

## **SPECIAL TREATMENT – THE REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE IN THE MEDIA**

RUTH McCausland\*

Australians turn to the mainstream media to gain information, analysis and reasoning about events and issues on a daily basis. ‘The news’ has a powerful and permeating influence on how we all understand and make sense of the world around us. Notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘fact’ in media tradition belie the reality that the experiences and values of those who work in the media influence the way events and issues are portrayed. Like many Australians, those who work in the media may have ill-informed or prejudiced views of the historical and current experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Although there are many commentators, opinion columnists and others who make overtly racist statements about Indigenous people, racism in the media also manifests in more subtle ways in everyday media practices of news gathering and the narrative structures of news reportage. There is an institutional racism in the media, an entrenched culture that represents issues and people in particular ways. It is as much about what is not reported as what is. Whether deliberate or unconscious, those working in the media have the power to marginalise and construct Indigenous communities as ‘other’, as associated with criminality or conflict. This power comes from the capacity to make connections, to represent events or issues in the context of pre-existing prejudices. This article explores the relationship between media reporting, political rhetoric and community attitudes, and the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – from the way that legislation and policies concerning Indigenous people are formulated, to the way that Indigenous people are treated on a daily basis in the street, in the workplace, at school, and in the community.

### **‘The News’**

There is nothing as simple as ‘objective truth’ in news reporting. The values and beliefs of editors, sub-editors, reporters, commentators, proprietors, producers, opinion writers, cartoonists and photographers shape the way in which news is gathered, analysed and presented. Politicians, police, advertisers, corporate interests and powerful individuals can also influence the construction and production of news.<sup>1</sup> Decisions must always be made about what is ‘newsworthy’ and what is not, about the angle or focus of a news story.

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\* Ruth McCausland is the author of the Anti-Discrimination Board report *Race for the Headlines: Racism and Media Discourse*, 2003. She is currently a Research Fellow at Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, University of Technology, Sydney.

<sup>1</sup> Anti-Discrimination Board, *Race for the Headlines: Racism and Media Discourse*, 2003, p. 10.

Decisions are also made about whose voices are heard and whose are not; about the sources or spokespeople for a story. These decisions have a powerful and permeating influence on the way people view the world and their, and others', place in it.

Conventions in news reportage require an event, a conflict, an angle to make something newsworthy.<sup>2</sup> Race is regularly used in the Australian media as the reference point, the cause or the catalyst for problems or conflict. This is often underpinned by a kind of 'common sense' racism, where the process of targeting or blaming certain minority communities becomes justified by the language and reasoning used in news reports on a daily basis. Such narratives take hold and come to be used to explain, justify and rationalise contradictions and problems in our society. Rather than helping us to understand conflicts or explore complexities in a post-colonial and multicultural society, much of this news fuels notions of 'nationalism' and 'otherness' which are at the heart of populist racism and resentment.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) was set up to investigate the high rates of Indigenous incarceration, of deaths while in custody, and of institutional racism. The role of the media in perpetuating stereotypes about Aboriginal communities was highlighted in the final report. RCIADIC Commissioner Johnston stated that:

Racial stereotyping and racism in the media is institutional, not individual. That is, it results from news values, editorial policies, from routines of news gathering that are not in themselves racist or consciously prejudicial. It results from the fact that most news stories are already written before an individual journalist is assigned to them, even before the event takes place. A story featuring Aboriginals is simply more likely to be covered, or more likely to survive sub-editorial revision or spiking, if it fits existing definitions of the situation.<sup>3</sup>

The news media, while drawing on traditions of objectivity or fact, has the power to marginalise and contribute to discrimination against Indigenous people. The media can articulate and transmit pervasive and negative narratives, images and ideas about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that can have a significant effect on the collective beliefs of mainstream Australia. Whether those people working in the media do this wilfully or inadvertently, the damaging effects it can have for Indigenous communities are the same.

### **Media, political rhetoric, community attitudes**

It is difficult to isolate the ways in which media coverage of current events, political leadership and rhetoric, and community attitudes interact. There is no clear linear causality to the creation of negative stereotypes of Indigenous communities in the media. In many respects, recent events

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Commissioner Johnston, *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, National Report: Overview and Recommendations*, AGPS, 1991, pp. 185-186.

demonstrate the ways media reporting is interdependent and interwoven with political agendas and community perceptions.

For example, the extensive coverage of the government announcement of the abolition of ATSIC ‘fed common stereotypes of Aboriginal people as unable to govern with transparency and accountability’.<sup>4</sup> The focus by most in the media on the sexual assault allegations against the Chair of ATSIC and the allegations of misappropriation against the Deputy Chair rather than the policy and program successes of the institution,<sup>5</sup> allowed the government to abolish the main Indigenous representative body with little opposition or outcry. Community opinion, measured by letters to the editor, media outlet-run polls and talkback radio, confirmed that ATSIC indeed had failed Indigenous communities and should be abolished. The fact that ATSIC was not responsible for key areas such as education and health, and that neither the government or the opposition were consulting with Indigenous communities or proposing any detailed alternative framework, was rarely mentioned in media analysis. After the flurry of attention surrounding the abolition of ATSIC, there has been virtually no mainstream media reporting of Indigenous policy or program issues or government responsibility in this area.

Audiences are positioned through the language and images that are used in news reports and the way that issues are characterised or contextualised. Political leaders understand this, and carefully construct their communication through the media using professional staff whose responsibility it is to convey ideas or policy in particular ways, and to give them the desired impact and currency. Complicity of media reporting with government rhetoric or ‘spin’ has become a feature of the political landscape under the Howard government.

Media discourses convey views, both explicit and implicit, about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with whom the broader community may have no direct experience. As a result, the media plays an important role in shaping attitudes and understanding of those communities. Events are often explained or connected in the media in racial terms which may legitimise prejudice and discrimination against minority groups such as Indigenous communities.<sup>6</sup>

For example, the public view of crime is shaped by the media, as most people do not have a first-hand experience of crime. There is a substantial body of research that demonstrates that the media over-reports or disproportionately focuses on the alleged criminal activity of Indigenous and other non-white Australians.<sup>7</sup> This can lead to the perception that Indigenous people or those

<sup>4</sup> Behrendt, L., ‘Election 2004: Indigenous rights and institutions’, *Australian Review of Public Affairs Digest*, <http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/drawingboard/digest/0408/behrendt.html>, 16 August 2004, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> Tuen van Dijk, *Racism and the Press: Critical Studies in Racism and Migration*, Routledge, 1991, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, National Report: Overview and Recommendations*, AGPS, 1991; Institute of Criminology, *Current Issues in Criminal Justice: Special Issue – Refugee issues and criminology*, Volume 14, Number 1, Journal of the Institute of Criminology, July 2002; Jock Collins, Greg Noble, Scott Poynting

from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds are the source of problems or disorder in society. Such negative discourses about racial, ethnic or cultural difference are presented as part of a shared ‘common sense’. This common sense is created by both media commentary and political rhetoric, and is then given authenticity through being continuously reaffirmed in media reportage. These notions are underpinned by values and beliefs that are given power through being made ‘normal’. Counter views are then characterised as somehow untrue or irrational.

Australians as a media audience are not a homogenous or uncritical mass. All of us are influenced by our backgrounds, identities and experiences in the way that we interpret media reporting of issues. Nonetheless, the overwhelming force of the ‘racialisation’ of media and public discourses makes resistance to common sense explanations difficult. Audiences learn to notice and identify differences that relate to race, and to discount other factors. The diversity within Indigenous people and communities is also overlooked.

Political leaders and media commentators often draw on fear as a tool for community bonding or solidarity, and groups who are racially and culturally different are a common target. In particular, threats to the security of the nation from external or internal sources are regularly racialised.

After the High Court’s *Wik* decision, some state premiers publicly commented about perceived threats to ‘suburban backyards’ from native title claims, and the Prime Minister held up a map of Australia on television to highlight the potential areas of Australia open to native title claims. *The Bulletin*’s ‘Land Rights: How Much Is Too Much?’ cover story in December 1997, 12 months after the *Wik* decision, portrayed most of the Australian mainland as susceptible to Indigenous land claims – a representation which did not convey the historical dispossession, land use and extinguishment which contradicts the notion that most of Australia could be successfully claimed by Indigenous groups under native title legislation.<sup>8</sup> Such political and media reactions brought further confusion and hostility to an already complex and heated public debate, whatever the lack of a factual basis for such allegations.<sup>9</sup>

This construction of the threat posed by Indigenous people is a key means of giving a sense to many Australians of belonging, of a rightful place, through a twisted logic where it is non-Indigenous people who are under threat from invasion of their own backyards by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The ‘we’ found in the mainstream media is pervasive, the law-abiding, hard-working, ‘fair go’ Australians as opposed to ‘them’, the ‘others’ with ‘un-Australian’ values and beliefs. The irony that Indigenous people could be

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and Paul Tabar, *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime: Youth, Ethnicity and Crime*, Pluto Press, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Horrigan, B., *Native Title in Commercial Practice – A Question of Human Rights or Risk Management?*, National Centre for Corporate Law and Policy Research, University of Canberra, December 2001.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

labelled as somehow ‘un-Australian’ seems to be lost in many political leaders and media commentators’ use of the phrase.

### **Historical portrayals**

There has long been a synchronicity between government policy and media and public portrayals concerning Indigenous people. The effects of violence and disease on the Aboriginal population as a result of European colonisation was characterised as a process of natural selection in which certain racial groups would dominate and survive and others would die out. According to this view, the future of Aboriginal people was inevitably doomed, and the role of governments and missionaries in this process was to ‘smooth the dying pillow’.<sup>10</sup> Governments acted on this belief by establishing protectionist legislation and administration to control the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people. In New South Wales, Aboriginal people were forced off their lands and onto reserves managed by governments, missionaries and police.

The unresolved tensions that undermined the notion of a unified Australian identity, given the appropriation of land and mistreatment of Aboriginal people, were not considered in the mainstream media. Aboriginal people were consistently represented as ‘a dying race’ and as essentially inferior.

An editorial in *The Age* in January 1888 stated that:

It seems a law of nature that where two races whose stages of progression differ greatly are brought into contact, the inferior race is doomed to wither and disappear ... The process seems to be in accordance with a natural law which, however it may clash with human benevolence, is clearly beneficial to mankind at large by providing for the survival of the fittest ... It may be doubted whether the Australian Aborigine would ever have advanced much beyond the status of the neolithic races in which we found him, and we need not therefore lament his disappearance.<sup>11</sup>

This ‘law of nature’ provided British migrants and descendants of the colonisers in Australia with the justification for the appropriation of land and exploitation and mistreatment of Aboriginal people as some kind of inevitable outcome of their biological and cultural inferiority. Such media representations both reflected and influenced government policy of the time, as well as stereotyping and inflaming representations of Indigenous people.

Assimilation policy in relation to Indigenous people sanctioned a highly interventionist role in Indigenous people’s lives, judged by non-Indigenous standards and racially hierarchical assumptions by non-Indigenous policy makers. Legislation in New South Wales allowed the removal of Aboriginal children from their families on the basis of ‘neglect’ or ‘to send to service’ or

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing them home, National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, AGPS, 1997, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Andrew Markus (ed.), *From the barrel of a gun: the oppression of the Aborigines 1860-1900*, Victorian Historical Association, 1974, p. 65.

'at risk of immorality' or just for 'being Aboriginal'.<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal children were institutionalised, adopted and sent out to work as domestics or farm hands for little or no pay.

The Australian media during this time reproduced the assumptions of an essentially homogenous white society,<sup>13</sup> with representations that supported government policy. For example, an early version of the argument for the assimilation of Aboriginal people appeared in the *Sydney Gazette*:

The journal celebrated the life of a young Aborigine, cared for by whites after the death of his parents in the War of Resistance. 'His origin he remembered with abhorrence... a rooted and unconquerable aversion to all of his own colour... with his early alienation from his sorry kindred he seemed to have undergone a total change of disposition... docile, grateful, and even affable'.<sup>14</sup>

Australia's 'White Australia Policy' was mirrored in the masthead slogan of *The Bulletin* - 'Australia for the White Man', from 1880 until 1961.

Although such blatantly racist agendas are no longer trumpeted by Australian media outlets, there are still many instances of more subtle forms of racism permeating news reporting. For example, in 1996 Martin Bryant shot 35 people at Port Arthur, Tasmania. During the week following, leading newspapers around Australia described the event as Australia's worst massacre. A headline of the *Sydney Morning Herald* proclaimed it 'Australia's worst mass murder: up to 40 dead in gunman's bloody rampage', and *The Australian*, '33 slain in our worst massacre'.<sup>15</sup> *The Australian* also stated that 'The Tasmanian massacre surpasses any other documented in Australia's history, and is believed to be one of the worst mass shootings of all time'.<sup>16</sup>

This whitewash completely ignored the massacres of Aboriginal people which took place in Australia as late as the early twentieth century, and in Tasmania in particular. The only historical reference in media portrayals of the shooting was to Port Arthur's history as a convict settlement,<sup>17</sup> drawing on the white history of the area. Such portrayals reflect the views and priorities of those working in the media, and their ignorance or disregard of the dispossession and violence perpetrated against Aboriginal people in Tasmania. It demonstrates how news is produced in a particular ideological context and

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing them home, National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, AGPS, 1997, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> (ed) Andrew Jakubowicz et al., *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*, Allen & Unwin, 1994, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> quoted in (ed) Andrew Jakubowicz, *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*, Allen & Unwin, 1994, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Banerjee, S.B. and Osuri, G., 'Silences of the media: whiting out Aboriginality in making news and making history', *Media, Culture and Society*, SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, Volume 22, 2000, p. 268.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Banerjee, S.B. and Osuri, G., 'Silences of the media: whiting out Aboriginality in making news and making history', *Media, Culture and Society*, SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, Volume 22, 2000, p. 269.

that notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘fact’ in media tradition belie the reality that the experiences and values of those who work in the media influence the way events and issues are portrayed.

### ‘Special treatment’

Certain stories get media attention when they are perceived as posing a significant threat to the values, assumptions and beliefs that underpin white Australian identity. This is particularly the case with stories where race can be used as a reference point, or cause or catalyst for unwelcome change or problems.

From the early 1980s, a gradually increasing recognition of the distinct rights of Indigenous Australians became the focus for much negative media attention and public debate. In 1984, the Western Australia and federal Labor governments proposed to legislate for Aboriginal land rights. In response, the Chamber of Mines of Western Australia hired public relations and market research consultants and provided funding for advertising in the state’s media. This marked a new approach for an Australian lobby group. The market-research driven advertising campaign made the slogan ‘land rights should be equal rights’ the centrepiece of its campaign against proposed land rights legislation.<sup>18</sup>

The issue of Aboriginal land rights sparked particular political and media debates at this time about the ‘equal’ vs ‘special’ rights of Indigenous people. There has been much contention since the 1967 referendum about what the call for ‘equal rights’ for Indigenous people actually means. The concept of ‘equal rights’ is often interpreted as a lack of overt discrimination against Indigenous people, and accompanied by an inference that Indigenous people should in turn behave in the same way and value the same things as ‘other’ (white) Australians. In an ironic twist, distinct rights such as native title, or policies and programs that acknowledge the history of dispossession and discrimination experienced by Indigenous people and provide redress and recognition for that, then become characterised as discriminatory.

Criticisms of government policies on Indigenous affairs and immigration, headed by ‘historian’ Geoffrey Blainey and spokespeople such as Hugh Morgan of Western Mining, focused on the ‘special treatment’ of certain ‘interest groups’ or minorities as opposed to the ‘real Australians’ who had worked hard for this country and believed in a ‘fair go’. These minority groups and their supporters were apparently seeking to overthrow the ‘Australian way of life’, were motivated by their own interests and formed an ‘Aboriginal industry’, ‘multicultural industry’ or ‘guilt industry’. This language became entrenched in public debates and media discourse in coverage of this issue.

During the 1990s, the examination of Australian history as marked by violence, exploitation and racism became characterised as the ‘black armband’

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the remaking of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2001, p. 59.

view of history, a phrase coined by Geoffrey Blainey in 1993.<sup>19</sup> Those who acknowledged the racism in Australia's history, and those who had suffered it, became distinguished from 'real' Australians who celebrated Australian history and national identity, and objected to anyone attempting to make them feel 'guilty' about it.<sup>20</sup>

In 1993, John Howard, then Leader of the Opposition, stated:

The broader debate about Australian society involves a clash between what can only be called the optimists and the apologists. The optimists essentially take the view that Australian nationhood has been a success, and that despite many flaws and imperfections, there have emerged distinctive Australian characteristics of humanity, fairness, egalitarianism and individual risk taking. By contrast, the apologists take a basically negative view of Australian history, and light upon every great national occasion not to celebrate Australian achievements, but to attempt the coercion of all of us into a collective act of contrition for the past.<sup>21</sup>

Howard portrayed himself as a defender of 'traditional' Australian values and history. As Leader of the Opposition, he spoke of leading a 'mainstream government' that made decisions for the whole community and for the 'national good' rather than just for 'interest groups'. 'For All of Us' was the Howard Government's ambiguous 1996 election campaign slogan.

The 1996 election saw a substantial shift in the boundaries of legitimate political discourse regarding race, with the victory of two independents, Pauline Hanson in Queensland and Graeme Campbell in Western Australia. In her maiden speech in 1996, Pauline Hanson stated:

We now have a situation where a type of reverse racism is applied to mainstream Australians by those who promote political correctness and those who control the various taxpayer funded 'industries' that flourish in our society servicing Aboriginals, multiculturalists and a host of other minority groups. In response to my call for equality for all Australians, the most noisy criticism came from the fat cats, bureaucrats and the do-gooders.<sup>22</sup>

Over the years 1996-8, Hanson ranked in the top five of the 'most talked about people'.<sup>23</sup> There have been extensive and detailed examinations of the extent to which Pauline Hanson's views were constructed and given credence by the media, or whether media focus on the issue reflected core debates and views of the Australian community. However, there is no doubt that the way

<sup>19</sup> Blainey's Latham Memorial Lecture, quoted in 'Goodbye to All That?', *The Weekend Australian*, 1-2 May 1993, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the remaking of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2001, pp. 68-72.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the remaking of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2001, pp. 93.

<sup>22</sup> Pauline Hanson, Maiden Speech, House of Representatives, 38th Parliament, Hansard, 10 September 1996.

<sup>23</sup> quoted in Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the remaking of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2001, p. 159.

Pauline Hanson was portrayed and focused on so extensively in the media lead to national and international attention to her views.

The term ‘political correctness’ became common in political and media debates as a means of deriding and undermining non-discriminatory language and programs. This was portrayed by many who asserted that they spoke for ‘mainstream’ Australia as a form of censorship.

Just after Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech, John Howard stated that:

One of the great changes that has come over Australia in the past six months is that people do feel able to speak a little more freely and a little more openly about what they feel. In a sense the pall of censorship on certain issues has been lifted. I think we were facing the possibility of becoming a more narrow and restrictive society and that free speech could not be taken so easily for granted as we might in our calmer moments have assumed. I think there has been that change and I think that’s a very good thing. . .

I welcome the fact that people can now talk about certain things without living in fear of being branded as a bigot or as a racist or any of the other expressions that have been too carelessly flung around in this country whenever somebody has disagreed with what somebody has said.<sup>24</sup>

The ‘people’ that John Howard refers to being able to ‘speak a little more freely and a little more openly about what they feel’ are presumably not Indigenous people or new migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. He implies that the people who have been censored or deprived of free speech are the ‘mainstream’, ordinary Australians who may have been ‘branded as a bigot or as a racist’, and that as Prime Minister he has countered this censorship and assisted a more free and open society. Those who have challenged racism are clearly characterised as not calm, careless in their accusations, and irrational in restricting the speech or rights of ordinary Australians.

This involved a move away from pluralism, characterised as the pendulum swinging back to the centre, as balance being re-established. This process was presented as the product of ‘common sense’, with a total unwillingness to recognise the partisanship involved in the definition of ‘centre’ and ‘balance’.<sup>25</sup>

A more recent exchange on talkback radio 2GB between Alan Jones and a caller demonstrates how the discourse of special treatment of minority groups and censorship of ‘ordinary’ Australians has permeated everyday discussions in the media.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Extract from a speech given by John Howard to the Queensland Liberal Party convention on 22 September 1996,

‘We will always listen to voices of reason’, *The Australian*, 25 September 1996, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the remaking of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2001, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> This exchange relates to a proposal to set up a small gym for Muslim women only in Lakemba in south-western Sydney to provide an appropriate environment for Muslim women to gain access to health and fitness information and to exercise.

Caller: Mate, just in regards to the Muslim women gym only...I just want to know what would happen if we had an Australian English speaking women's gym and that only...

Jones: Yeah, and said when the Aboriginal woman came to the door, no you can't come in here...

Caller: That's right.

Jones: ...or then the Muslim woman come in and you said you can't come in here and they'd say oooh, you're picking on us because we're Aboriginal or because we're Muslim.

Caller: That's exactly right. It's sort of implicated that the worst thing to be in Australia is a white English speaking Australian.

Jones: Well it's time I think we spoke....you're helping by talking about it. We're not going to cop that sort of stuff. We don't mind who comes, but we're all equal here. We're all equal here and you're dead right. If some Anglo-Saxon outfit decided to book out the gym or whatever and an Aboriginal woman arrived at the door and was turned away because she's Aboriginal, and you're not Anglo-Saxon, all hell would break loose! Well why doesn't the other side of the coin provide the same story?<sup>27</sup>

The notion of equality becomes twisted so that particular measures to assist minority communities to participate more fully in society are characterised as somehow discriminating against white English-speaking Australians.

## Criminality

Indigenous Australians have long been represented in the media in connection with criminality and threats to national identity and social order. Chris Cunneen has argued that one of the most important inclusionary/exclusionary boundaries in contemporary Australian society is between citizenship and criminality.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were originally excluded from citizenship through racist doctrines of biological inferiority. In the contemporary period such exclusion operates through the association with criminality and civil disorder. Aboriginal people are posited as a criminal threat to the integrity of the nation through the projection of aggression and disorder. The projection allows the history of violence against Indigenous people in Australia to be removed and forgotten. In its place, white society appears safe, contented and civilised.<sup>28</sup>

The National Inquiry into Racist Violence raised a number of concerns relating to the media portrayal of Aboriginal people that are as relevant today:

Discriminatory reporting in relation to crime stories was cited as being particularly likely to generate a climate conducive to racist violence. Terms such as 'black terror'

<sup>27</sup> Alan Jones, 2GB, 22 August 2002, 6am.

<sup>28</sup> Chris Cunneen, 'Hysteria and hate: the vilification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' in (ed.) Chris Cunneen, David Fraser, Stephen Tomsen, *Faces of Hate: hate crime in Australia*, Hawkins Press, Sydney, 1997, p. 152.

and ‘black crime wave’ clearly convey a sense of racial hostility and threat. Other examples included stories where a person’s ethnic and racial origin was only mentioned if the person was Aboriginal or Islander. Aborigines in many rural areas complained that local media reinforced racist attitudes and generated fear in their reporting of race issues.

The question of balance arises not only in relation to the presentation of individual stories, but in regard to the predominance of negative reporting on Aboriginal people. While the role of the media in exposing injustices or highlighting the problems faced by Aboriginal communities is a most important one, there were many complaints about racist portrayals and the lack of media coverage of positive developments within Aboriginal communities.<sup>29</sup>

It serves governments well when media coverage of crime is racialised, because attention is diverted from the inadequacies of government policies and programs in addressing the underlying causes of criminal behaviour. Such coverage also often ignores the role of over-policing and laws that are discriminatory in their impact on Indigenous communities.

### **The power of the media**

On the whole, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are associated with negative, homogenising stereotypes in the mainstream media. However, there have also been instances where the power of the media to influence public opinion has manifested in a positive response to issues affecting Indigenous communities.

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and their Families (1995 - 1997) and its report, *Bringing them home*, focused on the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities throughout the twentieth century, known as the stolen generations. This was a disastrous and discriminatory intervention in the lives of generations of Indigenous families that had gone unrecognised and unreported by non-Indigenous Australians. *Bringing them home* also investigated the contemporary separation of Indigenous children from their families under current child welfare and juvenile justice legislation.

A detailed analysis of the media coverage of *Bringing them home* after tabling<sup>30</sup> considered the attitudes expressed in the print media, (editorials, columns, opinion pieces, feature articles) in handling the issue of the stolen generations. In particular, it included an analysis of the proportion of media coverage of the issue that was supportive, and the extent to which the media

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<sup>29</sup> HREOC, *Racist Violence: The Report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence*, AGPS, 1991, pp. 357-358.

<sup>30</sup> Mervyn Smythe and Associates, ‘An analysis of the media coverage of *Bringing Them Home: The Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*’, conducted for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, funded by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, June 1998.

considered the conclusions of the *Bringing them home* proved rather than controversial or open to question.<sup>31</sup>

Despite attempts by the Prime Minister and other government ministers to discredit the report and its authors, this analysis found that the majority of opinion pieces and editorials were sympathetic towards and supportive of *Bringing them home*. A key factor in the support for the findings of the report was identified as the telling of individual stories by members of the stolen generations in their own words. This analysis highlighted the role of the media in shaping community sympathy for the stolen generations:

[t]he probability of achieving the objectives of educating the public, and creating a higher level of sympathetic awareness to a problem or situation within the community, will be greatly enhanced if the material contained in the media reports is sympathetic to the subject and indicates that a high level of credibility can be placed on the information being conveyed, and on the organisation and persons conveying that information.<sup>32</sup>

In van Dijk's critical linguistic analysis, editorials often express the ideological stance of the owners and managers of the newspaper, and are addressed not only to the reading public but also to the economic and power elites of society.<sup>33</sup> The analysis of *Bringing them home* found that all the major newspapers surveyed<sup>34</sup> carried editorials on the subject, often more than one. All the newspapers examined agreed:

that the assimilation policies were a blot on Australia's past, virtually all called for a formal apology, and most were critical of the Prime Minister when he gave only a personal apology at the Reconciliation Convention.

Many papers editorially had trouble with some aspects of the Report, such as the use of the word 'genocide' to describe the separation policy, and the subject of compensation. However, there were many articles on the opinion pages which supported, often very strongly, these elements of the Report.<sup>35</sup>

While there was considerable media and community support for the stolen generations, there were also criticisms that *Bringing them home* was 'biased', that it only focused on the negative stories of removal, that it was not representative of most people's experiences, and that it judged past legislation

<sup>31</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Sixth Report*, AGPS, 1998, p. 60.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Sixth Report*, AGPS, 1998, p. 61.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in France Henry and Carol Taylor, *Racist Discourse in Canada's English Print Media*, The Canadian Race Relations Foundation, March 2000, pp. 70-71.

<sup>34</sup> Newspapers surveyed for the media analysis were the *Australian/Weekend Australian*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Canberra Times*, the *Age*, the *Herald Sun*, the *Courier-Mail*, the *Advertiser*, the *West Australian*, the *Mercury*, and the *Australian Financial Review*.

<sup>35</sup> in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Sixth Report*, AGPS, 1998, p. 61.

and practices by current standards.<sup>36</sup> This view also got extensive coverage in the media after the report was released,<sup>37</sup> and has been the subject of ongoing debate.<sup>38</sup> The Prime Minister's refusal to offer a national apology to the stolen generations remains a major stumbling block in the reconciliation process.

Also, the sympathetic media coverage of the findings of *Bringing them home* did not extend to the large section of the report on contemporary separations of Indigenous children from their families and communities through the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. It seems that Australians find it easier to acknowledge and confront historical wrongs which do not implicate them personally than to take responsibility for current discrimination, such as the vast over-representation of Indigenous young people in custody.<sup>39</sup>

### **Regulation of racism in the media**

The existing self-regulatory system has limited capacity to address 'racialised' reporting and negative stereotyping of Indigenous communities. Regulatory bodies such as the Australian Broadcasting Authority and the Australian Press Council and their complaints processes, which provide for people to make individual complaints about specific instances of racist reporting in the media, are premised on the notion that racism occurs in isolated incidents. This informs media workers' understanding of what racist reportage is. Media organisations and individual journalists are not challenged or required by such a framework to develop appropriate and informed processes in covering stories that involve or reflect on Indigenous communities, or to have an understanding of human rights issues or racism beyond the threat of potential complaints.<sup>40</sup>

The lack of understanding of institutional racism, reflected in the regulatory framework and the work of many within the media, has been described as a discourse of 'indifference' that is 'the problem with contemporary journalism'.<sup>41</sup>

Treating everyone the same is also the mantra of the egalitarian populists whose comments are most frequently cited as racist, from the radio talkback 'shock jocks' to the One Nation party. There is an insoluble problem here:

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<sup>36</sup> For example, see criticism of report by Padraig P. McGuinness, Ron Brunton, et al. in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Sixth Report*, AGPS, 1998.

<sup>37</sup> See analysis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Sixth Report*, AGPS, 1998, pp. 68-71.

<sup>38</sup> For example, see Deborah Cassels, 'Evolution of Manne', *The Weekend Australian*, 28-29 December 2002, pp. 15-17.

<sup>39</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Sixth Report*, AGPS, 1998, p. 76.

<sup>40</sup> Anti-Discrimination Board, *Race for the Headlines: Racism and Media Discourse*, 2003, p. 101.

<sup>41</sup> John Hartley and Alan McKee, *The Indigenous Public Sphere: The reporting and reception of Aboriginal issues in the Australian media*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 338.

'indifferent' journalism treats people equally, but it is this very technique that produces the reporting most complained of as 'racist'.<sup>42</sup>

A study undertaken by Marcia Langton in relation to the portrayal of 'Aboriginal people and things' in films found that in much filmmaking, particularly by non-Indigenous people:

Film and video can make invisible the racist and sexist import of the cultural material they re-present. The conventional styles and constructions of melodrama, documentary and other popular genres will continue to trap producers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in conventional racism and sexism.<sup>43</sup>

Her study explores the dilemma always present when one culture attempts to 'analyse' or 'portray' another using the tools of the former. She sees the solution to this in Indigenous people having more control over their own self-representation. The chances of this occurring in a widespread way in Australia's current media environment seem unlikely.

Media and communication academics Lynette Sheridan Burns and Alan McKee have compiled a series of practical suggestions for journalists regarding the complexity of covering Indigenous issues in the Australian media.<sup>44</sup> They include:

- Concepts such as 'objectivity' offer little practical guidance to the writing of stories;
- Do not be afraid to ask Indigenous people what to do (who to speak to, what language to use);
- Consciously set out to extend your network and contacts; and
- Check facts and assumptions, paying attention to context and history.<sup>45</sup>

Other important points regarding the process of news gathering included encouraging journalists to recognise that journalism can be pro-active as well as reactive; that news stories do not always have to be about conflict; that workplace culture may not be supportive of Indigenous issues, but that should not be used as an excuse; that media workers should be aware of their own assumptions and position; that simply reporting two opposing opinions on an

<sup>42</sup> John Hartley and Alan McKee, *The Indigenous Public Sphere: The reporting and reception of Aboriginal issues in the Australian media*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 339.

<sup>43</sup> Marcia Langton, 'Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television', *An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things*, Australian Film Commission, 1993, p. 83.

<sup>44</sup> Lynette Sheridan Burns and Alan McKee, 'Reporting on indigenous issues: Some practical suggestions for journalists', *Australian Journalism Review*, 21(2) 1999, pp. 103-116. These suggestions emerged from delegates at the 1998 National Media Forum on 'Reporting on Indigenous Issues', which was established following the RCIADIC. The Forum aimed to move away from more common polarised debate about reporting characterised by accusations of racism and defensive accounts of 'standard journalistic practice'.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 105.

issue is not a balanced story; that it is important to show a variety of perspectives; and that it is important to check facts before reporting, particularly regarding sensitive or sensational material.<sup>46</sup>

## **Conclusion**

There is a history of institutional racism in the mainstream media in Australia, which has regularly portrayed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in association with negative and damaging stereotypes. Issues and events that are considered ‘newsworthy’ in relation to reporting on Indigenous communities are those that are connected to conflict, criminality and dysfunction. This has a powerful and permeating impact on the way that most Australians view Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and on the way that government policy is formulated and implemented. Those who work in the media have a responsibility towards informed, fair and critical reporting – to look beyond simplistic angles for reporting issues; to critique political rhetoric; to challenge racism in media practice; and to engage with the views and experiences of all Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 105-114.