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# Media dreaming: Representation of Aboriginality in modern Australian media

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# Media Dreaming:

## Representation Of Aboriginality In Modern Australian Media

*The media not only plays a primary role in informing Australians about the issues that affect Indigenous Australians, it also plays a central role in the construction of social discourse on what and who is seen to be Indigenous. This article examines the way Aboriginal issues and identity are portrayed in the contemporary Australian media. In particular, it analyses the media reporting of three important decisions relating to Indigenous rights in two of Australia's major daily newspapers, The Sydney Morning Herald and The Australian, and demonstrates that there is still a considerable lack of Aboriginal voices in the Australian print media. When Aboriginal voices do occur, they are generally outnumbered by the voices of elite actors, or mediated by white voices that appear on behalf of, and instead of, Aboriginal voices. Moreover, these Aboriginal voices are those that are "culturally approved" by the white elite. This suggests that, while racism is not as overt as it once was in the Australian media, it still exists.*

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The Australian media, like the media of many Westernised countries, plays a significant role in not only providing information about the society in which we live but also in actively constructing for us a picture of that society. The media has the power to reflect and create many of the core relationships in our lives: those between men and women, between the young and the not so young, between people of different classes and between people of different groups and race (Jakubowicz 1994: 7). It has, in other words, the ability to reflect public debate and to drive it (Human Rights Commission 1996: 3).

In a population of 18 million, Indigenous Australians make up approximately one percent of the Australian population. As a result, the closest that many non-indigenous Australians will come to having contact with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is via their representation in the media. The media not only plays a primary role in informing Australians about the issues

that affect Aboriginal Australians, it also plays a central role in the construction of social discourse on what and who is seen to be Aboriginal.

There has been a dense history of racist, distorted and offensive representation of Aboriginal people in Australia (Langton 1993: 24). While overt racism may not be as prevalent in the Australian media as it once was, covert racism in the form of poor or stereotypical representations of Aborigines still exists (Mickler 1998: 247; Jakubowicz 1994: 290). In 1991, the National Inquiry into Racist Violence concluded that there was a tendency in the Australian media for the "perpetuation and promotion of negative and racial stereotypes, a tendency towards conflictual and sensationalist reporting on race issues, and an insensitivity towards, and often ignorance of, minority cultures", which could "contribute to creating a social climate which is tolerant of racist violence" (Human Rights Commission 1996: 3). In their study on the Australian media, racism and ethnicity, Jakubowicz and his colleagues found that the media not only tended to perpetuate and promote racial stereotypes but also had a limited awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and ethnic issues and took little or no responsibility for the media product it produced (1994: 8).

Studies in Australia, the United States and Europe have shown that the media promote racial stereotyping and also regularly absent non-white voices (Jakubowicz 1994; van Dijk 1991; Cohen and Gardener 1982). The media is instead dominated by elite actors, institutes and organisations (eg. police, government, universities etc) whose elites are usually white and who give their own interpretations of events and activities (van Dijk 1991: 153; Herman and Chomsky 1994: 2). As a result of this domination, interpretations and evaluations of news events are routinely embedded in the ideology of the white elite. When ethnic or minority voices are heard in the media -- if they are heard at all -- they are found to be less credible than elite speakers such as police and government officials (van Dijk 1991). Elite representatives, however, are seen as being above reproach (Schiller 1973) and "ethnically neutral", even when giving their definition or evaluation of ethnic and racial events (van Dijk 1991: 153-4). In addition, minority voices are often mediated by elite actors such as lawyers, academics or politicians who defend the minority groups case or cause.

Since 1996, the race debate has re-emerged as one of the most prominent issues in the Australian mass media. The political emergence of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, Native Title claims, PM John Howard's Ten Point Plan and Aboriginal Reconciliation have, at times, dominated the news and headlines. In May 1997, the reporting on race issues reached its pinnacle when

three issues relating to, or concerning, Indigenous Australians dominated the headlines. The first was Prime Minister John Howard's Ten Point plan in response to the High Court of Australia's Wik decision of December 23, 1996. The decision was the culmination of a long battle by the Wik people for recognition of ownership of their traditional lands in the Cape York peninsula in far-north Queensland. The land which they claimed as their own made up part of the huge (2,830 square kilometres) Holroyd River pastoral lease. The High Court found that the granting of pastoral leases had not extinguished native title (Bachelard 1997), and went on to rule that "if inconsistency is held to exist between the rights and interests conferred by native title and the rights conferred under the statutory grants, those rights and interests must yield ... to the rights of the grantees" (Blanchard 1997: 67). In other words, the rights of pastoralists would take precedence over the rights of the Indigenous owners. Howard's Ten Point Plan, first floated in April 1997, was an attempt to "swing back the pendulum", which he claimed had swung too far in favour of Aborigines as a result of the Wik decision. On 1 May, the National Indigenous Working Group, which had been attempting to negotiate a solution with the Government over Wik, withdrew from the negotiations saying that Howard seemed more concerned with imposing his views than negotiating (Bachelard 1997: 86-7). Federal Cabinet went on to endorse Howard's plan on 7 May.

The second event to capture the media's attention was the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's "Bringing Them Home" report on the "Stolen Generations", despite the fact it had not yet been tabled in Federal Parliament. The "Stolen Generations report", as it became known, was the result of a national inquiry set up in 1995 to look at the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families. The scope of the inquiry covered not only the forcible removal of Indigenous children, but also the services available for people affected by forcible removal, what principals would justify compensation, and the cause of removal of Indigenous children today (Human Rights Commission 1997: 7).

The Commission found that the forcible removal of Indigenous children had been a "gross violation" of their human rights and went on to describe it as "an act of genocide contrary to the Convention on Genocide ratified by Australia in 1949" (Human Rights Commission 1997: 27). The reason was that the major intention of forcible removal was to absorb, merge, or assimilate the children so that Aborigines, as a distinct group, would disappear (Human Rights Commission 1997: 27).

The final major event to come to the media's attention was the Reconciliation Convention, marking the 30th anniversary of

the historic referendum in which 90 percent of Australian voters voted "yes" to include Aborigines in the census count for the first time. The result also gave the Commonwealth the power to legislate for Aboriginal people (Attwood & Markus 1997; McConnochie et al 1988: 125). For many Aborigines, the referendum represented the "moment when Aboriginal people were admitted to the body politic" (Attwood and Markus 1997: X). The 30th anniversary of the referendum, in light of the rise of "Hansonism", provided for many people -- both Indigenous and non-Indigenous -- a stark contrast between the goodwill expressed towards Aborigines in the late 1960s, and the seemingly hostile attitude that had developed in the mid-1990s.

A discourse analysis of two of Australia's major daily newspapers: *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*, undertaken during this period, revealed that there is still a considerable lack of Aboriginal voices in the Australian print media. It also revealed that, when Aboriginal voices did occur, they were mostly outnumbered by the voices of elite actors (such as academics, government officials etc.), or were mediated by white voices that appear on behalf of, and instead of, Aboriginal voices.

In reporting on Wik and Native Title in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, every article containing an Aboriginal voice was counterbalanced by three that contained no Aboriginal voices. *The Australian* had a slightly better ratio, with one in three articles containing comment by Aboriginal spokespersons. In the reporting of the Stolen Generations issue, articles containing Aboriginal voices outweighed those of elite actors in both newspapers, however, these mainly took the form of comments from victims of the assimilation policy, rather than analysis by Aboriginal actors or organisations. Surprisingly, in reporting on the Reconciliation Convention, there was a relatively equal distribution of both Aboriginal and elite voices in both newspapers. While this may seem to be an improvement in the reporting of Indigenous affairs, it should be pointed out that the majority of speakers addressing the convention were Indigenous. Aboriginal voices outnumbered the elite actors, but in the newspapers they could only achieve an equal representation with the elite.

Aboriginal actors did not achieve a dominant representation, even on issues which were seen to be specifically Aboriginal. Where Aboriginal voices did appear, they were often accompanied by between three to five non-indigenous elite voices. It was very rare for Aboriginal voices to stand alone, which was often the case with elite voices. In addition, much of the media reporting on Wik and Native Title issues absented Aboriginal voices and substituted elites such as celebrities, prominent citizens, church groups, academics, lawyers and politicians to speak on

behalf of Aborigines.

In the reporting on the Stolen Generation, Aboriginal voices were mediated in many cases by whites who had supposedly "experienced" the assimilationist policies of White Australia, because they knew "personally" an Aboriginal who had suffered under the policy. This experience allowed them to "identify" with the plight of Aborigines and to speak on their behalf. One such report was a story by James Woodford in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (26 May) entitled "Haunted by History". The first 11 paragraphs of Woodford's article dealt with a white man Professor John Norman's experience of assimilation. As a child, Professor Norman had an Aboriginal nanny who had been stolen from her family and sent to work for white families. Norman's account gave a white sympathetic face and credibility to what had happened to Aborigines.

Norman was not the only white elite actor to appear and to speak on behalf of, and instead of, Aboriginal voices. Anthropologists, a clinical professor, a law professor, the Chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and even the former Attorney General Michael Lavach, all spoke on behalf of Aborigines in Woodford's story to counter the opinions put forward by Prime Minister Howard and Attorney General Darryl Williams. Woodford's story contained only one Aboriginal voice, that of Gatjik Djerrkura -- the Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Djerrkura's comments accounted for one paragraph in a story of 44.

While it is evident from this sample that there is still a substantial lack of Aboriginal voices in the modern Australian media, what of those Aboriginal voices that do appear in the media? I would contend that even when Aboriginal voices do appear that they are those that are "culturally approved". By this I mean Aboriginal people who are portrayed, in many cases, in a relatively positive manner and have been selected to fit the dominant Anglo-elite perception of what and who should be seen as Aboriginal (Freeth 1982: 29). Only on infrequent occasions do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, other than those that are "culturally approved", appear to speak on behalf of Indigenous Australians in the Australian media. The primary reason, I would argue, is that institutionalised racism still exists in Australia and continues to pervade all of our major cultural and political institutions. This racism is held in place ideologically by the white power elites mentioned earlier. As a result of their privileged position, they act as gatekeepers in relation to what race issues are deemed culturally and politically relevant and who should speak on behalf of Aborigines.

On 20 May 1997, *The Australian* ran a story entitled "Bigotry

creates radical Blacks" (1997: 2). In the story, Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti is quoted as saying that the "constant vilification of moderate Aboriginal leaders could lead to their political destruction and the emergence of radical alternatives and the end of Australia's best chance for reconciliation". The moderate leaders, Sidoti was referring to include Mick and Pat Dodson, Lois Donohue, Peter Yu and Noel Pearson. According to Sidoti, these activists were rational and responsible leaders that non-indigenous Australians can properly deal with. By this definition, to be anything other than "moderate" implies you are irrational, irresponsible and unintelligent, and therefore not worth dealing with.

This definition of "moderate" is one that is framed by the dominant white elite. As a result, those Aboriginal activists wanting access to the dominant elite's framework must be willing to work within the dominant paradigm to get their message across. If they don't, in all likelihood they will not get access to organisations and institutions that are controlled by this elite, amongst them the media. If those outside the elite framework do manage to gain access to these institutions, there is a high likelihood they will be portrayed in a negative manner. A point in case occurred in November 1997, when moderate Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson hit the headlines when he referred to the Federal Government as "racist scum". Pearson, who was viewed by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people as a moderate was carpeted by Prime Minister Howard for his "outburst", and was also criticised by members of the media fraternity. The reaction from the elite appeared to run something along the lines of: "How dare he lose his temper and express an angry thought. After all, we gave him exposure and airtime and it is his responsibility to be moderate and to work within an appropriate framework, isn't it?"

It did not seem to matter to many, however, that Pearson's "outburst" occurred at the end of a period that saw the Prime Minister: throwing substantial doubt on the validity of the Stolen Generations report and its author, Sir Ronald Wilson; haranguing Aboriginal delegates at the Aboriginal Reconciliation Convention; shutting Aboriginal leaders out of many of the Wik/Native Title negotiations; and, wanting to amend the Native Title Act so that, as one ATSIC Commission put it, it gave "cattle more rights than Indigenous people (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 November 1997). Pearson's "outburst" was instead used to isolate him and other Aboriginal leaders and to marginalise their view that there was an increasing undercurrent of institutionalised racism renewing itself in the Federal Government's handling of Indigenous affairs.

While the ability to conform to the dominant elite's

framework is one aspect of the definition of "cultural approval", it is not the only one. Culturally-approved Aboriginal voices and actors also need to "look" Aboriginal and ideally have visible contact with Aboriginal traditional culture. "Real" Aborigines, it seems, are those who maintain some remnants of the elite's image of the "noble savage" (Mickler 1998: 245).

In her work on racism and the Australian film and television industry, Aboriginal scholar Marcia Langton argues that the label "Aboriginal" has become one of the most disputed terms in the Australian language (Langton 1993: 28). Langton notes that there are over 65 definitions used for Aboriginal people and that these definitions developed as a result of the status of Aboriginal people as wards of the State, which resulted in their incarceration on institutionalised reserves (1993: 28). The fixation or obsession with classification, which grew out of social Darwinism in the late eighteenth century, has not disappeared with the subsequent demise of the Aboriginal protection board, responsible for the administration of reserves. In Australia, there is still an obsession with who are "real" Aborigines. John Howard's notion of the "Aboriginal Industry" is a point in case.

Howard's "Aboriginal Industry" has become a term of denigration used to marginalise anyone, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, who criticises the elite's record on Indigenous issues. The term has also come to encompass those Aborigines whose "Aboriginality" is questioned because they do not fit the elite's concept of what a "real" Aborigine is, though this it is never articulated in the manner in which it was in the racist language of early colonial Australia, when terms such as "half-caste", "quadroon", "octoroons" and "full bloods" were used. Well-educated Aborigines, urban Aborigines and any others who do not have visible connections to the Aboriginal community, are accused of riding the gravy train. According to Steve Mickler in his book on media discourse and the myth of Aboriginal privilege, "real" and "mixed" Aborigines are defined in terms of authenticity. Aborigines classified as "fractional whites" (ie. not being "full" blood) are disqualified from being perceived as "real Aborigines" (1997: 244). White Australia's obsession with "real" Aborigines is one of the reason that only a limited number of "culturally approved" Aborigines are represented in the media. Aboriginal activists such as Michael Mansell, and many others who do not fit the racial and cultural stereotype of what it is to be Aboriginal, rarely make it into the media. When they do, their Aboriginality is often questioned.

However, while the elite uses the concept of cultural approval as a filter, this does not mean that these voices are automatically accepted as representatives by all their own people.



This is illustrated by an incident that occurred at the Aboriginal Reconciliation Convention. During the Convention, an Aboriginal woman named Shirley Lomas took the stage unannounced and took control of proceedings for a small amount of time. During that time, she lambasted not only Prime Minister Howard and Pauline Hanson; she also lambasted many of the Aboriginal leaders at the convention. Ms Lomas attacked those Aborigines referred to in the media as "Aboriginal leaders" by saying: "They are not our leaders, they don't speak for us" (*The Australian* 1997: 4).

In Australia in the 1990s, the dominant white elite and the media are no longer overtly racist in their portrayal of Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders. Instead, as Mickler states, hostility toward Aborigines and Aboriginal claims "must be seen in the context of competing discourses of Aboriginal identity, and not simply or always a blanket rejection of the concept of separate Indigenous rights" (1997: 247). The media may no longer use overtly racist terminology and may, at times, deflect criticism of institutionalised racism by criticising overt racism. However, it still portrays Aboriginal Australians in stereotypical ways. The political and cultural elite, by their ostensible rejection of overt racism, strategically deflect attention from their own racist practices (van Dijk 1988: 223-4).

So while Aborigines are portrayed in the Australian mass media in an apparently more positive manner than they were 10 or 20 years ago, their portrayal is still determined by the dominant elite's concept of Aboriginality. This concept fails to portray Aborigines in a manner that reflects the kaleidoscope of Aboriginal identity. In Australia in the 1990s, the spectre of racism has not disappeared but just shifted tack. Racism is still occurring in the media, only it's in a "nicer", more acceptable, form that is just a little more palatable for too many people. ■

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