

# Zaky Mallah, Q&A, and the media at its worst

OPINION

By ABC's [Jonathan Green](#)

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PHOTO: [Zaky Mallah should have been a no-go zone for Q&A.](#) (ABC Q&A)

***This week in politics and media was a wreck: beginning with Zaky Mallah and the troll casting on Q&A, to the inflated hypocrisy of the tabloid response and the blustering outrage of government, writes Jonathan Green.***

**Omnishambles:** 'ɒmniʃamb(ə)lz/ noun British informal

1. a situation that has been comprehensively mismanaged, characterised by a string of blunders and miscalculations.

... or any given week in the Australian media and politics. Actually not just any week, this week: this rolling, muddy scuffle of buffoonery, self-interest, score settling and fear.

Yes the whole Zaky Mallah farrago, from thoughtless Q&A troll casting, to the grotesquely inflated hypocrisy of the tabloid response and the censorious, red-cheeked, blustering outrage of government. A week that has shown the media class at its worst: reactive and self-absorbed, simultaneously inconsequential and self-important. Or worse: driven by petty vindictiveness over public interest.

The public interest here is simple: freedom of speech, pluralism. And maybe Q&A has done some harm to that cause through accident, overconfidence and misadventure, but the thrust of its endeavour was right. Here is a young man, once radicalised, now reformed, whose [central message is disdain for the "wankers" of Islamic State.](#)

That's a voice that has a place in our conversation about the promotion of terror, but not if politics has anything to do with it.

A complex human reality of cause and complicated effect might muddle the binary simplicity promoted by the Government in its prosecution of a domestic front in the War on Terror. It was all pretty clear to the Prime Minister:

I think many, many millions of Australians would feel betrayed by our national broadcaster right now, and I think that the ABC does have to have a long, hard look at itself, and to answer a question which I have posed before: whose side are you on?

Betrayed by an admission of complexity? Betrayed by an attempt to consider the full range of the conversation? This is the sort of freedom that surely our war should defend.

To call it a betrayal is to protest too much, is to reveal the thinness of the politically self-serving construct of "us" against some nameless but omnipresent "them", a construct remote from reality, but one that the ABC is seemingly bound to defend.

Us and them meant something rather different by the time the tabloids got their hands on the story, and here it became just another shot in a vicious culture war, a culture war with the added edge of deep commercial self-interest and simple spite.

It takes a special kind of dulled self-awareness to produce front page images of Mallah in every major capital outside Perth and then [complain, with heated outrage, of how the ABC had given this demon "publicity"](#). Never mind equating the entire staff of the public broadcaster with IS, that's just offensive hyperbolic groupthink; the hypocrisy is the real killer.

And as good a demonstration as you might hope for of how profoundly self-regarding and fundamentally broken mass media is in this country: that one corporation's sense of indignation and outrage can somehow become a strangely confected, stable-wide news event. It's too easy to imagine that the real intent of Wednesday's ubiquitous News Corp covers was to do harm to a public broadcaster whose presence in the Australian media is the last remaining coherent check on the ubiquity of its readily manipulated media message.

This is a lesson in how media can operate: not reflecting with an objective sense of significance and priority on the events of the world it claims to report with fairness and good faith, but here, as so often, [devoting every resource to a vendetta](#).

Here was our moment: politics trading on fear and hoping for little short of acquiescent propaganda from media, media responding with an unseemly readiness to betray its public's reasonable interest in the simple truth.

And after all of that the thing that should have kept Mallah off the TV were not his views on terror, or jihad, or his loathing of Islamic State.

Mallah should have been a no-go zone after he tweeted threats of sexual violence against columnists [Miranda Devine](#) and [Rita Panahi](#) a few months past, threats repeated with idiotic zeal after this fuss blew up, threats that should have been known to the producers who scheduled a question from him to add ginger to Monday's program.

It's all of a piece in this muddle of media and politics, that violence against women plays second fiddle in this saga to Mallah's alleged, and for the most part imagined, links to terror.

We know the numbers by heart now, two women a week killed in this country in acts of violent loathing. The figures for those killed in acts of domestic terror...

Yet in pursuit of one we are prepared to surrender liberties, democratic process and perhaps even chip away at the rule of law. Never mind the dedication of [billions to schemes only likely to inflame the very radicals they seek to imprison, banish or deter](#).

And for the other? The real killer, the true source of so much domestic terror? The usual political routine of penny-pinching, platitudes and lip service.

Put it all together and you might just give way to despair.

*Jonathan Green* is presenter of RN Sunday Extra. He has recently been appointed editor of the literary journal Meanjin. This will be his last regular column for The Drum.