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7-1-1997

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J. Ewart

*Central Queensland University*

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### Recommended Citation

Ewart, J., The scabsuckers: Regional journalists' representation of Indigenous Australians, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 3, 1997, 108-117.

Available at:<http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss3/7>

## The Scabsuckers: Regional Journalists' Representation Of Indigenous Australians

*This article paints a picture of the professional culture of journalists at one regional daily newspaper in Queensland, Australia in relation to their self-described practices in the representation of indigenous Australians. The author suggests that journalists' ideologies and self-described practices tend to conflict. However this conflict tends to be rationalised and justified by the journalists on the basis of the reality of their practices and adherence to conventional news values.*

*Jacqui Ewart*

*Central Queensland University, Australia*

Well, I think the media has got to take a lot of the blame [for Pauline Hanson]. Cultural and racial stereotypes are your trade. You guys are responsible for creating the very swamp out of which Pauline Hanson has just emerged. You people trade in prejudices. You've been picking at the scab of racism since you started. You're in the scab sucking business. (Noel Pearson, *Frontline*, 1997).

Strong and emotive, but hard hitting words from a man who has been on the receiving end of the "scab sucking business" for many years in his work with the Cape York Land Council in the Northern Territory, Australia. Pearson's comments, about the media and its role in perpetrating and perpetuating racism, may well have been presented within *Frontline's* satirical format, but as an ex-journalist I couldn't help squirming in my seat for the thirty or so seconds of his comments.

It is not so much the question of whether the media perpetrate and perpetuate racism that occupies the central theme

of this paper, because this has been more than satisfactorily dealt with by a variety of researchers. Rather, it is the question of how journalists view their practices in representing indigenous Australians that I want to deal with here. Do journalists find their practices in representing indigenous Australians problematic? And, what do their self-described practices reveal about the nature of the indigenous Australians and the media.

Most of the studies into representation of indigenous Australians have tackled the issue through examinations of journalist's products, rather than any extended investigation into the way journalists perceive their practices in representing indigenous Australians. Researchers such as Meadows (1996, 1994 a, 1991, 1988, 1987), McKee (1995), Trigger (1995) and Mickler (1992), have undertaken extensive analyses of the texts journalists produce in this area. An ethnographic approach to understanding this issue, through journalists' self-described practices, is now needed to address the basic causes of continuing stereotypical representations of Aborigines in the Australian media.

The central theme of this paper is the disjuncture between journalists' ideals (that is their statements about what they do) and practices. It seeks to discover how journalists describe their practices in representing indigenous Australians within the media. Understanding this is the first step towards changing these practices and behaviours. Although projects such as the *Media and Indigenous Australians Project (MIAP)* are attempting to address this, any lasting change remains elusive at this point.

I approach this paper through Hall's (1980, 1992) work which explores the representation of indigenous people and minority groups in the media, and his work in the context of why and how such representations have been perpetrated and perpetuated in Australian society. Researchers such as Meadows (1996), McKee (1995), Jacobowicz et al (1994), Goodall (1993), Eggerking and Plater (1992), Hartley (1992), Mickler (1992), and Meadows and Oldham (1991) apply the issues dealt with by Hall to show how the media is implicated in the formation of notions of race, ethnicity and identity in Australia. Aboriginal researchers Mudrooroo (1995) and Langton (1993) provide valuable information about the battle Aboriginal people have been involved in recently for some level of control over and/or input into their representation through the media.

This study applies the elements derived from cultural and organisational approaches to news (Schudson, 1991). Within this case study organisational constraints and cultural symbol systems

## **Conceptual Framework**

could be seen as major constraining forces in the production of news by the journalists interviewed.

The ethnomethodological approach used in this study (Jayyusi 1991, Mehan and Wood 1975) combined with the analysis of the journalists' self-described practices, provides an alternative perspective on why Aborigines are represented in particular ways in the media. This is useful for journalism educators and trainers in discovering the professional culture of journalists and in working towards changing their work practices.

The newspaper studied (name withheld) provides a daily news service to the Central Queensland area. It has a circulation of about 22,000 copies per day and covers a large geographical area, which centres on mining and farming communities, with large industry support and public service bases.

## **Methodology**

The ethnographic data for this thesis was gathered through structured interviews with twelve journalists including the Chief-of-Staff (CoS), who was acting editor at the time of the interviews, journalists, photographers and sub editors (henceforth all referred to as journalists). The twelve represented half of the editorial staff. The newspaper has seven journalists dedicated to the general news section and three to sport. There are ten sub editors who deal with sport, general news and features and four photographers.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of their age and length of experience as journalists. Interviewees came from a wide range of age groups and levels of experience. The resultant pool of interviewees included staff with the following profiles: 21 years old, one year of experience; two staff who were 24 years old, with seven years experience; 28 years old, four years experience; two staff who were 27 years old, with seven years experience; 32 years old, fourteen years experience; 32 old, twelve years experience; 35 years old, fifteen years experience; 43 years old, ten years experience; 43 years old, twenty-five years experience; 50 years old, thirty years experience.

## **Qualitative Findings**

Many studies have found the media are responsible for reproducing racism. Trigger (1995) suggests the press produces agreement within the public consciousness over images of Aboriginality. He also found that the role of the media in representing Aborigines was particularly vital because many non-Aboriginal Australians had little or no contact with Aborigines and formed their ideas about them from the information they

obtained through the media.

The Rockhampton community in Northern Queensland is quite clearly segregated by race and class, with reasonably little contact with Aborigines by members of the non-Aboriginal public. The data gathered from the journalists evinced many contradictions between the way journalists operate and the way they think in this area. McKee (1995) and Hartley (1992) have identified that a major issue in representations of indigenous Australians in the media is that journalists deny having racist attitudes, but as soon as an incident involves indigenous Australians, they are identified as such, whereas other races are not identified in the same way. All journalists in this study indicated a dislike for blatant racism, just as Loo's (1992) study found that blatant racism amongst journalists was considered repugnant and anachronistic.

Some major discrepancies were evident in the data gathered during the interviews. Three issues surfaced in relation to the representation of indigenous people in this newspaper. These were discrepancies between journalists' ideologies and practices; the exclusion of indigenous Australians from the criteria used by journalists in selecting news; and discrepancies in the self-described practices of journalists in handling stories involving race.

All journalists interviewed strongly supported the Australian Media, Arts and Entertainment Alliance's (MEAA) code of ethics, particularly the principle that suggests journalists should not place unnecessary emphasis on race. However, despite the journalists' support of this guiding principle, they unanimously felt the newspaper did not adhere to it. The journalists said they would choose where and when to apply the code of ethics which they viewed only as a guideline. Stories mentioning race were treated individually and according to their merits or news value.

Despite their staunch support of the ethical codes, journalists indicated that they were often pressured into acting in ways contrary to the principles that MEAA espoused. Here journalists seemed to operate on two levels: on one level they saw themselves, quite seriously, as paragons of ethical virtue, while on the other hand they cited their practices and the reality of gathering, writing and producing news as a justification for any unethical behaviour. On a third level, they were able to abdicate their ethical responsibility because of the actions of the editorial hierarchy.

Journalists used the MEAA's code of ethics to support their practices, if they were criticised about them, but they cited the

## **Ideologies And Practices**

## **News Criteria**

reality of their practice in the event they were criticised for not following the code. Some of the journalists seemed to be aware of the contradictions of their practices, but used the concept of the realities of working as a journalist to explain the gaps between their conception of ethical journalism and their actual practices. The CoS said the newspaper loosely followed the Code of Ethics, but each story was treated on its merits. He indicated that the Code of Ethics was rarely referred to by newsroom staff: "You won't find the code of ethics in anyone's drawer. The letter of the law protects people, you don't publish distasteful things [those things that don't meet the breakfast test]. If a journalist has a bee in their bonnet about black fellas they can't just slam them in the paper."

The data gathered showed that indigenous Australians were not considered as news by this newspaper's editorial hierarchy. Most journalists indicated that they were writing fewer stories about indigenous Australians because of the editorial management's lack of interest in such issues. Editorial management and journalists said they had made a conscious decision to avoid such articles because of a belief that the general population was not interested in them. The Chief of Staff referred to the editorial hierarchy's disinterest in indigenous issues as reflective of the lack of interest amongst the general population about such matters:

"The editorial hierarchy does not believe that the average reader wants to read that much about Aboriginal affairs. If we doubled the amount of stories in the paper and the size of the paper I would be surprised if these kinds of stories would increase," he said.

The CoS added that the newspaper had a duty to discuss issues that affected the community. However, some contradictions in this area were apparent when he gave details of two separate news events and the attitude he had towards covering them. The first of these was an incident where police served outstanding fine warrants on mourners at an Aboriginal funeral and the second was in relation to Independent Member for Oxley Pauline Hanson.

CoS: "With the Woorabinda story [about the arrest of fifty Aboriginal people on outstanding fine warrants, at the same time as a community funeral] we opted not to go overboard. We decided there is a perception that the majority of readers don't really care what happened out there. It is our responsibility to report it and we did that. We covered the fact that it happened that they served the warrants, and the actual issuing of the

warrants we covered as news. There was a blow out over the fact it happened at a funeral and we did not embroil ourselves in the shit fight that blacks hate police and police hate blacks. It would not have achieved anything.

"We had to make a conscious decision based on our circulation, we had nothing to gain circulation wise by continuing the fight for days and days. We don't think we could achieve anything in healing the rift between police and Aborigines. We should not be used as a vehicle for dirty laundry to be hung out. The only news in the story was the large amount of warrants that were served in the police operation, that is news so we covered it. I have a clear conscience that we handled it extremely well."

The CoS's comments on the Woorabinda incident are noticeably contradicted by his views on Pauline Hanson's remarks on Asian immigration. In the Woorabinda case he claimed the paper did not have any duty to report on the issue. However, in relation to Hanson's remarks on Asian immigration issue, he claimed the newspaper had a duty to debate important issues.

The newspapers' circulation department also dictates how and whether certain issues are covered as news. Several journalists commented that the circulation manager had told them that circulation dropped when photos of indigenous people were used on the front page and that such photos and associated stories did not encourage the average reader to buy the paper. News is therefore limited by the set of criteria that the journalists, circulation manager and editorial hierarchy use. The CoS said there had been a push for more local news which had led to a larger scope of news being covered, rather than particular subjects. The journalists in this study said the need for sensational news items often overrode journalistic ethics.

Bennett (1989) found news of Aborigines is treated as moral disorder, because it challenges the status quo. Journalists also considered possible defamation when deciding if a story was newsworthy. The potential for defamation as a news criteria was particularly evidenced by one journalist who said that when potentially defamatory stories were being handled, journalists and editorial management weighed up the likelihood of a person taking legal action as well as their financial ability to mount such a challenge.

Other journalists indicated that those who lacked the money and influence to successfully conduct a defamation suit were more likely to be the subject of potentially defamatory articles. Many Indigenous Australians, particularly community groups are constrained by a lack of resources, limiting their ability to mount such legal challenges.

Journalists also suggested that time pressures and resource

## **Race Related Stories**

challenges also made it difficult to cover certain issues. They said the decrease in the size of the newsroom staff meant that less important issues such as indigenous issues were sacrificed in favour of more important stories. At this newspaper, the seven general news journalists are each responsible for one major council and five areas as part of their rounds. They are required to produce an average of seven stories, averaging between 20 and 25 centimetres per day as well as briefs and feature articles.

Most of the journalists interviewed said race was rarely mentioned in stories except in those about crime. A perusal of the newspaper was enough to indicate this just is not the case. There were major contradictions in their self-described practices of mentioning race in crime stories. Most journalists said that all races were mentioned in stories where suspects were being sought by police. A perusal of the crime files and research by those in the field indicates that it is almost always a suspect's Aboriginality that is mentioned including in post-arrest accounts. One journalist showed amazing insight, if a certain level of naivety, into her and her colleagues' practices in this area.

"Race is never mentioned unless it is a race that is non-Anglo Saxon. Race is only mentioned when it is different and not considered the norm. If you say a white person robbed a store then it would be fair to say an Aboriginal person robbed a store, but we do not do this. There should be one rule for all."

All journalists with this one exception believed it was fair to identify the alleged perpetrator of a crime as indigenous, but they agreed it was extremely rare for criminals to be identified as Anglo Saxons in news stories. The one journalist, who did not agree with descriptions of alleged offenders by race, said such descriptions served little purpose and rarely assisted in the apprehension of the perpetrator.

However, some contradictions were then exposed with most journalists saying they did not mention skin colour in stories. They said their stories were often changed afterwards and such details added by editorial hierarchy. This begs the logical question: If the journalists did not mention skin colour then how did the editorial hierarchy know the colour of a person's skin? One journalist said members of the editorial hierarchy were keen for such details to be mentioned in crime related stories. Sub-editors justified the inclusion of such details with comments like:

- "We are conscious of race, we find that in a hard news story, for example something that is a public service story, about a hunt for a murderer or rape suspect where police appeal for public help, we have no compunction [regarding] mentioning the colour of a person's skin, if it helps police resolve the matter.
- "We are conscious of the fact that some people would



regard it, to mention a person's race or skin colour, as racist, but while we are aware of that overtone, if it leads to a speedy resolution of the crime, that is fine.

- "We do stipulate white or black, just as we say blonde with a fair complexion. We are astute enough to realise that it is a sensitive area and we don't mention the indigenous factor in a story unless there is a reasonably good reason for doing it. This is the way things have always been reported and they came about since the newspaper first came in.

- "It is up to readers to make connections in their own minds. Race is difficult for us to get around it and brings us to the question of whether we should take certain steps with particular stories to avoid any possible confrontation. This could be going against our charter to report the facts."

"The point is, in order to chase ratings, we present distorted, hateable stereotypes. I mean we have the gall to turn around and criticise someone like Pauline Hanson for being prejudiced. Can't you see the hypocrisy?" (Emma, *Frontline*, a satirical portrayal of contemporary journalism aired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1997). The hypocrisy of the media is obvious to those parodying the media, such as *Frontline's* character, Emma. However, the difficulty with the media is that this hypocrisy is not so clear to those involved in presenting the news and representing minority groups, such as Aborigines, on a daily basis.

Indigenous issues continue to make news on the basis of the involvement of elements of conflict, and not on the basis that other news stories are judged. At this newspaper Indigenous issues are considered to be of little interest to readers. There is a level of self interest in journalists' practices in the representation of Indigenous Australians. This was particularly evident in comments made by the editorial hierarchy about the newspaper not gaining anything by healing the rift between the Indigenous community and the police. A cogent issue here is the way journalists cover issues that are deemed by the editorial hierarchy to be of interest to the readers.

In reporting stories involving race, some conflicts are evident. Race or colour are usually mentioned where Indigenous Australians are involved in issues with negative slants, but seldom are subjects of stories described as Anglo Saxons. Much more work is needed in examining journalists' self-described practices in relation to the representation of indigenous Australians. Addressing the conflicts between ideologies and practices in the newsroom is an issue that needs to be taken up by journalism

## **Conclusion**

educators.

Equipping graduates and young journalists to deal with the disparities that arise in their day to day practice and preparing them to negotiate the minefield of pressures that can be and are applied by editorial hierarchies in this area is vital. Journalists and potential journalists need to take responsibility for their daily practices by recognising the impact they have, particularly on minority groups. Perhaps a comprehensive change is required in the very foundation of news criteria before indigenous Australians can achieve fair representation. ■

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JACQUI EWART is a journalism lecturer in the Media and Communication Department at Central Queensland University. Email: [j.ewart@cqu.edu.au](mailto:j.ewart@cqu.edu.au)

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