in the same articles. In 59 articles coded for the voice of advocacy groups, 23 included the voice of this organisation through its Mr Langoulant. Another related organisation that featured prominently was the Meningitis Foundation of Australia, quoted in 11 articles.

As the campaign effort increased in intensity, other advocacy groups appeared in the media discourse. For example, when the issue of social equity was featured, the advocacy groups cited were organisations relevant to that sector – Salvation Army Support Services Network through the voice of the director and, in the case of South Australia, the Salisbury Uniting Church through the voice of the minister. Other groups speaking in support of the campaign were the Australian Parents Association, childcare centres acting as a coordinated group and other smaller, community-based offshoots of the larger meningitis support organisations. Not all advocacy groups engaged in the discourse supported the campaign objectives. Those critical of current mass immunisation policy and practices, such as the Australian Vaccination Network, had some voice in the debate, but a muted voice: only five articles were coded for this voice.

Overall, fifteen percent of the articles sampled contained the voice of an advocate organisation. This figure does not adequately represent their impact on the discourse, as it captures only instances where they were directly quoted. It does not take note of the times when members were speaking from other perspectives but still promoting the agenda of the group. In a number of articles when the advocacy voice was present, there were also personal experience stories (29%). For example, a local meningitis support group founded by a parent affected by the disease to “provide support and awareness on all forms of meningitis, meningococcal and pneumococcal disease” and to “stop the paranoia” around them. In this instance, the advocate’s voice is more properly located within the context of personal experience of the diseases.
With the exception of the Australian Vaccination Network, all groups endorsed the key themes of the campaign without question with the single exception of the Australian Parents Association, who did recommend that all vaccines should be “investigated thoroughly before use”.

**Table 12 The voice of advocate groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Discourse/Legitimation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Pneumococcal disease   | 1.1 Mr Langoulant, who now runs the Meningitis Centre, says so far it has cost his family and the community $200,000 to provide for his disabled daughter’s needs. *(Daily Telegraph, 8 December 2003)*  
  1.2 Chairman Bruce Langoulant says pneumococcal is one of the most insidious diseases a child can get. “It is the leading cause of meningitis in Australian children under five and can cause cerebral palsy, deafness, epilepsy and a host of other terrible disabilities,” Mr Langoulant said. *(Sunday Tasmanian, 14 December 2003)*  
  1.3 A survey by the Meningitis Centre shows only 43% of parents have heard of the disease and even fewer can recognise the symptoms. *(Daily Telegraph, 9 May 2001)*  
  1.4 “Parents can’t afford to be in the dark about this disease,” he said. “They should not hesitate to seek medical advice if they suspect a child in their care may have any form of pneumococcal disease as deterioration can be very rapid.” *(Herald Sun, 10 May 2001)* | 1.1 Legitimation via personal authority, and economic rationalisation.  
  Discourse theme of social and economic cost.  
  1.2 Legitimation via personal authority, scientific rationalisation.  
  Discourse theme of severe illness.  
  Dramatisation of disease.  
  Discourse theme of severe illness.                                                                 |
| 2. Antibiotic resistance   | 2.1 Meningitis Foundation CEO Elizabeth Watling said information issued by the Commonwealth Communicable Diseases Intelligence Network showed the vaccine could also help reduce the incidence of antibiotic resistance in the community. *(Hills Shire Times, 24 June 2003)* | 2.1 Legitimation via personal authority, institutional authority, scientific rationalisation.  
  Discourse theme of antibiotic overuse.                                                                 |
| 3. Immunisation            | 3.1 Meningitis Centre chairman Bruce Langoulant said many parents who recently had their children vaccinated against meningococcal C would mistakenly think their children were protected from meningitis. “There’s not only meningococcal, but also pneumococcal bacteria and viruses,” he said. *(The West Australian, 16 June 2003)* | 3.1 Legitimation via personal authority, scientific rationalisation.  
  Discourse theme of prevention better than cure.                                                                 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Discourse/Legitimation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Prevenar vaccine</td>
<td>4.1 Mr Langoulant said a vaccine, which would be suitable against up to 85% of pneumococcal strains, was expected in Australia this year. (Herald Sun, 10 May 2001) 4.2 “The new vaccine can protect Australian infants from the leading cause of meningitis and prevent up to 1000 cases of other severe infections caused by the pneumococcal bacteria,” Mr Langoulant said. (Hills Shire Times, 24 June 2003) 4.3 “Data collated over three years in the United States showed vaccination reduced pneumococcal disease by 78% in infants under 2 years,” Mr Langoulant said. (Hills Shire Times, 24 June 2003) 4.4 “There’s no way in the world people in those circumstances could be able to afford three shots at $100-odd dollars a pop,” Salvation Army Family Support Services Network Director Julie Parr said. (Standard Messenger, 13 March 2004)</td>
<td>4.1 Legitimation via personal authority, scientific rationalisation. Discourse theme of solution to disease threat. 4.2 Legitimation via personal authority, scientific rationalisation. Discourse theme of vaccine solution to disease threat. 4.3 Legitimation via personal authority, scientific rationalisation, Discourse theme of overseas research endorsement. 4.4 Legitimation via personal authority, moral argument – common sense. Discourse theme of social equity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Experience story</td>
<td>5.1 The pair has formed the Central Coast Meningitis Foundation Community Group to provide support and awareness on all forms of meningitis, meningococcal and pneumococcal disease. (Central Coast Express, 12 February 2003) 5.2 Mr Langoulant’s experience with Ashleigh encouraged him, as the father of three daughters, to provide support for other parents in similar circumstances by becoming chairman of the Meningitis Centre. (The West Australian, 7 April 2003)</td>
<td>5.1 Legitimation via personal authority of direct experience. Discourse theme of awareness building. 5.2 Legitimation via personal authority of direct experience. Discourse theme of awareness building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Government funding</td>
<td>6.1 Elizabeth Watling, general manager of support and advocacy group the Meningitis Foundation said the decision to recommend the pneumococcal vaccine was “definitely a step forward, but we need a government-funded immunisation program” (Daily Telegraph, 6 October 2003) 6.2 Perth-based Meningitis Centre chairman Bruce Langoulant said the Government razor gang had twice rejected recommendations for the vaccination to be publicly funded. (The West Australian, 5 May 2004) 6.3 Meningitis Centre chairman Bruce Langoulant said he was pleased the Opposition had recognised the terrible dilemma faced by families unable to afford the $500 cost of the vaccine. (Courier Mail, 14 May 2004)</td>
<td>6.1 Legitimation via personal authority of organisation position. Discourse theme of awareness building. 6.2 Legitimation via personal authority and institutional authority of advisory groups. Discourse theme of government responsibility 6.3 Legitimation via personal authority of direct experience and organisation. Discourse theme of vaccine unaffordability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.7.4 The political voice

In the later stages of the campaign, particularly as the issue became a contentious electoral issue, the voice of politicians – both government and opposition – entered the discourse. These were drawn from local, state and federal levels of government. As stated earlier, this voice became disproportionately large in this sample as the issue became a contentious point between the major parties in the lead-up to the 2004 federal election.

The voices of politicians are present in three main ways: first, Federal government ministers respond to pressure from various groups to have the vaccine included on the national immunisation schedule. Second, the Federal opposition focuses on the issue, calling for the government action and making funding of this vaccine a key election promise. Third, politicians at other levels of government add weight to the call to the Federal government to fund the vaccine. Many of these represent the local perspective of the issue, where the disease is seen as a real threat in particular communities rather than a remote risk on a national level.
### Table 13: The voice of politicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Discourse/legitimation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pneumococcal disease</td>
<td>1.1 “The symptoms sound like the flu but if these kids are left alone, in two days it could be too late. Death is a real possibility and the side effects include permanent disability. This is a very serious illness and needs to be taken very seriously.” (Councillor Dalley, <em>Logan West Leader</em>, 24 December 2003)</td>
<td>1.1 Legitimation via personal authority. Discourse theme of severe illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 Labor MP Jennifer Rankine, parliamentary secretary assisting Health Minister Lea Stevens, said infections were four times more prevalent than meningococcal and eight times more deadly. (<em>The Adelaide Advertiser</em>, 26 Feb 2004)</td>
<td>1.2 Legitimation via personal authority. Discourse themes of severe illness, public health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Antibiotic resistance</td>
<td>2.1 Federal Health Minister Kay Patterson this week launched a campaign to convince parents to stop feeding antibiotics to their children for unnecessary reasons. “We are very concerned that the most common form of bacteria in hospital is becoming resistant to our last line of antibiotics,” she said. (<em>The Age</em>, 1 June 2002)</td>
<td>2.11 Legitimation via personal authority. Discourse theme of antibiotic overuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Immunisation</td>
<td>3.1 Councillor Dalley praised council’s highly successful school-based immunisation program which had vaccinated more than 8000 students since its introduction in the early 1990s. (<em>Logan West Leader</em>, 24 December 2003)</td>
<td>3.1 Legitimation via personal authority. Discourse theme of public health strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 Prime Minister John Howard has said he is committed to maintaining the nation’s high immunisation rate. (<em>Herald Sun</em>, 19 February 2004)</td>
<td>3.2 Legitimation via personal authority through role and moral justification. Discourse theme of government responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Vaccine solution</td>
<td>4.1 Federal Member for Ryan, Michael Johnson said the Government was expanding its National Pneumococcal Program which targeted children at high risk. (<em>South West News</em>, 1 October 2003)</td>
<td>4.1 Legitimation via personal authority. Discourse theme of responsible for public health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 Councillor Watkins said many families in Fairfield could not afford the planned $500 cost of immunising their children from diseases such as chicken pox, pneumococcal and inactivated polio. (<em>Fairfield Advance</em>, 3 December 2003)</td>
<td>4.2 Legitimation via personal authority, moral evaluation. Discourse themes of vaccine affordability, social equity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Experience story</td>
<td>5.1 After meeting 15-month-old Bella Brooks, who contracted pneumococcal last month, Opposition Leader Mark Latham said his policy would help prevent the needless deaths of 50 Australian children each year. ... “Why can’t it see the compassion and</td>
<td>5.1 Legitimation via personal authority, moral rationalisation – what is commonsense. Discourse themes of government funding role, moral rightness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Chapter 6: Analysis of media discourse

**Theme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Discourse/legitimation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>commonsense of this policy – saving the lives of children like Bella Brooks. (“The Australian, 14 May 2004)</td>
<td>Discourse theme of responsible for public health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.Government funding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 A Vaccination will be introduced to protect babies and children from deadly diseases such as pneumonia and meningitis, Health Minister Michael Wooldridge said yesterday. “The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) recently recommended that a new vaccine called Prevenar be made available to immunisation providers to vaccinate children at highest risk for pneumococcal disease,” he said. (Daily Telegraph, 18 May 2001)</td>
<td>6.1 Legitimation via personal authority, impersonal endorsement by Govt authority. Discourse themes of severe illness, public health strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Opposition Workplace Relations spokesman Craig Emerson said he was concerned the Government’s failure to fund the vaccines would penalise parents who wanted to ensure their children were fully immunised. “The Government has collected record taxes but it is too miserable to return taxpayers’ own money by funding immunisations and saving Medicare,” Mr Emerson said. (Albert &amp; Logan News, 12 December 2003)</td>
<td>6.2 Legitimation via personal authority, moral justification. Discourse themes of moral rightness, government responsibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott said he had met representatives of the Meningitis Centre recently, and the Government had committed $21 million over four years to immunise 91,000 children most at risk. (Sunday Tasmanian, 14 Dec 2003)</td>
<td>6.3 Legitimation via personal authority of ministerial role. Discourse themes of economic responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 A spokesman for Federal Health Minister Kay Patterson said the pneumococcal vaccine was still on the Government’s agenda. But he said ATAGI had rated the meningococcal vaccine as a higher funding priority. (Sunday Herald Sun, 29 June 2003)</td>
<td>6.4 Legitimation via personal authority of ministerial role, impersonal authority of government agency. Discourse theme of relative benefit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 “Why is the Federal Government not funding pneumococcal disease immunisation?” Jennifer Rankine, the Parliamentary Secretary assisting in health said last week. “A vaccine recommended for all Australian children should be funded for all Australian children.” (City Messenger, 28 April 2004)</td>
<td>6.5 Legitimation via personal authority of parliamentary position and tradition, what has always been done. Discourse theme of responsible for public health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 Federal Member for Lilley Wayne Swan said there would be no shortage if the Government hadn’t ignored its own expert advice to fund a pneumococcal vaccine for</td>
<td>6.6 Legitimation via personal authority as elected official and expert authority from advisory committee.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.7.5 The professional voice

Medical organisations entered the discourse late in the campaign and added weight to calls from independent and public health medical experts for the vaccine to be added to the list of recommended vaccines and, subsequently, to be funded by the Federal Government. Ninety-one stories included the voice of professional associations, the majority appearing between October 2003 and June 2004. The leading professional association engaged in the discourse is the Australian Medical Association (AMA), quoted in 66 articles. The national body, as well as various state bodies and subcommittees from this organisation, was actively engaged in the issue and well represented in the media discourse.

The key message delivered by the AMA was that the government must fully fund the pneumococcal vaccine for all children. The language used is direct and unequivocal. The most consistent argument used to legitimise their demand is that the government should heed its own expert advisory group. The position is supported by reference to the government’s own advisory committees among other arguments. The AMA propose an economic argument supported by national funding estimates of economic cost and benefits produced by the AMA; an AMA...
budget analysis criticised the lack of funding. The government was accused of placing children at risk and harming others through the spread of disease. In this aggressive lobbying attack, the rhetoric matched the mood: recommendations had been ignored and thus the AMA launched their own “education” campaign to encourage people to write to their local MPs. At this time, the AMA said the decision not to fund would cause “dangerous” confusion (*Adelaide Advertiser*, December 2003). The tone of their engagement in the debate is highly authoritative, not imploring or pleading, but demanding action and attacking the government on its decision:


Another common theme is that people use the funded vaccination list as an indication of what was necessary. The decision not to fund the vaccine immediately is described as flawed, stupid and sheer bloody-minded. These organisations speak with authority in demanding action; they call on people to voice their anger at a short-term decision they collectively condemn. Overall, they are direct and authoritative, and engage with the government as equals or even superior partners. They address the issue in global terms, use strong language and are highly aggressive.

The other medical professional organisations most quoted are the Australian Divisions of General Practice (six articles) and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (five articles); they speak in support of the AMA position. The Public Health Association of Australia makes a brief appearance responding to a proposal for means testing as a way of dealing equitably with the cost of immunisation. The Pharmacy Guild also enter the debate briefly, to respond to claims that pharmacists are overcharging for the vaccine and commenting when supplies are limited. The Meningitis Centre accused them of charging a premium and making the vaccine unaffordable; the Guild responded that they were being unfairly used as pawns in a campaign to get the Government to fund the vaccine.
Their position was that they were working with the government to try to reduce the “spiralling costs” of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

Table 14 The voice of professional associations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Discourse/legitimation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Immunisation</td>
<td>1.1 Australian Medical Association spokesperson Rosanna Capolingua said parents unsure of what vaccinations they needed should speak to their GP, who had the most up-to-date information on changes to the schedule. (<em>The West Australian</em>, 21 January 2004). 1.2 AMA vice-president Mukesh Haikerwal said Australia had once been at the forefront of immunisation, but had recently dropped the ball – due in large part to the Howard Government’s decision to not fund a universal pneumococcal vaccination program. (<em>Courier Mail</em>, 14 May 2004)</td>
<td>1.1 Legitimation via personal authority of organisational position. Discourse theme of public health strategy. 1.2 Legitimation via personal authority of organisational position. Discourse themes of public health strategy, government funding role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Government funding</td>
<td>2.1 “Because the Government doesn’t fund them people think they are not important vaccinations, but they are,” he said. (AMA immunisation spokesman Rod Pearce, <em>Adelaide Advertiser</em>, 18 January 2003) 2.2 GPs in the South East feel that the Government should heed its own advisory groups and fund these vaccines for all children,” she said. (South East NSW Division of General Practice chairperson Janet Watterson, <em>Illawarra Mercury</em>, 4 October 2003) 2.3 The Australian Medical Association says GPs’ predictions about difficulties in implementing the two-tier immunisation program are becoming a reality. (<em>Australian Doctor</em>, 24 October 2003) 2.4 Paediatrician and AMA Child and Youth Health Committee chairman Dr Michael Rice said it would cost $27.4 million in the first year compared to $41 million for the meningococcal vaccine. “There are about 3500 hospital admissions for pneumococcal disease and 400 deaths each year in Australia,” he said. (<em>Sunday Mail</em>, 16 November 2003) 2.6 AMA federal vice-president Mukesh Haikerwal says Senator Patterson should listen to expert advice. (ABC News, 20 September 2003)</td>
<td>2.1 Legitimation via personal authority of organisational position. Discourse theme of government funding role. 2.2 Legitimation via personal authority of organisational position and impersonal authority of expert advisory groups. Discourse theme of government funding role. 2.3 Legitimation via personal authority of organisational position. Discourse theme of important public health strategy. 2.4 Legitimation via personal authority of organisational position, professional expertise and economic rationalisation. Discourse theme cost effective strategy. 2.6 Legitimation via personal authority of organisational position. Discourse theme of government responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 6: Analysis of media discourse

6.7.6 The medical voice

The voice of a doctor is present in 41.7% of articles and thus is the most significant contributor to the media discourse.

The doctor as a social actor in this discourse has two manifestations. First, and most prominent, is in promoting the issue of immunisation, pneumococcal disease and the new vaccine. The role of doctors promoting the campaign issue in media texts reflects the role found in the campaign texts. Generally they talk about the worth of vaccination programs overall and the importance of immunisation. They provide information about the disease and present it in a professional and unemotional manner. They promote the argument of the cost of provision, justifying this in terms of social costs of treatment of those affected versus initial vaccine cost. In this voice doctors give instructions to parents: for example, advising them that they should not feel foolish in taking children to the doctor if concerned. They support their claims with information from statistics reporting disease incidence and effects in Australia and overseas, and legitimise their position via professional qualifications, experience and professional organisations. The doctor in the discourse is unemotional. One notable exception is Dr Daryl Price, who takes a leading role in lobbying for the vaccine and is more emotional in some of his comments. Doctors also question the degree to which most parents in the community are able to afford to pay for the vaccine.

The second manifestation is in personal experience stories, where doctors mentioned are referred to in indirect, impersonal terms. For example, “there were doctors and nurses everywhere, and a doctor thought it was some sort of meningitis and it was likely to be fatal” (Lee-Ann Munton, quoted Sunday Tasmanian, December 2003). We hear via the narrator what the doctor might have said, but the doctors do not speak directly in the discourse. In these situations, the role of the doctor is like that of a victim also, struggling in the fight against the disease.

Overall, doctors are depicted as being on the front line of the battle against the disease or in offering scientific legitimacy to the claims made about the vaccine.
Chapter 6: Analysis of media discourse

The table below illustrates the ways in which doctors’ voices appear in the media discourse, the discourse themes they articulate and the legitimisation strategies they use to give credibility to their arguments.

**Table 15 The voice of doctors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Discourse/legitimation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pneumococcal disease</td>
<td>1.1 Dr Price said that in Queensland each year, pneumococcal disease caused 147 cases of blood infection, 273 hospital admissions for pneumonia, 8400 middle ear infection and one death. <em>(Gold Coast Bulletin, 25 June 2003)</em></td>
<td>1.1 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise, scientific rationalisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 He said pneumococcal was far more common than meningococcal and more likely to leave a child with a permanent disability such as mental retardation or deafness. <em>(Dr Price, Gold Coast Bulletin, 25 June 2003)</em></td>
<td>1.2 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise. Justified as being more dangerous than disease already funded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3 According to Dr Richard Lo, Head of Immunology, Princess Margaret Hospital for Children, Perth, pneumococcal disease presents itself in various forms. “Once pneumococcal disease invades the body, it can cause a range of illnesses,” he says. “Annually, more than three million deaths in children worldwide are attributable to this pathogen.” <em>(Totline, Edition 1 2001)</em></td>
<td>1.3 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise and organisational position, scientific rationalisation through statistics, overseas experience. Discourse theme of severe illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Immunisation</td>
<td>3.1 “I’m passionate about immunisation for children and this is extremely important for the kids of Australia,” said Dr Price. <em>(Gold Coast Bulletin, 20 October 2003)</em></td>
<td>3.1 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise. Discourse theme of public health strategy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3.2 Dr Richmond said vaccination was one of the best investments parents could make for the health of their children. <em>(The West Australian, 21 Jan 2004)</em></td>
<td>3.2 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise. Discourse theme of public health strategy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3.3 “As with all extremists, reason and logic are replaced by confused dogma and scientific naivety”, said Dr Andrew Ebringer, Townsville Division of General Practice. <em>(Townsville Bulletin, 6 December 2003)</em></td>
<td>3.3 Legitimation via personal authority of organisational position, professional expertise. Trivialisation of opposition view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.4 “As health professionals, when we see a child suffering we get angry. We would rather prevent injury than pick up the pieces after the damage is done.” <em>(Dr Price, Gold Coast Bulletin, 25 June 2003)</em></td>
<td>3.4 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise. Discourse theme of public health strategy.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Chapter 6: Analysis of media discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Discourse/legitimation strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Prevenar vaccine</td>
<td>4.1 The Mater Children’s Hospital visiting paediatrician Dr Julian Mellick said the pneumococcal vaccine provided good protection against pneumococcus which he said was the most common bacterial germ affecting small children ... if every child under six was vaccinated, it would prevent at least one death a year from pneumococcal, 131 cases of septicaemia, 240–250 pneumonia hospital admissions and 2800 middle-ear infections. <em>(Southern News, 2 October 2003)</em></td>
<td>4.1 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise, scientific rationalisation. Discourse theme of solution to disease threat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 “If parents were educated about this vaccine it would have a very high uptake,” she said. <em>(Dr Royle, The Age, 14 May 2004)</em></td>
<td>4.2 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise. Discourse theme of parents unaware.</td>
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<td>4.3 Dr Peter Richmond, senior lecturer at the University of WA’s school of paediatrics and child health said the vaccine had been tested in clinical trials and there was no evidence of side effects. <em>(The Age, 15 September 2004)</em></td>
<td>4.3 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise and organisational position and scientific rationalisation. Discourse theme of vaccine side effects.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Experience story</td>
<td>5.1 PMH intensive care specialist Geoff Knight said early recognition of the condition and the emergency treatment in Port Hedland almost definitely saved her life. <em>(The West Australian, 29 August 2001)</em></td>
<td>5.1 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise. Discourse theme of severe illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 It had been many years since he had since such a severe form of the pneumococcal bacterium. <em>(The West Australian, 29 August 2001)</em></td>
<td>5.2 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise. Discourse theme of severe illness.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Government funding</td>
<td>6.1 “Experience is that until [a vaccine] is funded, very few parents will take it up,” he said. <em>(Professor John Ziegler, head of immunology and infectious diseases at Sydney Children’s Hospital, Daily Telegraph, 24 September 2003)</em></td>
<td>6.1 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise and impersonal authority of independent advisory group. Discourse theme of vaccine funding as indicator of importance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 “It is unethical to have an important, safe, effective vaccine that is only available to people who can afford it,” she said. <em>(Dr Royle, Herald Sun, 14 May 2004).</em></td>
<td>6.2 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise and moral rationalisation.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6.3 “At $500 a child that is an enormous amount for parents to manage. We all know that with that kind of money, it will be the most needy kids who miss out.” <em>(Dr Price, Gold Coast Bulletin, 20 October 2003)</em></td>
<td>6.3 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise and moral rationalisation. Discourse theme of social equity.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Theme | Examples | Discourse/legitimation strategies
---|---|---
6.4 | Dr Price said the cost of pneumococcal to the public health system each year was enormous, with massive numbers of children admitted to hospital suffering complications from the bacterium. \((\text{Gold Coast Bulletin, 25 June 2003})\) | 6.4 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise and economic rationalisation.  
7.1 | "They’re then vaccinating an entire population to catch a minority," he said. \((\text{Dr Donohue, Canberra Times, 20 September 2003})\) | 7.1 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise and moral rationalisation. Discourse theme of public health strategy  
7.2 | Perth GP Joe Kosterich said there was the risk of killing the goose that laid the golden egg by “disease-mongering”. \((\text{The West Australian, 21 September 2004})\) | 7.2 Legitimation via personal authority of professional expertise and moral rationalisation.

### 6.8 Summary

This chapter has presented the results of the analysis of media texts related to the campaign case study. First it addresses the research question: How does the media discourse reflect the public relations campaign message? To answer this, a quantitative analysis of the media texts was conducted to reveal the scale of the influence of public relations on the media discourse and qualitatively to reveal the character of the influence. Discourse elements, voices and legitimations identified in the analysis of campaign texts in Chapter 5 are applied to the media discourse analysis. One of the key findings to emerge from this analysis is the domination of public relations messages in media discourse. The analysis comprehensively demonstrates the degree to which the media reproduce the materials and arguments of the public relations campaign, and the degree to which these discourse strategies dominate the media discourse. Leask and Chapman, in a study of 2,440 press articles about immunisation, find that the majority of news coverage is normative or promotional (2002, p.446); these results confirm this characteristic of media reporting.

Leask and Chapman argue that it is not the quantity of information that renders it newsworthy, but the qualitative nature of some information which makes it memorable to the wider public: “How an issue is present or framed creates
appositions with wider social themes that transfer meaning across ostensibly
different topics” (2002, p.446). This discourse analysis has revealed the
sophisticated nature of public relations discourse practice in constructing
messages, combining interest groups, selecting voices to articulate those
messages, and legitimising strategies to build the credibility of the campaign
message. This has implications which are both readily apparent and which lie
beneath the surface. The construction of arguments, which facts are included and
which omitted, can easily be observed. More subtle are the use of fear, the
assertion of risk and the construction of identity: what does it mean to be a good
parent?

This chapter examined the effects of mediatisation on public relations
communication strategies enacted through mainstream media. The replication of
the relationships between discourse participants assembled for the campaign is
demonstrated in the media discourse. In addition, the relationship between public
relations and journalism as revealed by this analysis is one of interdependence.
Materials are reproduced with little alteration, and the overall promotional
argument of the campaign is faithfully carried by the media. Journalists do add to
the drama and emotional impact of the disease, using hyperbole and metaphor that
communicate a sense of alarm. Alternatively a small number of articles
investigate the kinds of practices used by pharmaceutical companies to promote
their products, and the strategies used by them and their public relations agencies
to recruit advocacy and professional associations to their cause. Any mention of
public relations in these articles alludes to a mode of practice aligned with the
negative “spin doctor” roles discussed in Chapter 2.

The analysis demonstrates the combination of the private and public in the
discourse, where private health concerns are brought into the public domain to be
used together with wider public concerns to legitimate an argument. Analysis of
the voices used to carry particular story elements offers insights into who talks in
the public sphere and what are they able to say. The legitimisations found in the
campaign discourse, and are carried into the media discourse, reveal a consistency
and offer an insight into “the subtle meaning making processes through which
organisational phenomena … are legitimated in contemporary society” (Vaara, Tienai & Laurila 2006).

The issues raised in this analysis are as much about transparency as content. The analysis reveals the degree to which interests promoting the issue are hidden and the degree to which influence can be exerted over a range of social and political issues.
Chapter 7Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the implications of public relations influence for public policy debate in the public sphere, answering the final research question: How does the media discourse represent normative standards for a deliberative public sphere? This thesis adopts a “mega discourse” approach rather than a “micro discourse” approach and seeks to address some of the challenges of linking texts with contexts “beyond the immediate interactions associated with their creation and interpretation” (Leitch & Palmer 2010, p.1198). One of the aims of this thesis has been to explicate and explore the important role played by public relations as producers of discourse or players in the public sphere.

7.2 Discourse Analysis: key factors in shaping public discourse

This case study has revealed the highly complex nature of public relations practice in relation to public discourse, revealing both the considerable influence of public relations and a certain fragility in its claims of conducting ethical practice and, from that, of professional standing and reputation. The sophistication of public relations practice in managing a complex number of the issues and stakeholders involved is well demonstrated in the pneumococcal issue. A number of competing issues had to be balanced: the benefits of immunisation versus the risks of the vaccine; the relative benefits of treatment of individuals versus mass immunisation; the rights of individual choice versus the good of the community; the intersection of commercial imperatives and public health policy. Questions of the public good present ethical challenges: Is public relations merely an agent of the organisation that hires it, or does it have a professional responsibility transcending this single focus, acting in the interests of the client but mindful of the public interest? If public relations is truly to be considered a profession it needs to determine the professional boundaries of its role as advocate.

The Turnbull Porter Novelli agency deployed a range of strategies and tactics to achieve its strategic objectives. First, by locating the new vaccine within the wider
immunisation discourse and social practice they were able to present it as an extension of “routinised practices”: that is, in terms of Bourdieu’s habitus, a practice that is considered reasonable without necessarily being the result of conscious reasoning. It is reasonable for health policy makers to include immunisation in the habitus of society, whereby benefit to all is obtained. The challenge is in determining where private interests seek to establish themselves in the public consciousness by tapping into this established mode of acceptance.

Second, the pharmaceutical company’s argument was driven by a skilful combination of various forms of capital and the coordination of the interests of various fields of practice. The field where this was played out was in public health provision, where actors compete for a share of scarce resources. The field, as Benson (2009) argues, can include a centre which goes beyond Habermas’ concept of the public sphere to encompass non-government and government sectors. This was the case in this campaign: a range of capital resources, primarily economic, was deployed by the company, both to fund professional public relation practitioners to drive their campaign and to foster advocacy groups who would support and be the primary drivers of the campaign message. The public relations professionals were able to employ professional voices, buy media space and exploit interested and motivated advocacy groups with the funding provided from the company. They also brought the cultural capital of their profession: skill in designing message strategies and knowledge of the media, for example. They drew upon the cultural capital of the company, manifested in the depth of scientific research that underpinned the campaign. The pharmaceutical company was thus enabled to present their campaign using spokespeople from medical practice, specialist medicine and medical professional groups such as the AMA, and from the advocacy groups it had subsidised. Funded by a wealthy company, the public relations professionals developed discourse strategies that combined voices and legitimation, and that were manipulated to achieve different effects at various stages of the campaign. While it can be argued that it is possible for groups without access to such a level of capital to overcome such obstacles (Davis 2000), this was not the case here.
Other forms of capital, such as the company reputation as a reliable pharmaceutical supplier, contributed to building mana for the organisation, a “reputation for competence and image of respectability and honorability” as Bourdieu put it (1984, p.291). Public relations practitioners, who played a central role in planning and carrying out this and the other campaign strategies, were key contributors to the aura of organisational legitimacy.

7.2.1 Public relations influence apparent in the media discourse

One of the key findings in this case study is the degree to which public relations-generated themes and legitimisation strategies dominated the media discourse. This was evident not only in the number of stories reporting the issue but also in the manner in which they were reported. This finding supports previous studies which demonstrate the effectiveness of public relations in attaining organisational goals and influencing tangible business outcomes by having media take up their messages (Kiousis, Popescu & Mitrook 2007). As demonstrated in Chapter 6, media reporting of the issue tended to follow the information provided by the public relations firm, and to adopt the same legitimising strategies. This influence can be seen in quantitative terms, with the majority of articles dealing with the issue in a way that adopted the public relations agency’s framing of the debate, followed its agenda, and incorporated its various tactical elements and perspectives. The voices used to articulate the story in the media were also highly consistent with those provided by public relations.

The domination of a single interest affects the quality of debate on and issue. This campaign promoted a view of the basis on which government decisions should be made, normalising a process for public policy decision-making that suited the interests of the client, but was not necessarily in the best interests of society. Numerous stories carried the campaign’s argument that government should do as it had always done and accept advisory committee recommendations: a remarkably narrow view of a complex issue which was presented as a stand-alone concern rather than part of a complex social policy problem.
On the surface the issue is not particularly controversial. Immunisation is generally considered beneficial, and reporting in this way could be considered a public service, as public health communications often have difficulty in raising sufficient awareness and concern in target publics to prompt action. The pneumococcal vaccine case became complex when a public health message was conflates with a commercial interest. It presented a conundrum to medical practitioners, who found it difficult to separate the public health element from the commercial drive. Indeed, the two are not always mutually exclusive, as is apparent in a consideration not only of campaign texts and related media stories, but of other stories not linked to the campaign but related to the issue. Articles about the new vaccine ran alongside government health campaigns promoting immunisation; both used similar communication strategies. This interdiscursivity (Fairclough 1995), amplified the campaign message through association with other texts and the blurring of distinctions between sources.

This case study has demonstrated the capacity of commercial interests, through their public relations agents, to dominate media discourse by the orchestration of sophisticated communication practices. Results of the media discourse analysis, which finds campaign message elements in ninety percent of stories, present a compelling and inarguable demonstration of the influence of public relations on public discourse. This supports the argument that it is insufficient to assess professional public relations practice only in terms of codes of practice which prescribe standards only at the level of the individual practitioner or agency. Codes of practice need to be located in the context of a clearly established professional ideology which articulates the social role and value of the field as a whole. As Lee (2001) argues, a focus on the individual instead of the group loses an important analytic dimension of the field in relation to important social issues and values.

7.2.2 News production and the role of journalists

The effects of journalists’ mediation of messages are apparent in the degree to which journalists use materials and themes as information subsidies, and the degree to which they amplify some aspects of stories, often by exaggerating
emotive content, presenting situations as stand-alone issues and reducing complexities. This reveals one of the limitations of public relations power: their material may be accepted by journalists, but they have no control over the final form it will take.

With rare exceptions, media discourse on the pneumococcal vaccine issue did not present a debate of all relevant issues. There was no opportunity given to readers to locate the government decision within the context of governmental budgetary restraints, for instance, or of competing public health issues. The more sensational aspects of the issue were amplified, and the level of fear generated exceeded the threat conveyed in any medical or campaign materials.

Campaigns of this kind frequently attract accusations of fear mongering, exaggeration and distortion of messages. Whether public relations or journalism should be held responsible for is a matter for debate. The public relations campaign award submission for this case study claims: “for all pharmaceutical communications, no statements or claims about the disease or the vaccine were made unless they could not be referenced back to credible, published, clinical data” (PRIA, 2001). While the relationship between public relations and journalism is both interdependent and suspicious, as this case study has shown, both contribute to a particular construction of reality in the public sphere.

Increasing, media rely on ready-made stories to supplement what is produced by journalists. The materials produced by public relations agencies, accompanied with photos and video footage, fit neatly into a news cycle where deadlines are tight and costs constrained. A relatively uncontroversial campaign such as this one for pneumococcal vaccination, with or without the added push for government-paid immunisation, is unlikely to cause much concern for a journalist: the sources are easily verified and the wide range of accompanying materials provides a variety of story angles. Sick children are hard to beat for news value.

Fairclough notes that the news is the outcome of a range of specific professional and institutional practices (1995) and so is shaped by influences from outside the newsroom such as economy, politics and ideology (Richardson 2007). This dimension of Fairclough’s model essentially refers to ideological effects and
hegemonic processes (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000) and the creation of polarisations between the in-group (us, a positive image) and the out-group (them, a negative image) (van Dijk 2006). While these ideas are normally applied to social inequities such as racism (for example, see Joye 2010), they are relevant for any social process in which a particular set of institutional practices and interests is able to dominate. By faithfully reproducing the message of pharmaceutical interests, the news media are complicit in ensuring the dominance of one perspective. If we are talking about us and them, the question of who is “us” and who is “them” warrants consideration. In this discourse, the “us” is legitimated from many perspectives (doctors, parents, advocates) and the “them” are constructed as extreme radicals. There is no room in this representation for the reasonable questioner, the concerned parent who may want to be fully informed; opposition parties are portrayed as being on the lunatic fringe.

An important consideration in assessing the balance of media discourse is to consider absence, those elements that media excludes from the discourse. Following Richardson (2007), Joye argues that journalistic meaning is expressed as much by absence as presence (2010). In this case study, only a small number of investigative articles canvassed other issues related to the debate. The themes raised in these broadsheet articles did not carry over into the tabloid and community media and, therefore, their effect on the discourse was minimal. One element absent from the media discourse, for example, was the social cost of a vaccination program and the diversion of resources into this area: the opportunity costs of directing limited public resources away from what might be more serious diseases (Moynihan, Heath & Henry 2002, p. 886). This issue is relevant to this discussion because the strategy of placing responsibility on government played a significant role in both the campaign and the media discourses. The success of the approach leads to a wider question: who is driving the agenda for the direction of health resources? If we look to this case for an answer, the answer would clearly be the pharmaceutical industry, together with a selection of health professionals and advocacy groups.

There is debate about the consequences of the media’s uncritical reproduction of information. Both public relations professionals and journalists face challenges in
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having sufficient technical expertise to report accurately on scientific issues and to know what the facts are. Motion and Leitch (2008) argue that attempts to achieve objectivity favour the scientific perspective: journalists seek stories based on factual statements and supported by credible evidence, so that “for both science and society, the media act as an intermediary constrained by the tension between the commercial imperatives of drama and emotion and the journalistic values of evidence and credibility” (Motion & Leitch 2008, p.38).

The problem, as this case study illustrates, is not that journalists used scientific evidence, but that they did not confirm the facts with other sources or investigate the issue more widely. Taking a critical position on the values that drive news production and the role of journalists, journalist and health writer Sweet (2003) notes that the media tend to accept information at face value when covering health and medical issues; information readily provided by public relations. This argument has been supported by others (Schwitzer et al, 2005) who maintain that journalists should use independent sources and provide a balanced assessment of the advantages and disadvantages, as well as revealing funding sources for advocacy and research groups that receive corporate sponsorship.

In the texts analysed in this study, only one article followed such a line of enquiry. Overall, the media discourse for the pneumococcal campaign, carried very few articles which independently verified claims or raised questions or about the product. This is not to criticise the validity of the product: it is to criticise the validity of the discussion. Sweet (2002b) notes the manner in which the media contribute to medicalisation by giving greatest prominence to the views of doctors when covering health matter, while consumer viewpoints are generally under-reported. She claims that journalists are often surprisingly uncritical of medical sources, and rarely, for example, ask doctors and researchers if they have conflicts of interest.

What are the implications for public relations? This analysis has demonstrated that public relations and journalism are both central to the construction of meaning, and, therefore, responsible for the ways issues are represented in the
public sphere. This supports Edwards’ (2006) point that the responsibility between public relations and those who hire their services should be shared.

The relationship is complex because the media are not simply a mouthpiece of the social structure but have a unique intermediary role. As hegemonic strategies are enacted throughout all spheres of society, including forms of public communication (Roper 2005) the media serve as a pathway of influence between civil society, the state and the economy. Journalism is both a site of practice and a field in its own right (Benson 2009), where public relations has considerable influence but does not have the power to dictate how stories will be portrayed. Its influence is increased by the profits the pharmaceutical and health sectors provide for media outlets through advertising revenues (Sweet, 2003), and the ability of the interests that public relations is representing to deploy economic, political and social capital, places them in a powerful position. The power that public relations exercises is largely derived from these interests.

7.2.3 Combination of the private and the public

This case study has demonstrated the way in which private concerns, both commercial and personal, become engaged in and a part of the public sphere. Sheller and Urry (2003) argue that one of the key dilemmas of the 21st century has been the erosion of “public” by processes understood as being “private”, so that participation in the public sphere and democratic life has also declined. Habermas describes this as colonisation of the lifeworld by the system logics of economic commodification and state bureaucratisation (1992).

In one sense, the erosion of the public sphere may be imagined as a blurring of the boundaries between public and private, although any discussion of blurring distinctions needs to take account of the “mobile multiple relationships” between public and private in modern societies (Sheller & Urry 2003). Sheller and Urry argue that while there has been an acknowledgement of multiple public spheres (Cohen & Arato 1992; Fraser 1992; Squires 2002), it is pertinent to consider the idea of multiple private spheres as well. The first distinction they make is between the market and the state: between private and public interests. In this dichotomy,
private actors pursue their own commercially oriented private interests while the state is presumed to act in the public interest. In real life, the situation is much more complex than this. This case study has shown that there is interaction of the public in realms which are private, as in governmental regulation of the quality of products (including pharmaceutical products) that can be sold. Conversely, the private encroaches into the public when commercial firms offer products of social importance.

Vaccines, to be allowed for sale and recommended for use by the whole population, must meet stringent standards of quality and efficacy. The reliance on business to produce public goods crucial for the health of society is complemented by the elevated role of civil organisations authorised to monitor them (Hirschland 2006 p.141). Hirshland questions the reverse situation: the creation and enforcement of public policies by predominantly private, and less than accountable, entities. While Hirshland is concerned with corporate social responsibility, his line of reasoning is relevant to this case, where a private corporation, making a product that may improve public health, provides input into health policy decision-making. This raises questions about the relationship between the state, experts and public opinion: to what extent should government be required to act on the recommendations of experts? Which “expert” advice should prevail; and how independent is it? In the process of achieving their organisational objectives, non-state actors engage in political action. This occurs, for example, when professional associations of experts and activist groups engage in political lobbying and campaigning.

One of the issues Hirshland raises is transparency, which is adopted only when it suits the parties concerned (2006, p.145). This research confirms this observation: certain elements of the relationship between the public relations agency, the advocacy organisation and the company, were voluntarily made public, and others were revealed only by investigative journalism.

An aspect of the blurring of private and public boundaries that emerges in this analysis is the voice of the private citizen. Through the voices of victims and parents, personal experience and the individual perspective were brought into the
public sphere. This illustrates another means by which public discourse becomes a combination of private concerns and public interests. This campaign, and the media that published it, bring the private concerns of individuals to bear on policy-making. This case offers and interesting illustration of the benefits that public relations can offer advocacy groups. In this campaign the main advocacy group benefited from their connection to the company and the receipt of public relations advice. They became the primary organisation representing citizen concerns relating to meningococcal/pneumococcal diseases and were able to have their voice heard.

Sheller and Urry describe the private sphere as “part of civil society from which potential solidarity, equality and public participation can arise”; where “private citizens come together as a public” (2003 p.111). They speak of the “political private”, where the individual emerges as a private citizen in relation to the state and ideally participates in a public sphere of communication, equality and deliberation. In the pneumococcal case, parents of afflicted children were deployed as a personal voice and also as part of an organisational voice, both important to the successful communication of the message about immunisation. As Leask et al. argue, “insights into how community benefit is understood and might be framed are important when, as vaccination’s success leads to disease control, community benefit rises in importance over individual benefit” (2006, p.7243). The concerns these voices articulate are both private and public: they argue for individual benefit and also for a wider benefit.

Is such a use of private voices criticised as manipulative of emotions or praised as representative of participation? Private voices undoubtedly generate empathy, and audiences are likely to react favourably to messages based on emotional appeal. Conversely, these voices can be construed as manipulative or exploitive; but a debate conducted without private voices is likely to be driven by voices of the scientific and professional elites, those likely to be in positions of power.
7.2.4 Shifting responsibilities for risk management

An overall theme in the campaign was to enhance awareness of the risks posed by the disease that the vaccine is designed to prevent, and to allocate responsibility for the management of that risk between parents and government. A key component of the first part of the campaign was to generate awareness of the disease and a level of fear of its consequences. This was necessary to gain attention and make parents aware of the risk for which the vaccine is the solution. It is common for alliances of pharmaceutical manufacturers, doctors and patient groups to use the media to frame a medical condition as widespread and severe (Moynihan, Heath & Henry 2002). In a similar vein to the work reported by Leask and Chapman (2002), the public relations texts in this case presented the campaign messages in this manner: stating the problem, presenting a solution and then assigning responsibility adopting that particular solution. In the first stage of the campaign, the product launch, the problem was the lack of public awareness of the disease and the responsibility for managing this risk was parental. Parents needed to be made aware. As the campaign progressed the emphasis shifted; responsibility for managing the risk moved from parents to the funding arm of government. While parents’ ultimate responsibility was not totally diminished, government inaction was presented as exposing families to unnecessary risk.

A question that arises here is how accurately the level of risk portrayed by the media relates to the actual level of risk the disease presents. Researchers agree (Hackett 2008) that society is increasingly aware of health risks, and many of them are socially constructed, often through the media, which contribute to and generate “risk” and “risk perception”. Newly discovered diseases are a type of risk that is increasingly seen within the control of humans, in contrast to other risks such as natural disasters. Hackett (2008) cites a number of projects that examine the social amplification of risk in which parents use media sources, including social networks, to help make sense of health risk issues. This behaviour needs to be considered together with the tendency of the media to dramatise health risks in an effort to attract a larger audience, and so to increase parental anxiety (Lupton 1993). If this influence is acknowledged by campaign designers
who claim to be acting in the public interest, then it should be taken into account and not exploited.

This case offers one example in a long line of illnesses, each described at the as extremely serious and each presented in a similar manner by the media. Research into health communication (Peterson & Lupton 2000) indicates that individuals can be anxious about the best way to deal with risk, and what role they should take to alleviate it. Generating excessive fear can backfire, if people respond as they did to the MMR crisis and avoid immunisation. Dr Julie Leask, senior research fellow and manager of social research at University of Sydney’s National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance and a firm supporter of immunisation, acknowledged in a recent newspaper interview that parents want balanced information and do not want to be propagandised. In her view, “health authorities should be more conciliatory towards the motivations of unconvinced parents, especially women for whom “intensive mothering was a point of pride” (Leask, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2011). She gave the example of upper middle class mothers, who see questioning immunisation as part of doing a good job of mothering, by making considered decisions and not just accepting the status quo. Leask argued that extreme positions on either side exaggerate both the benefits and risks of immunisation, and advocated a more nuanced approach to dealing with modern-day concerns about immunisation, given that immunisation rates in the community are generally good and the actual threat posed by the anti-immunisation lobby is low (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 February 2011).

In one sense, this approach is based on certain assumptions about the degree to which people accept science and scientific experts without question. Much of the complacency concerning immunisation has been attributed to the fact that people have no direct experience of the diseases that it prevents; that it has been the victim of its own success. However, the issue is more complex than this, with shifting public attitudes toward science overall. Recent developments in immunisation such as the MMR controversy in Great Britain, which linked immunisation to autism, leave many confused. Mnookin in *The Panic Virus* (2011) notes a souring of the love affair between science and the public occurred in the latter half of the 20th century, when the scientific community failed to note a
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shift from unquestioning admiration of the miracles of science to an acknowledgement of the limitations and ethical questions that new discoveries presented. People no longer believed something just because they were told it was so. In the case of the MMR scare the science was refuted; but the way the issue was popularised by media personalities and legitimised by journalists presenting a “balanced view” had a significant impact on immunisation rates overall, and there were subsequent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases (Mnookin 2011).

The state of constant fearfulness that scare campaigns help to maintain can ultimately work against the objectives of sensible social practice, such as, in this instance, immunisation. Leask (Sydney Morning Herald 2011) describes the issue of vaccination as a grey area: not all vaccines are perfect, but doctors and nurses are fearful that if risks are mentioned people may be put off. The simplistic way the media deal with scientific information exacerbates the problem: issues are not presented in sufficient depth to satisfy the information needs. Her comments support the observations made in this thesis: that strategies which may work in the short term, for a single case, may be less effective in the longer term.

This raises questions about the professional standards of public relations: questions relating to the appropriate use of fear, the capacity to assess the credibility of scientific evidence, and the ability to balance scientific accuracy with commercial interests. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to comment on the professional perspective as, in this case, there was no access to the public relations professionals who worked on the campaign. According to the agency, the campaign adhered to both public relations and pharmaceutical industry professional codes of conduct. The scientific information used was from credible research institutes as well as company sources; the use of these sources is reasonable from the perspective of public relations practice. Questions about fear and panic are less clear and are not properly dealt with in codes of ethics – where, for example, the PRSA code of ethics specifies that public relations serves the public good, the degree of fear that might be appropriate in a given situation is a matter for the individual practitioner to determine.
7.2.5 Legitimisation in public discourse

The analysis revealed public relations’ strategic use of legitimisation to achieve the organisation’s aims. This study supports previous findings that organisations attempting to influence a policy decision tend to seek access to the news media on the assumption that wide and sympathetic coverage of their stance will result in public opinion and policy-making favourable to them (Danielian 1992; Kennamer 1992). In Chapter 5, the importance of legitimacy in public relations practice was established, and the campaign discourse was analysed within the framework proposed by van Leeuwen. Successful legitimisation is achieved by strategically influencing the public, and the role of public relations is to develop and communicate a strategy that will achieve these goals (Waeraas 2007). If an organisation is to attract favourable media coverage, journalists need to believe its position is legitimate; and if its messages are to achieve the desired resonance, the readers and viewers of media stories need to believe that the sources quoted are legitimate and credible.

Public relations and journalism jointly contribute to the promotion of particular discourse positions. Public relations may offer a range of sources and evidence to the media in support of client claims, but the manner in which these are used is ultimately determined by journalists and media outlets. Certainly, by supplying regular and accurate information, a large, well established public relations agency establishes an established pattern of reliability and comes to be seen as legitimate (Hansen 1991, cited Yoo 2005). The ability to command a large number of resources is be evaluated as more weighty and thus more legitimate (Anderson 1991), and a large pressure group – such as Meningococcal Australia, with separate public relations support – would be a legitimate news source. Thus, the application of funds to such a group via a public relations agency is part of building legitimacy.

Does it matter which sources journalists use in creating news stories? The results of this analysis indicate that by primarily using sources and materials provided by the agency and the company, journalists produced a very limited discussion of the meningococcal vaccination issue. The incorporation of perspectives from such
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groups as the anti-vaccine lobby and health professionals who did not wholeheartedly support nation-wide meningococcal immunisation would have generated a more balanced presentation. On the question of who has a voice in the public sphere, the fact that journalists give voice almost exclusively to experts associated with the pharmaceutical company increased the legitimacy of these actors and marginalised the others. This observation is supported by Franklin and Carlson, who argue that sources not only supply information but are “also symbolic in supplying legitimacy and authority” (2011, p.5). Endowing voices with authority is accomplished through various means, not least of which is that their appearance in a news text as a quoted source enhances their legitimacy. Doctors, professional associations and advocacy groups, simply by their inclusion, are denoted legitimate participants in a discourse on public policy.

The benefits are reciprocal. By using identifiable sources to support their assertions, journalists add credibility to their stories. The majority of stories produced in the media discourse on the pneumococcal issue were supported by quotations from credible medical specialists and government health experts. As “journalists view certain sources as more legitimate, thereby allowing those sources to pre-empt media access and dominate the news in a public debate” (Yoon 2005, p.763), the sources that received privileged access to media became the “primary definers of news agendas by virtue of their power, representativeness and expertise” (Hall et al. 1978, p.58).

The domination of a particular view in the public sphere reflects the status of existing power relations (Foucault 1980). As discourses compete for legitimacy, the issue of who is permitted to talk, and what they are permitted to talk about, becomes important (Motion & Leitch 2008). There are power differences between medical experts and lay consumers; between scientific knowledge and other ways of knowing. While this case, for instance, privileged scientific knowledge, it also demonstrated a strong role for intuition and personal judgment via maternal instinct.

The discursive strategies used to express positions are also important, for “without an imminent relation to truth” (Habermas 1976, p.97) there is the temptation to
distort images. In discussing spin, the ultimate manifestation of this distortion or at least a more populist way of describing it, Waeraas (2009) argues that whether or not it is morally wrong, ultimately it does not work. The argument already discussed in this chapter, about the risks of exaggerated claims undermining long-term health messages, is one example of this principle in action. Truth is inherent in ideas of transparency, in the disclosure of private interests behind a campaign. Organisations such as those in the pharmaceutical industry who have been accused of disease mongering and distortion (Sweet 2003, Moynihan 2002) run the risk of reducing their claims to legitimacy in influencing public health policy.

7.2.6 Transparency of interest: the voice of the company and public relations in the discourse

A significant finding from the discourse analysis was the remarkably low profile the pharmaceutical company displayed. While they were directly mentioned in the launch campaign, in subsequent activities their message was carried through other voices such as advocacy groups and professional associations. The only other mention of the company in the media discourse was as the supplier of the new vaccine, and their only direct quotes later were to do with a shortage of supply of the vaccine. They made no overt calls for government provision of the vaccine on the immunisation schedule. Instead this was orchestrated through the public relations agency, which had no direct voice in the discourse. In these articles, the public relations agency is purely a tool for the client organisation and has no independent professional voice.

The lack of company voice in the discourse is significant as it indicates a lack of transparency about the interests driving the campaign. The underlying objectives may or may not be ethical, but against the standards identified for participation in the public sphere, the construction of a public debate which conceals some interests or falsely enhances the role of others, may be considered counter to the democratic process. The impressions formed by the public from information concealed or revealed favour particular interests. Corporations as funding sources are particularly problematic, whether transparent or otherwise. Corporations are not likely to support, through sponsorship, donation or research contracts,
anything that goes against their market interests. To do so would be contradictory to their mission. Proactive disclosure of funding sources for “opinion leaders, non-profit groups or journalists with financial ties to drug companies” (Burton & Rowell 2003, p.3) is an essential component of a public discourse that allows the public to make informed assessments of information with which they are presented.

There is no code of practice that requires public relations consultants to disclose the clients they are representing, or to breach client confidentiality, and this is not at issue here. Transparency in this instance relates to the capacity of the public to make a reasonable assessment of the necessity of the vaccine. The question is whether a false sense of urgency is created by promoting the vaccine through apparently disinterested voices which suggest it is the only solution to the risk. Through their work on projects such as the pneumococcal vaccine campaign, public relations is complicit in generating demand for a product which depends on government policy for supply. The case analysed in this thesis is not unique but represents a pattern of pharmaceutical promotion, where commercial messages are embedded in apparently credible journalism and independent research: a tactic that has raised concern amongst journalists and health professionals (Hansen 2002). In this case, it could be argued that public relations is merely an extension of a marketing strategy to create demand.

7.3 Summary

This chapter has located the key findings of the discourse analysis in the wider social context and considered the implications for public relations discourse practice in the public sphere. In Chapter 3 the limitations and benefits of the normative ideal of the public sphere were discussed, an argument presented for the normative ideal as a reference point for democratic debate, and a range of conditions against which media discourse in the pneumococcal vaccine campaign could be assessed identified was identified. The public sphere reflected in this case study is a series of overlapping fields: corporate, scientific, political, advocatory and journalistic. The focus of media texts necessarily places journalism at the centre, but in this case, where public relations seek to exert
influence, journalism is a site of action as well as a field in its own right. Public relations works to maximise the opportunities for the client voice to be heard in each of these fields.

How does the nature of media discourse on the pneumococcal vaccine issue inform understanding of the conditions necessary for an effective democratic public sphere? What is the role of the public sphere or what kind of public sphere is needed to enable reasoned debate of complex social issues? Chapter 3 identifies a number of basic criteria for an effective public sphere. The first criterion is information access and equality: access to media should not be distorted by unequal capital resources (Habermas 2006). Public relations’ capacity to marshal resources amplifies the effects of some interests, and public relations has established legitimacy with journalists and favoured those forms of media access that best work in their favour. The capital resources deployed in this case study demonstrate the domination of the public sphere by particular interests to the detriment of balanced debate on the issue. It is not argued that public relations client interests are not entitled to a prominent voice in the media; in the case under study, there were legitimate reasons to promote awareness of the disease and the vaccine. What is problematic is the degree to which voices which might have added other perspectives, and broadened the debate, were not represented.

The second criterion is argument based on reason, and this discourse largely met that requirement. All claims were based on evidence supported by scientifically validated studies and reputable research. However, there was little validation of the claims, and an exaggerated expression of risk and cultivation of fear. The emotional component also reflects poorly on the reasoned argument. In order to gain attention to their message public relations professionals use tactics that will have meaning for the target public. Emotional engagement can bring a campaign to life but is problematic when it becomes exploitive and exaggerates.

Another criterion relates to truth: a discourse should be sincere and morally appropriate. The degree to which the media texts were factually correct has been established. The key issue regarding truth is the lack of transparency of interests behind some voices participating in the discourse and the silence of an important
voice. The corporate voice is deliberately toned down. This has the potential to distort risk perception and shape public understanding of the issue in a way that favours particular interests.

This case study reveals the role of the media in this issue to be colonised by the established interests promoting the vaccine. There is an argument for the validity of this approach given the positive health message behind the campaign; however, the media’s generally uncritical acceptance and amplification of the campaign message does not seek to widen the debate or query the bias of the materialthis, nor does their failure to identify the commercial nature of the interests driving the campaign.

One reason this case was selected was because the campaign did achieve its overall objective to have the vaccine added to the national immunisation register, and therefore provides a good demonstration of how a coalition of interests can prevail over government policy formation. The Federal government’s approval of both the pneumococcal and the earlier meningococcal immunisation program received support from public health officials and the medical establishment as well as consumer advocacy groups. Other recommendations for changes to the national immunisation schedule, less well publicised, have not received the same attention.

These outcomes raise questions about the way in which policy issues are debated in the public sphere, and whose concerns and interests prevail. Clearly, legitimation of individuals and powerful interests through their representation in the media perpetuates existing power relations and limits debate on public health policy issues. How much influence should commercial entities have; how much should policy be directed by scientific experts or moderated by politicians and budgetary concerns? Government policy decisions necessarily consider a wide range of issues beyond the interests of one group promoting one solution to one part of an issue. The wider contextual issue, as this case demonstrates, is not if but how decisions about health funding should be made. Should a government be directed by technical advisory groups, or consider their advice as one part of a complex equation? At what point are budgetary considerations brought to bear,
given that there are limited resources and many more claims that can ever be supported?

This case study presents a number of challenges for the way health issues are considered in the public sphere. Public health issues need to be debated in a manner which is informative and generates an individual response while at the same time providing a balanced debate to locate the issue within wider social and policy contexts. Fundamental to this is a level of transparency which makes clear the often complex relationships between private and public interests. The role played by public relations in this complex scenario demands a high standard of professional ethical practice.

This research makes a distinct contribution to public relations scholarship by offering an examination of professional practice which highlights the complexities and challenges of PR as a strategic function. Public relations practitioners’ role as discourse actors in civil society and the political economy is complex, not always in their control and with potentially unexpected collateral outcomes. This research has extended the analysis of public relations practice to consider the impact of advocacy groups and mediatisation on the negotiation of meaning and the achievement of political outcomes. The methodology addresses claims that critical research can be too specific, too focused on small texts. The case study is a long term, multi-stage campaign and the approach adopted is a mega discourse approach rather than a detailed analysis of individual texts.
Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis began with a question that appears regularly in public relations literature and has remained unresolved: what is the role of public relations in society? Taylor (2010) argues that answers to this question will influence the way people theorise and practice public relations, and in this thesis I argue that a clear understanding of this role affects the degree to which public relations is able to advance its reputational and professional standing. Taylor’s definition explains that the role of public relations in society is “to create (and re-create) the conditions that enact civil society” (2010, p.7), arguing for a co-creational role in which public relations is positioned as one condition that makes civil society possible. This thesis has examined the influence of public relations practice at the intersection of civil society, political economy in the debate of a public policy issue.

The questions addressed in this thesis concern the role of public relations practice on public debate and the impact they have as discourse producers. The importance of this is established in the literature review presented in Chapter 2 and the conceptualisation of the public sphere offered in Chapter 3. This thesis argues that public relations needs to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of its practice with respect to its role in society and its production of discourse, not only to address its poor reputation but to elevate its status as a profession.

The analysis of the campaign and media texts in the case study demonstrates the complex means through which public relations wields influence in the construction of public discourse. The most directly observable effect is the impact on media discourse: particularly the degree to which the discourse strategies employed by public relations are taken up in the media with little alteration or scrutiny. This is related to the achievement of the campaigns’ overall objectives, which are to influence public debate and achieve a public policy outcome, in this case listing Prevenara vaccine on the national immunisation program. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, to limit the assessment of impact to the direct goal
Chapter 8: Conclusion

is to overlook the more subtle and possibly longer-term effects which are outcomes of public relations practice. It is not that there is an intention to abuse public trust, for, as has been established, strategies are neutral; but that there are wider implications about the way the power effects of public relations practices are enacted. The potential impact of sophisticated communication practice demands that professionals operate at a high level of awareness of collateral outcomes, a requirement that goes beyond current guidelines for ethical practice.

How can professionals and educators respond to the challenges this case study offers? First, the results highlight the need for both professionals and educators to take a wider view of the ethical bases of practice – to move beyond the individualistic, functional vision and “own” the argument about the social role of the profession. This can only be achieved on a large scale by industry professional associations and practitioners and educators. This ethical foundation should be then reinforced in the practices of individual members of the profession. Second, there is need for public relations education to continue to develop critical approaches to learning and adopt future-oriented and transdisciplinary approaches that enhance effective practice in complex modern social environments.

8.2 Public relations professional reputation

Public relations collectively faces a situation wherein problems which arise from the role it plays in society hinder the progression of the field in its quest for professional recognition, although so far this is not at such a crisis point that practitioners might consider taking urgent action. On the contrary, the field is lucrative, with growth in employment opportunities and increasing numbers of enrolments in undergraduate and postgraduate university degrees; however, public relations professionals continue to lament their lack of professional status (Macnamara 2012; Parente 2010). Thus, while academics may point to problems there is little imperative in the short term for the profession to reassess its behaviour.

This thesis demonstrates how public relations, participating in the public sphere through discourse practice, plays an integrative role in the negotiation of interests
in civil society and the political economy. Public relations is generally perceived to be acting for established, powerful, corporate interests who seek to create and maintain status positions in relation to the state. This is not an unjustifiable assumption, as this is where much public relations work is located. Fundamental to this are questions of power. Chapter 3 established that public relations practice, through the use of particular discursive strategies, can advance the hegemonic power of particular groups and enable them to gain public consent for their actions (Motion & Weaver 2005), and demonstrates the degree to which public relations power is derived from the organisations it represents. In this case, where the client is a large pharmaceutical company, the public relations agency is able wield considerable influence and produce results which are not necessarily in the public’s best interests. Through actions which influence public debate of policy issues such as health funding, public relations practitioners are engaged in work with implications beyond the immediate outcomes of campaign strategies.

However, the analysis also demonstrates the limitations of public relations influence in the complexity of the mediated public sphere. Yes, practitioners have the skills, and (in this case) the access to various forms of economic and social capital that enable them to wield considerable power in shaping the media representation of the issue; but they are also constrained by forces beyond their control. The current economic imperatives that prevail in the media industry make them a soft target for public relations influence. The insatiable needs of a twenty-four hour news cycle, and reductions in the funding allocated to investigative journalism, allow public relations practitioners to “assist” media practice efficiency by offering ready-made “news” that requires little more than cut-and-paste to fill out an empty newspaper column.

Public relations materials are not universally adopted without alteration. In choosing to run material and then shaping it in ways which suit their own agenda, journalists affect the degree to which public relations practitioners are able to impose the way issues are ultimately represented. Moreover, while the public relations tactic of building coalitions with interest groups, for instance, is a valuable strategy, it brings with it risks where spokespeople and advocacy organisations take initiatives or behave in way counterproductive to the campaign.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

Public relations’ power is both enabled and constrained by these factors, which present a number of challenges.

Public relations acts with, through and on behalf of others, and any assessment of its power and responsibility needs to be considered in this context. The choice of client by the firm, or the demands the client makes, will help determine the values communicated and the strategies deployed, making this a sometimes difficult process for consultancies and one that is not always easy to negotiate. Such constraints bring to the fore questions of accountability: where the limits of public relations power can be determined, and consequently, how the ethicality of an action might be assessed. This wider view of public relations social ethics is highlighted in this thesis. Actions may meet current standards of ethical practice in some aspects, but when combined with a range of other outcomes that might reasonably be anticipated achieve effects that are counterproductive to democratic debate.

The role of professional associations, in defining ethical practice in the social role of the field, is crucial here. If the social role is fully acknowledged, stronger forms of regulation and a stronger voice from professional associations may be warranted. In Britain, for example, the establishment of chartered status for the occupation means that the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), the only body offering a professional qualification in public relations, can require those wishing to become members to demonstrate understanding of the issues discussed in this thesis, including the profession’s impact on society politically, socially, economically and morally, and what professionalism entails. This move to chartered status and general advances in credentialling is a signal to professional bodies of the need for transparency and scrutiny of standards of practice, and places the wider social context of practice on the agenda. However, most professional organisations still follow a model of industry representation, a traditional approach based on an outdated paradigm where a decidedly narrow view of the interests of practitioners is promoted and any wrongdoing is deemed the work of a few “bad apples”. By continuing to favour an individualistic approach to professionalism and ethical practice, such organisations fail to address the issues underpinning the wider reputation of the field. As Olasky
Chapter 8: Conclusion

argues, “blaming the periphery does not come to grips with the corruption that can be found at the centre of the public relations trade” (1989, p.89).

While not the principal focus of this thesis, the powerful role played by professional groups in debating public policy issues has been made clear. This case study concerned medical professional associations lobbying for policy change, and actively engaging in debate in the public sphere on issues of importance to their field. This raises questions about the role of public relations professional associations. The literature review discusses the degree to which public relations is publicly criticised, but there is little on the voice of public relations as a professional group. The representation of public relations in the media discourse, in investigative articles on promotional methods used by pharmaceutical companies, underscores the relatively passive public role of the professional bodies. Neff talks about “the relentless negative media interpretations [that] hinder the development of appreciative publics supporting public relations” (2010 p.367). It is not only negative portrayals that shape these perceptions: it is also the way in which public relations is portrayed with a level of indifference, as no more than a tool used by other stakeholders. In this context, they do not deserve a comment on their professional practice; they are diminished by omission from this particular discourse. While Neff’s article in which this occurred was a critical piece, there would have been value in having public relations engaged in the debate about their area of practice. The discipline is responding to the challenge of negative media responses and is “taking a stand” (Neff 2010). She offers the work of Coombs and Holladay (2007) as an example of a positive effort “to establish the value of a ‘multibillion-dollar’ industry to society” (Neff 2010, p.370). Such work is a positive step. What is not clear is how far beyond the field such work reaches, how much effect it can have on wider impressions of the field. Are researchers still talking to themselves?

8.3 Implications for public relations education

One of the benefits of adopting a critical perspective which takes a wide view of context is the impact this can have on the way practitioners and academics conceptualise problems and develop solutions to challenges facing the field.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

Bourdieu characterises practice as having “its own logic, driven by a practical sense of what is appropriate, legitimate and effective in a particular context” (Bourdieu 1990 p. 32). Bourdieu argues that this logic of practice is socially determined, for it is in practice that habitus is acted out. How a practitioner behaves professionally reflects which elements of their habitus have shaped their understanding of their role and its relationship to the wider social environment; education is one of these elements. There have been calls from some researchers for the academic domain of public relations to become more independent of the practitioner perspective (Dozier & Lauzen 2000), and while this has been resisted, Macnamara (2012) believes it to be a necessary step for public relations to become a mature discipline. The shift advocated in critical research may contribute new perspectives, which are needed to prevent future research and development from doing no more than perpetuate the status quo.

The value of education has been acknowledged in academic literature as a tool to promote the professional standing of public relations (L’Etang & Pieczka 2006). There is tendency to focus on individual behaviour rather than group standards, so that “an occupation becomes a profession when a majority of its practitioners qualify as professional” (Grunig & Hunt 1984, p.66). Grunig and Hunt argue that this is a convenient way of avoiding important questions about the role of public relations in society, noting the same process in teaching ethics. This distinction is revealed in this case study, where claims to ethical conduct are made by the agency on an individual basis, for one part of the campaign, without acknowledgement of wider implications.

The complexity of practice revealed in this thesis supports calls for education that enhance critical thinking and incorporate it into interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approaches to learning. McKie and Munshi (2007) argue that creativity, especially diversity-fuelled creativity, will be increasingly essential for success in business and organisations in a future that is unpredictable, uncertain, fast changing and transformative. Others argue that scholarship has lagged behind practice in adapting to the complexities of this volatile landscape (Wakefield 2010). New approaches are needed to produce practitioners with the wide
Chapter 8: Conclusion

perspective necessary for them act ethically and in the public interest, and to take a leadership role in professional communication.

Models of educational practice, which follow the functionalist lines of much public relations theory, have taken the field to a certain level of professional development; however, more is needed. Complex situations require professional preparation which is both professionally specific and broad. Practitioners have to acquire the technical specialisations necessary to operate in the field, but they also need the capacity to look beyond disciplinary boundaries. Scholars have challenged the narrow disciplinary focus of public relations, advocating a broad approach (Leitch & Neilson 1997; Mackey 2001; Macnamara 2012), with some even describing the failure to engage as consigning public relations to a “scholarly ghetto” (Pfau & Wan 2006, p.111). The nature of social problems is complex and multi-dimensional, and many of the issues facing modern societies such as community health and public health policy benefit from collaborations between academic researchers, community based organisations and members of different communities. Applying insights from a broad range of disciplines to these issues can better equip public relations professionals to develop creative solutions with long-term beneficial outcomes.

Public relations is a field of practice which requires technical knowledge specific to the field plus existing knowledge from other fields in which the practitioner may not be expert. As Macnamara argues, narrow disciplinary knowledge facilitates technical competency “but does not provide understanding of the environments and broader contexts in which society, communities, governments, markets, organisations and individuals operate” (2012, p.453). If they are to be required to make complex ethical decisions, public relations practitioners need to have appropriate problem-solving skills. While there has been significant development in professional and academic research, there needs to be continual development to meet the communication demands of society; the depth and breadth of education must be increased as the complexity of context increases (Neff 2010, p.378). Neff foresees a shift in emphasis from a client- or organisation-centric view, and asks whether the field should take a more independent stance and assume more of a leadership role in society (2010).
8.4 Further research

This research has revealed much about the nature of public relations influence in the public sphere, but also points out a number of contradictions. Public relations influence has been demonstrated, but so too have limits to its power as a professional field. Public relations practitioners achieve with and through others – their power to control the quality and outcomes of their work is limited. Although scholarly work has explored these contradictions, further research is needed to determine how this complex combination of antithetical forces can be incorporated into a model of ethical professional engagement for these discourse producers in the public sphere.

This case study focuses on health/immunisation in Australia, and further research could determine whether the findings resonate in other sectors and other cultural contexts, particularly in non-Western countries. There may also be value in exploring these themes in non-commercial contexts such as environmental campaigns, where the resources deployed, and power relations at play, may differ in their scope and impact.

The views of practitioners of their social role have not been a component of this study, and this limitation should be addressed in further research. Critical insights from practitioners on contentious campaign issues can be difficult to obtain, but the field would benefit from deeper insights into the social ethics of public relations.

8.5 Concluding remarks

The questions posed by this thesis are concerned with illuminating the way public relations campaigns shape and influence public discourse on health issues. In answering these questions, the study has revealed a complex and sophisticated mode of practice which wields considerable influence in the public sphere. This has added to the body of evidence on the social role of public relations, and the need for the field as a whole to reflect critically on the ethical dimensions of the power that is exercised.
Critical research has occupied a difficult position in the development of theory and knowledge for public relations: often marginalised, described as occupying a gadfly role, it remains important as it can “stimulate the ‘rest of us’ to examine our own work reflexively and critically” (Dozier & Lauzen 2000, p.16). The review in this thesis of popular critiques of public relations practice makes it is clear that not a great deal has changed in regard to the professional reputation of the field, despite the best efforts of many practitioners. The only group who really see public relations as a profession, with the social legitimacy this implies, are those within the field: in other areas of business management it has not reached this status (L’Etang 2002). There is no agreement even within public relations that it has attained professional status. Critical research, which seeks to investigate public relations practice as a socio-political activity, its practice, purpose and implications, is fundamental to any improvement in the status and reputation of public relations.

The methodology adopted in this study is significant in that is represents a systematic attempt to examine public relations practice and the resultant media discourse within a single, long-term public policy campaign. The results of a single case study cannot be generalised, however, the issues raised have relevance to many areas of public relations practice and to the conduct political debates in a democratic public sphere. This contributes to the development of critical public relations theory on the social role and power of the field. A focus on the relationship between campaign and media texts contributes to an understanding of the relationship between public relations, the media and other stakeholders in discourse production.

The pneumococcal case study highlights a number of competing perspectives from which to examine the role of public relations in society. On one level, public relations can be seen as a negative influence in democratic debate, engaging in unethical practices and wielding undue influence on behalf of private corporate interests. From another perspective, these practices may be considered strategies which enable them to compete effectively in the public sphere, to promote client interests, and to have their voices heard. The messages the campaign promoted may be seen as beneficial for the community in that they provide awareness of
and a solution to a medical risk; or they may be seen as deceptive, constructing a false threat to achieve what was essentially corporate gain. These contrasting assessments indicate that notions of evil or good cannot be isolated but are parts of a dynamic whole.

This thesis argues for the need to address the collective concerns of the field of public relations concerning the role it plays in society and the poor reputation it endures. By demonstrating the complexity of the context of practice, and the far-reaching influence of its discourse activities, this thesis highlights the need for continued research into the nature of the influence and power wielded by public relations as discourse producers in the public sphere. This will contribute to the development of a professional ideology for public relations which, as the noted scholar on the professions, Eliot Freidson, says, is “separate from individual conscience” and related to “the ideal claim of a collective devotion to that transcendent value and, more importantly, the right to serve it independently when the practical demand of patrons and clients stifle it” (Freidson 2001, p.96).

This study is significant for the Australian public relations industry as the field still faces challenges in establishing its social legitimacy as a professional occupation. It informs discussion of the issues facing professional practitioners at a time when there are moves in other parts of the world, for example in Great Britain, to strengthen professional accountability through such measures as achieving chartered status. Practitioners and educators in Australia are not alone in seeking to increase the social legitimacy of their field, and work in this area, in terms of developing a body of knowledge and a code of ethics administered by professional associations, goes some of the way to addressing this challenge. There is still, however, no consensus as to just how public relations should move forward and how it should define itself as a profession. This quandary is shared by educators, who without such fixed foundations are required to develop programs that will equip future practitioners with the intellectual and moral capacity to function as fully formed professionals, able to make wise and ethical decisions.
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Appendix 1: Quantitative analysis coding frame

Text source

Table 16 Categorises media, trade and PR texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist press</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Headline topic

Table 17 What is the lead topic for the article?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General health/flu</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous vaccine/ over 65yrs</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meningococcal disease/vaccine</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumococcal disease</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumococcal vaccine</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaccine cost</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunisation</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience story</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Month

Time was recorded in month and year. During analysis another variable was created which condensed this data into quarters.
Appendixes

Journalist type

Table 18 Specialist or general reporter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journalist type</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

State

Table 19 Location of publication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of publication</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Voices

Table 20 Who is speaking in the text?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Where government authority is invoked, either through department or public hospital is mentioned as part of supporting claim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>Where politician of their spokesperson is quoted directly in the story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Qualified medical practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>Spokesperson for the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy Group</td>
<td>A community based group, NFP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Association</td>
<td>AMA and other professional associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Where parents speak of children vulnerable to the disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langoulant</td>
<td>The key advocate spokesperson for the PR campaign</td>
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## Discourse Elements

### Table 21 PR and media texts including different viewpoint.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Antibiotics</td>
<td>Mention of antibiotics in the article</td>
<td>1 Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Call for government funding</td>
<td>Did the article include an urge to the government to fund the vaccine</td>
<td>1 Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different viewpoint</td>
<td>The expression of any view on immunisation and the pneumococcal vaccine or pneumococcal disease which differs from the argument presented by the campaign</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal experience story</td>
<td>a story personal experience of the disease</td>
<td>1 Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Immunisation</td>
<td>The wider topic of immunisation – vaccine as a form of risk management and not the pneumococcal vaccine specifically</td>
<td>1 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumococcal disease</td>
<td>Facts about disease – symptoms, treatment, outcomes as per the campaign texts</td>
<td>1 Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaccine</td>
<td>Mention of the new vaccine</td>
<td>1 Yes</td>
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Appendix 2: Added variable

Table 22 Condensed time periods from monthly to quarterly

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<table>
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