

Who Listens to Alan Jones?

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Summary

Alan Jones is considered the 'king' of breakfast radio in Australia. There is a widespread belief amongst Australia's political elites that Jones can decide elections.

Drawing on demographic and attitudinal data from an extensive survey by Roy Morgan Research, this study examines the characteristics of Alan Jones listeners and compares them with all Australians over 14. It seeks to uncover whether the extent and composition of Jones' audience is congruent with his perceived influence.

The typical Jones listener is an older Australian - 68 per cent are over 50 compared to 37 per cent of the entire population over 14. By income his listeners tend to be concentrated in two groups - pensioners and others with incomes around the average. The typical Jones listener is also substantially more likely to be religious than other Australians. Only 10 per cent of Jones listeners say they have no religious affiliation compared to 26 per cent of other Australians.

In their attitudes, Jones' listeners are much more conservative than other Australians. For example, 77 per cent of his listeners believe that the fundamental values of 'our society' are under threat compared to 66 per cent of all Australians. They are also less likely to believe that Aboriginal culture is an essential component of Australian society.

They are also more likely to favour heterosexual families in which children are disciplined and taught respect for authority. Strikingly, only 13 per cent of Jones' listeners believe in adoption rights for homosexual couples compared to 37 per cent of the general population.

Jones' frequent beating of the law and order drum mirrors the fearfulness of his listeners. Sixty-eight per cent say they feel less safe than they used to, compared to 49 per cent of all Australians, and they are more likely to believe that crime is growing.

Perhaps the largest difference between Jones' listeners and other Australians is the extent of their support for the Coalition Government. While 47 per cent of Australians say that the Government is doing a good job running the country, fully 75 per cent of Jones' listeners agree. Not surprisingly, their voting patterns match this expressed support for the Government. They are twice as likely as other Australians to vote for

the Federal Coalition with 65 per cent saying they give their first preference to the Liberal Party.

The evidence presented in this paper indicates that perceptions of Jones' influence and political sway are disproportionate to the size and nature of his audience. His listeners are much more conservative and authoritarian in their views than other Australians. His audience is small - about the same as a low-rating television program - and highly concentrated among older listeners with well-established and inflexible political allegiances. This suggests that his influence is based more on networking and fear of on-air criticism than a real ability to shift votes.

1. Introduction

Alan Jones is considered the ‘king’ of breakfast radio in Australia. His talkback radio show on Sydney’s 2GB consistently wins the rating slot. His audience share, political networks and willingness to use both to have his opinions heard, and often acted upon, make him one of the most regarded and feared media personalities in Australia.

Indeed the Jones Breakfast show is regularly the first place where the Prime Minister and the NSW Premier turn to make announcements and address the community. Liberal and Labor heavyweights believe his influence is critical to winning elections in NSW. Michael Kroger, former President of the Victorian Liberals and key Howard strategist, argued as long ago as 1998 that:

[y]ou can’t underestimate the Alan Jones factor in New South Wales. I mean he has hundreds of thousands of listeners every day ... [he] seeks to exercise his influence far more than John [Laws] or any other commentator. He’s a very powerful figure (Lateline 1998).

Since then his influence has grown substantially.

This study draws on survey data to investigate the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of Alan Jones’ listeners. In doing so it aims to discover whether the extent and composition of Jones’ audience is congruent with his perceived influence. Before doing so, we consider the influence of talkback radio and of Jones himself.

2. Background

Prime Minister Howard has claimed that talkback radio has played a greater role in shaping recent election outcomes than other sections of the media (Frew 2004). Many commentators in the political arena argue that its impact often outweighs that of television and newspapers.

Talkback radio has a long history in Australia and over the last 20 years Alan Jones has been the most listened to talkback host in the country. In fact, in the most recent AC Nielsen radio ratings Jones posted his 31st consecutive win with a 16.4 per cent share of the Sydney breakfast audience. His nearest rival was 2DAY FM with a 10.5 per cent share (AC Nielsen 2006). This translates into approximately 182,000 Sydney-siders listening to his program (or at least with the radio tuned to 2GB) on any given day (Lee 2006).¹ On the other hand, in a recent commentary David Salter argues that the number of swinging voters he may influence could be as low as 1,250 people ‘spread over Sydney’s 25 federal electorates’ (Salter 2006, p. 46).²

Impressive as Jones’ audience share appears, the number of his listeners is dwarfed by the readership of the main newspapers and the audience of television channels. The highest rating television shows during prime time receive upwards of 600,000 viewers in Sydney. The top rating news program, National Nine News Sunday, had 552,000 viewers in Sydney for the last week of March 2006 (Oztam 2006), more than three

¹ Since 1995 Jones has also presented daily editorials on the ‘Today’ show, the Channel 9 morning program.

² There are actually 27 federal electorates in the Sydney basin.

times the number of people who tune in to Alan Jones. Similarly, the two largest Sydney newspapers are read by close to a million people (Lee 2006). In short, the number of people who listen to the highest rating radio programs is considerably less than the equivalents for television and print.

3. Political influence

Why is Alan Jones perceived to be powerful? His influence derives from his activities on-air and off. As a former aspiring National and Liberal Party politician his political networks range far and wide. He has contested various pre-selections for the Nationals and Liberals and was a speech-writer to Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (Four Corners 2002a). However, the key to his influence is his willingness to use his powerful contacts and to fire up his loyal listeners.

Many commentators point to his ties with influential figures including the Prime Minister, media mogul James Packer and David Flint (former head of the Australian Broadcasting Authority and currently convenor of Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy). Jones is a regular guest at functions held by the Prime Minister and was even the master of ceremonies at the celebration of John Howard's ten years in power. He was selected by the Packer family to act as the master of ceremonies at the funeral of Kerry Packer in February 2006.

However, Jones is not merely seen to mix with the powerful, he knows how to use his influence. In 1999, the Prime Minister created a special contact point for Jones in his office after he complained that the Federal Government was ignoring his correspondence (Four Corners 2002b). In the same year, he is believed to have sent 4,500 letters to the Federal Government (Four Corners 2002b). In NSW it is reported that the Premier receives a report card each morning covering the topics from Jones' breakfast show (Four Corners 2002a). It is argued by some observers that, in NSW at least, his program sets the agenda.

In 2001, the resignation of former NSW Police Minister Paul Whelan and the dismissal of the former NSW Police Commissioner, Peter Ryan, were seen by many as evidence of Jones' influence (Four Corners 2002a). Jones' program relentlessly criticised the NSW Government, and Commissioner Ryan in particular, over its apparent failure to reduce the crime rate. It was widely reported that the NSW Premier conferred with Jones on the matter and his subsequent appointment of Michael Costa as the new police minister (Baily 2001).

The forceful, and often partisan, editorialising by Jones is considered his most effective tool of influence. According to political journalist Laurie Oakes, senior Labor figures believe that his persistent pursuit of Labor, and support for the Liberals, is changing the political culture of Sydney (Oakes 1999, p. 48). On the eve of the 1998 Federal election, Jones' first two guests argued that Labor Opposition leader Kim Beazley was unfit to govern and that the GST was good policy (Four Corners 2002a). Moreover, a study by media monitoring company Reham shows that during the 1998 election 70 per cent of Jones' comments about the key Labor issues were negative and none were positive. In comparison, only six per cent of his comments about the key Coalition issues were negative and 41 per cent were positive (Four Corners 2002a).

4. Demographic characteristics of Jones' listeners

This study investigates the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of Alan Jones listeners using data from Roy Morgan Research. The data were collected across Australia from 24,718 respondents aged 14 and over during the period October 2003 to September 2004.³ The Alan Jones breakfast show is on air from 5.30 am to 10.00 am weekdays. The Roy Morgan data are split according to time slots; accordingly, this study focuses on people who listen to 2GB radio between 5.30 am and 9.00 am.

A large majority of Jones' listeners are older Australians - 68 per cent are over 50 years of age compared to 37 percent for the entire population over 14. Thirty five per cent of Jones' listeners are over 65 years compared to 15 per cent for the whole population over 14. Thirty-nine per cent are retired compared to 18 per cent of the population over 14. On the other hand, while 37 per cent of Australians over 14 are aged 14-34, only around 7 per cent of Jones' listeners fall into this group. Jones has virtually no direct impact on younger voters.

There are slightly more males among Jones' listeners than females (54 per cent versus 46 per cent).

By income level, Jones' listeners tend to be concentrated in two groups - pensioners and others with around average incomes.

In terms of religious affiliation, Jones' listeners are substantially more likely than the average to identify with the Anglican Church (32 per cent compared to 22 per cent for all those over 14) and the Catholic Church (30 per cent compared to 23 per cent). Jones' listeners are more likely to go to church or their place of worship on a regular basis than other Australians (26 per cent compared to 18 per cent). On the other hand, while 26 per cent of the population over 14 say they have no religious affiliation, only 10 per cent of Jones' audience says the same.

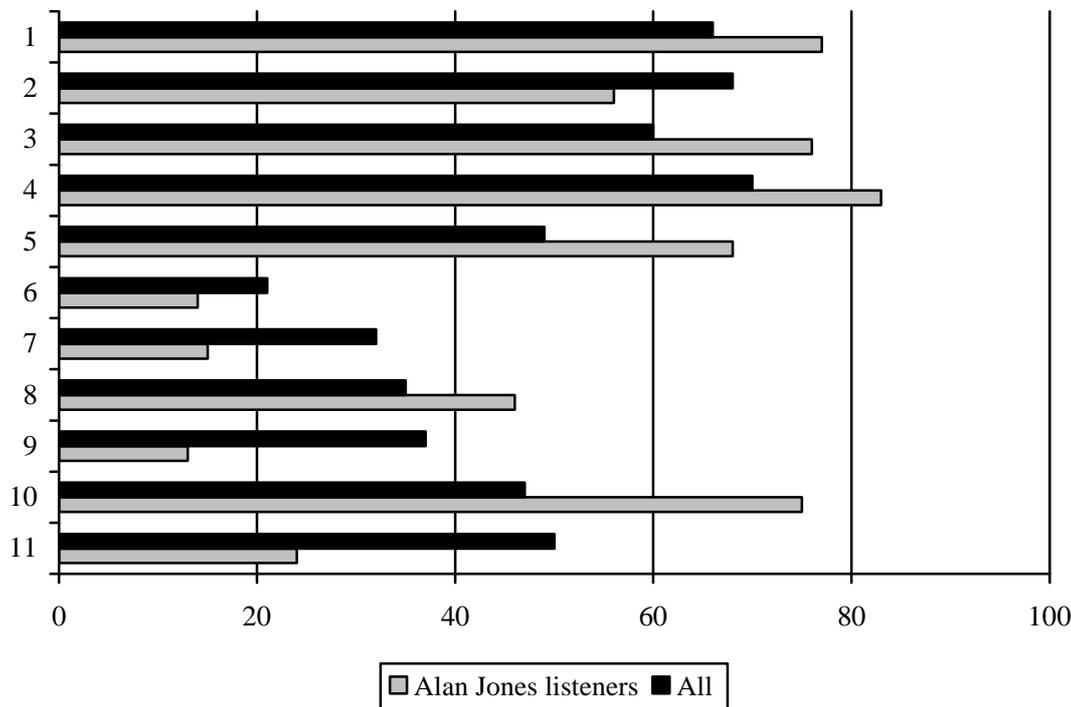
5. Attitudes of Jones' listeners

An examination of social attitudes covered by Roy Morgan Research data makes it very apparent that Jones listeners are both morally more conservative and much more concerned about crime and security than other Australians. Their social attitudes are highly consistent with many of the themes that Jones stresses in his on-air editorials. More often than not, the comments of Jones on issues ranging from societal values to the performance of the Federal Government replicate the attitudes of his listeners.

Differences between Jones' listeners and all Australians over 14 on a number of attitudinal questions are shown in Figure 1.

³ This paper draws on three sets of data collected in the same period, October 2003 to September 2004. The attitudinal data are drawn from 24,718 respondents, the demographic data from 56,344 respondents and the data on Alan Jones' listeners are drawn from 952 respondents.

Figure 1 Agreement with selected issues, Alan Jones listeners and the Australian population over 14 (%)



Statement

1. The fundamental values of our society are under threat
2. Aboriginal culture is an essential component of Australian society
3. Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn
4. Crime is a growing problem in my community
5. I feel less safe than I used to
6. Freedom is more important than the law
7. Terrorists deserve the same rights as other criminals
8. I believe homosexuality is immoral
9. Homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children
10. The Government is doing a good job running the country
11. I don't trust the current Australian Government

Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

Perhaps the most marked difference between Jones' listeners and other Australians is the extent of their support for the Coalition Government. While 47 per cent of Australians over 14 say that the Government is doing a good job running the country, fully 75 per cent of Jones' listeners agree. And while 50 per cent of Australians say they do not trust the current Australian Government, only 24 per cent of Jones' listeners take the same view.

Not surprisingly, the voting patterns of Jones' listeners match this expressed support for the Government. They are almost twice as likely as other Australians to vote for

the Federal Coalition. Among all Australian electors, 35 per cent said they would give their first preference to the Liberal Party, but among electors who listen to Jones the figure is 65 per cent. Correspondingly, while 39 per cent said their first preference would go to Labor, only 23 per cent of Jones' audience said the same.⁴

These figures - along with the warm treatment Jones gives to the Prime Minister and the favourable editorialising on key conservative issues - confirm the perception that most of Jones' audience are staunch Liberal voters. It is unlikely that many listeners are swinging voters whose preferences could be influenced by Jones' comment or urgings.

Jones' listeners are generally more socially conservative than other Australians. More than three quarters (77 per cent) of listeners to Jones' breakfast program believe that the fundamental values of 'our society' are under threat. This compares to 66 per cent of all Australians. They are also more likely to believe that the most important values for children to learn are obedience and respect for authority (76 per cent compared to 60 per cent overall).

On his program Jones often comments on the decline in values and the breakdown of families. For example, in an on-air editorial in 2005, Jones opined:

[so], you see, mothers, often not married, teenagers - are hanging on to children with awful consequences (Jones 2005).

Jones' listeners are also considerably less likely than the rest of the population to believe that Aboriginal culture is an essential component of Australian society. Sixty eight per cent of Australians believe Aboriginal culture is an essential component of society compared to 56 per cent of Jones' listeners. The views of his listeners on Indigenous issues appear to match his own. In 1993 for example, he described the choice of Mandawuy Yunupingu as Australian of the Year as an 'insult' claiming that he only received the award because he is black (Four Corners 2002b). Jones was also sued for defamation after imputing that an Aboriginal organisation had conspired with others to pursue a Native Title claim it knew to be fraudulent for land at Crescent Head (*Daily Telegraph* 1998).

Jones has been harshly critical of certain ethnic communities, most recently in relation to the Cronulla riots. Jones cut off a caller who reported hearing "really derogatory remarks" aimed at Middle Eastern people on Cronulla beach, saying:

Let's not get too carried away ... We don't have Anglo-Saxon kids out there raping women in western Sydney (Marr 2005).

The disposition of Jones' listeners towards a strict disciplinarian hand in the family is paralleled by their views about authority in society. Jones has regularly castigated the government and police in NSW for being 'soft' on crime. His listeners are much more likely than other Australians to say they feel less safe than they used to (68 per cent compared to 49 per cent). They are also more likely to believe that crime is a growing problem in the community (83 per cent to 69 per cent).⁵ One of the most striking

⁴ It should be noted that the voter intentions expressed above are as of 2004.

⁵ Jones' forays into debates about law and order in NSW are frequent and often controversial. See for example, Marr (2005) and Salter (2006).

differences between those who tune in to Jones and other Australians is that they are much more willing to sacrifice legal rights in the fight against crime. Thus only 15 per cent agree that terrorists deserve the same rights as other criminals, compared to 32 per cent of other Australians.

It is little wonder Jones' listeners are worried for their safety, for his morning words often reinforce the view that the world is a violent and dangerous place. In 2001, for example, he went to air leaving the impression that the people of Sydney were at the mercy of gangs and rapists.

Sydney's bleeding and we need help – we don't [want] anymore spin, anymore hollow words, we need action. And we need people running our police service who know what they are doing (Alan Jones quoted on Media Watch 2001).

Like Jones, his listeners show a strong preference for a punitive approach to law and order. They are almost a third less likely than other people to agree that freedom is more important than the law. Only 14 per cent of Jones' listeners place freedom above the law compared to 21 per cent of all respondents.

In one of the more notable differences between Jones' audience and other Australians, 46 per cent of his listeners believe that homosexuality is immoral, compared to 35 per cent of all Australians. Their views about homosexuality extend to parenthood. They are substantially less likely to support homosexual couples' right to adoption than their fellow Australians. In fact, only 13 per cent of his listeners believe in adoption rights for homosexual couples compared to 37 per cent of the general community. In contrast to his radio competitor John Laws, Jones is much less vocal about issues of homosexuality, which is curious given the seemingly homophobic attitudes of his audience.

In summary, Jones' listeners are more likely than others to favour heterosexual families where children are disciplined and are taught respect for authority. Moreover, as children have respect for authority so should citizens have respect for the law. Reflecting their higher level of insecurity, a punitive approach to crime is favoured, especially with respect to terrorism, even if this means loss of civil liberties. These attitudes reflect a morally conservative and authoritarian audience that is a long way attitudinally from the rest of Australia.

6. Implications

There is a widespread belief amongst Australia's political elites that Alan Jones can decide elections. He is credited with delivering a 300,000 voting bloc in NSW to those who fall into line (Salter 2006, p. 46). Prime Minister Howard regards Jones as a litmus test of community feeling, and Labor members fear that his one-eyed editorialising is shaping the NSW political landscape (Oakes 1999, p. 48). These are bold claims about a radio announcer who preaches to approximately the same number of people as a low-rating television program. On any given day Jones broadcasts to approximately 182,000 people, the vast majority of whom have well-established and inflexible political allegiances.

The data discussed in this paper suggest that perceptions of Jones' influence and political sway are out of proportion to the size and nature of his audience. His influence seems to be based more on networking and fear of on-air criticism than a real ability to shift votes. Yet, as one commentator put it, 'the perception of power is as important as power itself' (Four Corners 2002a).

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