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Speaking up and talking back: News media interventions in Sydney's 'othered' communities

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Abstract

Since August 2001, Arab and Muslim communities in Sydney's western suburbs have been caught up in a spiral of signification that linked 'gang' activity in the area to the standoff over asylum seekers aboard the MV Tampa*, a federal election campaign fought on the theme of 'border protection' and global news reporting of September 11 and the 'war on terror'. Many people who live and work in the Bankstown area responded to this intense news media scrutiny by developing community-based media interventions that aimed to shift the mainstream news agenda. Through media skills training, forums, events and cultural production, Arab and Muslim Australians in the Bankstown area positioned themselves as the subjects rather than the objects of news. This paper analyses news intervention strategies in terms of media power and the politics of representation. I argue that the activities of those working with racialised communities suggest valuable models for the wider process of improving the reporting of cultural differences in multicultural Australia.*

Within weeks of the events of 11 September 2001 in New York City, two senior officers of the New South Wales Muslim Women's Association (MWA) organised a media skills workshop for young Muslim women in Sydney. The workshop was intended to skill and empower the participants to respond and 'make a difference' to news reporting of their 'community':

> It was quite obvious that the community lacked access to the media to make a difference, to actually counter some of the rubbish that was being promoted … I don't think you can say that we had enough capable people who had the skills, the knowledge and the language to be able to engage with the media on an equal footing. Remember that the media were in power. They were the ones that seemed to be dictating the terms, and they were the ones who were influencing attitudes and reinforcing prejudices in many cases, and creating fear. And the community were just on the receiving end of all these attacks, and they had to be on the defence. They had to respond. (Nada, community worker and spokesperson)

While considerable research and commentary has analysed news reporting during the latter half of 2001 as producing the 'othering' of Arab and Muslim communities in Australia (e.g. Poynting, 2002; Noble and Poynting, 2003; ADB, 2003), this paper foregrounds the activities of people living and working in those 'othered' communities in responding to news media coverage. As Nada's comments indicate, this period of intensive racialised reporting and public debate was experienced as both symbolic and physical violence — producing profound feelings of exclusion

and an upsurge in racist violence and harassment directed at Arab and Muslim Australians (cf Poynting, 2002; ADB, 2003). For this reason, community workers and the young women who participated in the workshops decided to develop skills and strategies to intervene in mainstream news reporting.

I participated in the media skills workshop as part of ongoing research into strategies for producing change in the reporting of cultural difference in Australian journalism. Several studies have argued for improvement in news representations of 'race', 'ethnicity', Islam and the play of cultural differences (e.g. Loo, 1998; Jakubowicz et al., 1994; HREOC, 1991). My research has involved interviews and participant observation with community workers and journalists working to produce innovation in the reporting of the many communities and issues associated with Sydney's most culturally diverse suburbs: the local government areas of Bankstown and Fairfield. This article presents four examples of projects developed by people living and working in the Bankstown area to influence and improve mainstream journalism, with an emphasis on the participation of those 'othered' in the news media, in particular women and young people in the Arab and Muslim communities. The analysis highlights the significance of these projects for wider debates in scholarly research and professional journalism on the reporting of cultural difference.

The paper is organised in seven sections. The first outlines the 'signification spiral' which enmeshed the 'othered' communities of Bankstown in wider national and global debates. The second section introduces the concept of news interventions and the analysis of strategies in terms of media power. The following sections present four news intervention projects, and in the concluding section I discuss the significance of these examples for addressing the politics of representation in Australian journalism. I argue that the insights and experiences of those working on cultural production in Sydney's Arab and Muslim communities make an important contribution to the project of improving the reporting cultural differences in multicultural Australia.

Bankstown signification spiral since 2001

The suburbs of the Bankstown area in Sydney's southwest have a prominent place in the news reporting which has contributed to the production of the categories of Arab and Muslim as Australia's 'new others'. Beginning in July 2001 with news of a series of brutal group sexual assaults in the area that were framed as a 'race crime' (Kidman, 2001), news of 'ethnic gangs' in the area was discursively linked to coverage of asylum seekers arriving by boat, a federal election campaign fought largely on the theme of 'border protection', the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent 'war on terror'. This discursive linking produced a 'signification spiral' in which Bankstown and the Arab and Muslim communities associated with the area quickly became key examples in public debates on immigration, refugees, sovereignty and globalisation, and eventually terrorism and war.

The concept of a signification spiral was developed in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 1978) to analyse a way of signifying events that also intrinsically escalates the sense of threat or crisis. The spiral is produced through the discursive linking of events, and the concept highlights the fact that these links are not inherent in

the events themselves, but result from the symbolic work of politicians and journalists. Thus what is at stake is the politics of representation, or the ways in which events are made meaningful through the processes of naming and framing. The spiral of signification in reporting Bankstown began with precisely the elements analysed by Hall and his colleagues — 'race', crime and youth, albeit with the disturbing and complex addition of sexual violence. The events soon became signified as both a result of and a threat to Australian multiculturalism, as a page 1 report in *The Australian* reported on the 'Rape Menace from the Melting Pot' (Chulov, 2001).

News reporting of both 'Lebanese youth gangs' in Bankstown and Lakemba and the terrorist 'attack on America' was characterised by the use of military metaphors (Noble and Poynting, 2003), the language of war serving to link events through images of threat and violence. The other contributors to this volume have demonstrated the criminalisation and demonisation of categories such as 'Arab', 'Muslim', 'Middle Eastern' and 'Lebanese' in the reporting of the events in Bankstown, asylum seekers coming to Australia and in global news following the events of 11 September 2001. Reports of 'race crime' in Bankstown appeared in the context of several years of news media attention focused on so-called 'ethnic gangs' in the area, which has been analysed as a pervasive pattern of 'criminalising ethnicity and ethnicising crime' (Collins et al., 2000). The discursive linking of ethnicity, culture, religion, crime and violence serves to racialise a variety of discrete and highly complex issues, obscuring social, political and economic explanations for events and presenting instead an understanding of cultural difference as threatening 'otherness'.

There is also an important gender dimension to media representations of Islam and Muslims, both in Australia and internationally. Brasted (2001) has argued that media representations of Islam and the Arab world since the Gulf War of 1991 have moved from orientalist stereotypes to a focus on fundamentalism, violence, militancy and Islam as anti-modernist. The scrutiny of gender relations plays a prominent role and 'the "veil" has become the new all-encompassing metaphor for Islam itself' (Brasted, 2001: 220). This emphasis on gender relations and sexuality was evident in the signification spiral around Bankstown in 2001, with commentators asserting that an oppressive and patriarchal Muslim culture was to blame for the group sexual assaults (e.g. Parker, 2001). Photos of women wearing the hijab were often used to illustrate stories on Bankstown, on refugees and asylum seekers and on the war in Afghanistan. The heightened visibility of scarved women in the Australian news media culminated in a media panic in August 2002, focused on a Muslim women's gym and swimming classes for students of an Islamic College that were described as 'multiculturalism gone mad' (ADB, 2003: 64–67).

While the discourse of 'othering' indicated here was not the only signification in news reporting of cultural differences, during the latter half of 2001 it was certainly the most prominent and prevalent discourse. Racialised reporting in the news media had distinct consequences for many people who live and work in Bankstown. Reports of hostility, racist violence, harassment and discrimination against Arab and Muslim Australians increased dramatically as the signification

spiral widened (ADB, 2003). The nature of impacts was gendered (ADB, 2003: 75) and women and girls who wear the hijab became particular targets for racist attacks (Poynting, 2002). The Anti-Discrimination Board documented consequences including the pillorying or criminalisation of communities, violence, the disempowerment of community representatives and the development of an environment that allows discrimination and vilification (ADB, 2003: 73–79).

The discursive process of 'othering' Arab and Muslim Australians also has profound consequences for our wider understanding of Australian multiculturalism. The signification spiral discussed here presented an understanding of cultural diversity as threat and conflict, with responsibility for cultural adaptation and community harmony borne primarily by 'ethnic others'. This framing presents news audiences with a very narrow view of Australian multiculturalism and of everyday experiences of cultural diversity. Racialised reporting leaves the position and responsibilities of the white or 'ordinary' Australian unrepresented and unexplored (Noble and Poynting, 2003: 120), reproducing the naturalisation of Whiteness (cf Gabriel, 2000). Also absent in this reporting are the realities and possibilities of 'everyday multiculturalism' of intercultural interaction (Hage, 1997: 132) and the processes of hybridisation and cultural exchange. This discourse of 'othering' also provides very little opportunity for documenting the impacts of harassment, vilification and violence against Arab and Muslim Australians (ADB, 2003: 78), or for reporting the workings of racial discrimination and disadvantage in Australia (ADB, 2003: 64–73). Thus, while the signification spiral around Bankstown produced cultural difference as a threat, it obscured both the realities of relatively unproblematic cultural mixing, and the extent and significance of racism and discrimination in Bankstown and beyond.

From media critique to media intervention

In the context of this signification spiral, several people who live or work with racialised communities in the Bankstown area developed media intervention projects to influence news reporting. While some projects were organised specifically in response to news media coverage of the events of the second half of 2001, many organisations and individuals are also involved in ongoing activities targeting the mainstream news media for a variety of reasons.

To focus on community-based projects which address the mainstream media is to highlight activities which have largely been neglected in academic research. Much existing research about 'ethnic communities' and journalism involves textual analysis, often identifying media racism (e.g. Jakubowicz et al., 1994; van Dijk, 1991). Several studies have examined the experiences of 'ethnic minority' media producers in mainstream institutions (Cottle, 1993, 1997; Gray, 2000; Jakubowicz et al., 1994). Recent work on diaspora audiences indicates the importance of news media in negotiations of identity (Gillespie, 1995; Barker, 1997, 1999; Cunningham and Sinclair, 2000). None of this research makes visible the considerable efforts and emotional investment of people living and working in culturally diverse communities who attempt to intervene in the mainstream news media; nor does it examine what their achievements might be.

The term 'intervention' is intended to highlight a vital feature of the diverse strategies analysed here: all target the mainstream news media. These activities do not address 'ethnic communities' or ethnic media in particular — although this is not to argue that community media are unimportant. Participants in news interventions target mainstream news in order to influence news agendas and representations which are seen to impact on audiences and interactions between communities. In addressing the mainstream news media, people working with racialised communities cross the boundaries of 'community', transgressing the boundary that keeps ethnic 'others' confined to community media or specialist programming. Participation in these activities may not be 'typical', but it is certainly significant, and my wider research documents a significant and increasing range of news intervention activities in Sydney's southwest.[1]

I situate the analysis of news interventions within recent theorisations of media power and alternative media. Nick Couldry argues that in mediated societies the power of naming social reality is unevenly distributed between media producers and audiences (2000: 44–61), producing a symbolic hierarchy in which symbolic power is concentrated in media institutions (Couldry, 2000, 2001). Symbolic power is 'the power of constructing reality' by naming the social world (Bourdieu, 1991), and it is this aspect of media power which is highlighted in Nada's comments early in this paper that 'the media were in power. They were the ones that seemed to be dictating the terms.'

The concentration of media power is reproduced through a series of symbolic exclusions, including the spatial order of media production, whereby 'ordinary people' and the practices of consumption are routinely separated from the spaces of media production (Couldry, 2000: 3–21). The news media intervention projects analysed here challenge the fundamental organisation of media power as non-media professionals seek to influence news production. News interventions in Bankstown also challenge the spatial logic of centre and periphery, media production and consumption by suggesting that news media should be produced in those suburbs which are both symbolically and geographically marginalised.[2]

Couldry also argues that, because media power institutionalises and naturalises inequalities of symbolic power, it is particularly important to study those alternative media projects which seek to contest these hierarchies and concentrations of the power to construct social reality (2001). The projects and activities discussed below are significant because people involved in news interventions position themselves as 'subjects' rather than 'objects' of news, asserting in various ways that they should be able to influence or determine news media production and representation. In the unusual strategy of moving from the position of object to the subject of news, people working with the politics of representation in Sydney's most culturally diverse suburbs make visible the operations of news media power which usually exclude or marginalise their perspectives and concerns. Their activities suggest other possibilities for producing news and representing difference in multicultural societies. I turn now to the analysis of specific examples of news interventions.

Skilling up

My first experience in media skills training was as a facilitator for the Muslim Women's Association (MWA) Media Workshop organised by the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) shopfront in November 2001. As indicated in Nada's comments in the opening section, MWA spokeswomen wanted younger members of the organisation to develop media skills in order to respond to intense news scrutiny in more empowered and effective ways. The workshop took place at the UTS campus in central Sydney, with access to the radio studios of community radio station 2SER-FM. Women working at UTS facilitated workshop sessions on a range of media skills and background research as suggested by MWA organisers, including writing for the print media, responding to newspaper reporting and developing media management skills. After lunch, participants visited the radio studios and took part in mock interviews, practising techniques for adversarial interviews as the 2SER news director concentrated on tough and unpredictable questions.

Learning the conventions of news can also involve learning the limits of what can be said in the news. A workshop on identifying stories and responding to difficult questions proved to be a difficult and complex task. When asked, the 15 young women identified a range of stories that they wanted to tell: 'Islam is a liberation and empowerment for women'; 'Islam offers equal opportunity to men and women'; 'Crime occurs in all communities'; 'Muslims invented universities, cheques and education'; 'Islam is a religion of peace'; and 'Most Muslims are opposed to terrorism'. A lengthy debate on 'news values' ensued as we discussed the reasons why these statements would not be recognised as news stories. Whereas a general critique of racialised reporting is widespread amongst people who seek to intervene in the news, identifying alternative stories can be difficult — often because the beliefs or experiences which motivate a response do not themselves fit conventional news criteria. In reflecting on the discussion of 'identifying alternative stories', I felt that for participants in the MWA workshop, learning the conventions of news meant learning the news values and story angles that often don't allow their voices and concerns to be heard. The dilemma is perhaps best summed up in a participant's comment during the session on writing for print media:

> Isn't putting out a press release just a bandaid? We are wanting to tackle the whole ideologies — a history of representation. The stories are already written — so what can we do? (research diary notes)

Despite these reservations, the workshop was judged a success by the facilitators, organisers and participants I spoke to, and a follow-up workshop which focused on talkback radio was organised. Learning the conventions of news and developing source skills enacts a politics of inclusion and of being heard, aiming to diversify the range of voices in the news. Becoming a news source requires those who fill the role to work within the conventions of news reporting and the source role. Many organisations have adopted the strategy of learning 'how the media works'.[3] The Muslim Women's Association has been particularly active in news interventions

since the intense news scrutiny of 2001, building relationships with journalists and responding to many media requests. These activities have had significant publication outcomes in all of Sydney's metropolitan newspapers and broadcast news and current affairs outlets, talkback radio and daytime talk shows, and have produced features in young women's magazines and on ABC TV's religious affairs program.

Media management

Learning the conventions of news can produce significant outcomes — most clearly in the ability to respond effectively to news requests and thus achieve (greater) visibility in news reporting. Media management strategies aim not only to respond to the requirements of news media, but also to push the boundaries of news by proactively shaping the media agenda and determining stories. An important element of such a strategy is the promotion of 'positive stories' in response to news coverage which focuses on criminality, threat or deviance in relation to particular groups.

This strategy was adopted by GENERATE!, a large research project focusing on youth culture and migration heritage in western Sydney. Unlike the MWA media skills workshop, the GENERATE! project was developed prior to the signification spiral discussed above, and the media strategy was designed to be proactive rather than responsive. The project had several outcomes, including a research report (Butcher and Thomas, 2002), an edited volume of papers by academics as well young people (Butcher and Thomas, 2003), a museum exhibition of car culture, a visual arts exhibition and other forms of youth cultural production.[4] During the research, young people of Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds who were trained as research assistants conducted interviews and administered surveys. As one of the project objectives was to 'highlight the positive contribution that young people from migrant backgrounds make to Australian life and Australian culture', and the project manager, Melissa, has a background in news radio and campaign management, GENERATE! included an informal media strategy.

The aims of the media strategy were to be proactive and creative, and to provide images for journalists — most of whom were assumed to have no background in or understanding of the popular culture of Asian and Middle Eastern young people in Sydney's western suburbs. Melissa devised a series of 'media events' — 'providing events where they can see things that — where we can start to break down the stereotypes, basically'. This involved promoting stories in a format which was accessible to journalists — with a clear story angle and obvious news value. The most successful media event was the 'Big Night Out of Research', playfully named after the Big Day Out, Australia's largest outdoor music festival:

> It was a Saturday night, and we had our research assistants all over the city, Chinatown, Darling Harbour, Bondi, Parramatta … We actually got a lot of interest in that one. And I think because it was something that was kind of fun and kind of quirky … We packaged it in a fun, funky way. It was about fashion and being funky. (Melissa, researcher)

The story was reported on the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Morris, 2001), and generated considerable follow-up interest.

The Big Night Out of Research showcased the popular cultures of young people from migrant backgrounds by taking journalists to the places where young people meet and mingle, such as karaoke bars and nightclubs and an esplanade where young men cruise in modified cars. The researchers explained these places as important sites for cultural mixing and adaptation, emphasising the ways in which young people move 'between cultures' in diverse friendship networks. As young Australians from diverse backgrounds interact and adapt cultural resources such as fashion, music, cars, sms messaging and internet chat rooms, they develop dynamic, hybrid cultures which can 'create new images of Australia'. The youth researchers were also trained in media skills to enable them to tell their own stories of life in the western suburbs and their experiences of cultural fusion in multicultural Australia.

The GENERATE! approach emphasises story marketing — identifying gaps or absences in news coverage, creating a need for different stories and sources and then delivering the product. The ongoing media strategy was to focus on positive images:

> I used to set it up with them beforehand, that we're really about creating positive images, you know. Unashamedly, that's what we're about. That's our agenda. This is part of the reality. It's not all crime and drugs and rock and roll! (Melissa, researcher)

Thus, in a context in which young people of Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds appear in the news primarily in connection with crime, the GENERATE! team promoted a story of young people as cultural innovators making creative contributions to the future of a multicultural society. The GENERATE! project achieved significant publication outcomes including magazine and newspaper features, radio interviews, talk programs and international media requests.

News interventions which promote alternative stories can be successful, as professional journalists are keen to find 'new' story angles and to cover unusual events. This requirement opens up opportunities to intervene in the naming and framing of issues and communities, but also demands a media-savvy awareness of journalists' needs and story angles, and a pragmatic acceptance of the limits of what can and cannot be said in the news.

Talking back

If strategies of media management suggest some of the possibilities for intervening in the coverage of Sydney's western suburbs, the strategy of 'talking back' to the media highlights some of the limits to 'community' demands for change in the news. At the height of the federal election campaign fought on 'border protection', and against the backdrop of the beginnings of the 'war on terror', a coalition of migrant, refugee and Indigenous women organised a forum to highlight the 'silenced voices of the election campaign'. The Women Report Violence in a Time of War forum was focused not only on telling different stories, but also aimed to challenge, confront or contest particular news frames and media agendas.

The first session was an explicit response to news media reporting titled 'Challenging the Media', intended to highlight 'how women's voices are silenced during times of war by media and political pressures', noting that in 'the race election we had to have the voices of migrant, refugee and Indigenous women were remarkably absent' (April, community worker and activist). The forum had many elements of a media event, appropriating the televised format of the Great Debate, the centrepiece of election news coverage. The forum challenged the conventions of journalism by enacting a conception of public debate in which women's voices and experiences are central. Forum organisers placed a strong emphasis on taking testimonies, on telling untold stories, on witnessing and speaking out.

Speakers at the forum told a range of stories, concentrating on the impact of racialised media reporting and public debate on women and highlighting the connections and continuities with the wider history of race relations in Australia. The speakers also spoke about emotions, describing the event itself as moving and providing examples of the fear, anger and humiliation produced by the climate of racist violence and harassment, a climate which robbed women of security and the use of public spaces. The forum included a Remembrance Ceremony that challenged the unequal distribution of sympathy in mainstream news media and in public debate. Delegates lit candles in remembrance of 370 asylum seekers who drowned while attempting to reach Australia. Cultural activist Paula Abood contrasted the lack of public sympathy over these deaths to the outpourings of empathy for the victims of the September 11 attacks. Mahboba wanted the Australian people to 'hear a different story':

> For Afghan women in Australia, we are aware of the anti-Muslim feeling here. Many Muslim women have a fear to go into the public space. We know women and girls have been attacked and spat at. This violence in the Australian community has made many women stay in their homes. (Mahboba, community worker)

Another speaker read a poem:

> Before September 11 2001, in an act of violence my best friend was almost attacked by a stranger with a hammer.

> Before September 11 2001, in an act of violence my father was murdered.

> After September 11 2001, my best friend's car was egged at her family home and she was mocked at a Sydney post office because 'Lebanon' appeared on her birth certificate.

> After September 11 2001, I was called a murderer whilst traveling alone in my car, soon after my car was broken into on two occasions and personal religious ornaments were destroyed. (Sukkarieh and Zahra, 2001)

The poem describes the everyday fear and intimidation experienced by many people in Sydney's 'othered' communities following 11 September 2001, and links those experiences to an ongoing history of violence. Providing a public space

for these testimonies was particularly important as community representatives found the climate of media panic to be a difficult environment in which to propose news stories documenting the impacts of harassment, violence and vilification against Arab and Muslim Australians (ADB, 2003: 78).

Where the mainstream news media had framed the sexual assaults at the centre of the Bankstown signification spiral as a 'new race crime', speakers at the Women Reporting Violence forum explained the rising attacks on Arab and Muslim women as a continuation of a long history of racist and gendered violence. A speaker from an Aboriginal Women's Legal Service compared the ways in which the stories of colonisation and the 'children overboard' affair were told to silence women's voices and experiences of violence:

> Just outside of Narrabri is a site that's called Gin's Gap. And it's where an Aboriginal woman was surrounded by non-Aboriginal men, and in fear that she was going to be raped and brutalised, she grabbed her child and jumped over the gap … And no one knows her name or her child's name, but the site's there … Then the parallel I've brought to you today is the recent reporting of refugee women and their throwing of their children overboard … I've drawn the same parallel where a woman feels so cornered that there's no hope for her child that she carries out such a drastic measure for a mother to do. (Cleonie, legal officer)

Other speakers extended the discussion by comparing the racialised reporting of crime and the dehumanisation and criminalisation of asylum seekers in public discourse to the demonisation of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century and refugees from Vietnam, as well as the ongoing news reporting of Indigenous Australians.

Several speakers also highlighted a political angle to the story of Women Reporting Violence, suggesting a failure of Australia's key democratic institutions. A journalism educator argued that 'the media do have blood on their hands' in contributing to racist violence and failing to give voice to the disadvantaged. The speakers' pervasive experience of being silenced or unable to be heard led Lena to argue that 'our politicians do not speak for us, and cannot act in our names'. The context of fear and surveillance was also described as a denial of basic human rights:

> I felt like I couldn't breathe. I had to watch my movements, I had to watch what I said on the telephone, not that I had anything to hide. But my freedom as an individual human being was being contained. (Nada, community worker and spokesperson)

Thus, at a key moment in the federal election campaign, the speakers at the Women Reporting Violence forum articulated an alternative news agenda. While politicians and pundits debated 'border protection' and a possible war, the organisers and participants at the forum sought publicise the daily experiences and a long history of gendered and racist violence within Australia, and to declare the absence of these stories in the news media and political discussion as undemocratic and a form of violence.

The forum is an example of 'talking back' to the news media as speakers named media processes of racialisation, selection and framing — emphasising that news reporting is socially constructed rather than a simple 'reflection' of 'the facts'. Thus the intervention addressed the politics of representation rather than the politics of inclusion. The event challenged routine source strategies by giving voice to a diversity of unreported sources and untold stories, and enacted different modes of information-gathering and storytelling, with an emphasis on taking testimony, witnessing and empathy. That these activities were not seen as newsworthy by mainstream news outlets demonstrates the ways in which news values and news conventions can silence or marginalise the voices and concerns of people working with women's issues and racialised communities. The Women Report Violence Forum did not achieve any known publication outcomes in mainstream news and current affairs outlets, although all transcripts have been archived online (Immigrant Women's Speakout et al., 2001).

Speakers at Women Report Violence also suggested that journalists had 'got the wrong story', asserting that the symbolic violence of racialised discourse in the news media is a relevant and important topic for the public agenda. The forum is one example of the difficulty of telling stories critical of media power within the news media themselves. The demand for a self-reflexive journalism practice and a critique of the ways in which 'stories' are determined is itself not a 'story' that fits conventional news values and requirements. Long after the event, one of the organisers joked: 'Maybe if we'd said "Bellydancers against the Bomb!" the event might have been recognised as newsworthy!'

Beyond the boundaries of news

One response to the limits of working within the conventions of news is to work outside them. Several community workers and cultural producers working with racialised communities in Sydney's southwest have developed projects which respond to news media reporting but do not seek news publication outcomes. An example is the project Media Spaces and Places, which produced a series of anti-racism billboards using public spaces to respond to news without the restriction s of working within the genre itself. This is a strategy of talking back, but aiming to address wider publics rather than news professionals or institutions.

In our interview, a project organiser described Media Spaces and Places as 'proactive' precisely because it operated outside the conventions of news, 'working on our own terms':

Reactive is when we have to engage with 'them'. And I say 'them' because we're always being positioned as 'them' … So, for us to be proactive — that, for me, is working on our own terms. In our own voices, in whatever language we want to work in. It's working with communities, it's not being influenced *per se* by what they … certainly not being influenced by what is passable, for 'them', or consumerable. I always work from a critical consciousness point of view, I suppose, where in the cultural projects we undertake, we always look at dissecting and deconstructing, if you like, the

way we're represented. (Paula, community worker and activist)

The project was thus conceived as a deliberate attempt to work outside the conventional requirements of news, or what is 'passable', and to address the politics of representation.

Figure 1: 'Crime' © ICE[5]

   The project involved writing workshops, interviews and discussions with a range of refugee and migrant communities, including Indigenous Australians, a group of Afghani women, a Bosnian women's choir, young Pacific Islanders and an Italian women's group. The outcome was a series of text and visual images displayed on bus shelters in the western Sydney suburb of Parramatta, as well as a CD featuring interview materials and songs written and performed by the younger participants. At a media skills workshop for refugee women, Paula introduced Spaces and Places as an example of finding more creative ways of speaking back:

   It was about criticisms of the media but talking directly to the public. Thousands of people saw those billboards — that's really important. Bypass the media, and take up public space. Go straight to the public. My favourite two billboards: one says 'Crime, it ain't ethnic' [see Figure 1]. And there's one with two women wearing the scarf, a blurred photo [see Figure 2]. The caption says, 'It's amazing how some clothes attract so much attention'. It's

a comment on the scrutiny of the scarf, but also a comment on how billboards usually depict women, make them objects, wearing very few clothes. It was an important project because no one had to be named or take responsibility. It focused on issues not community. (Paula, community worker and activist, research diary notes)

The project bypassed the structured break between news producers and consumers by claiming public space for audience responses to news reporting and racialised discourses. It avoided the conventional news requirement for 'community representatives' who claim authority and credibility to speak for others, and deployed irony rather than reasoned debate. The billboards rely on slogans and make statements rather than addressing news requirements of 'stories' and events.

Figure 2: 'Amazing' © ICE

Discussion

This brief overview of news intervention projects suggests that the ability to name and frame events in the news media is crucially dependent on journalists' conventions of credibility and newsworthiness. These conventions are themselves raced and gendered:

When heard in the media, the voices of Arab and Muslim community leaders were perceived as less credible sources in shaping media stories, and were

called on to defend their communities rather than to identity the agenda for addressing the impact of the criminalisation of their communities. (ADB, 2003: 78)

Representatives of 'ethnic communities' appear in news and current affairs reporting primarily in response to issues and agendas set by media professionals or institutional sources, and are routinely framed as representing 'special interests' (Loo, 1998). Thus the perspectives of those working with cultural differences rarely determine news priorities. The discussion above also suggests that the symbolic hierarchies of news are gendered, as women's voices and feminist analyses of sexual violence struggle for visibility and legitimacy.

The news interventions analysed here do not provide simple solutions to the dilemmas of reporting in culturally diverse contexts, but they do suggest possibilities for those concerned to address the consequences of racialised reporting and the symbolic hierarchy of media power in multicultural Australia. These projects demonstrate the value of learning media skills and news conventions. Yet the conventions of news and the concentration of media power in news institutions mean that improving news reporting of cultural diversity cannot and should not be the task of 'ethnic communities' alone. Substantial change in news reporting requires change in journalism professional practice. News intervention projects can suggest some of the ways in which those conventions might be changed.

The projects discussed here suggest a range of stories and voices which rarely appear in the news, but do diversify the representation of cultural difference in Australia, from hybrid youth cultures to women living with prejudice against Islam, coalition politics between Indigenous, refugee and migrant women's activists, and the impacts of racialised public debate. Perhaps more importantly, they also suggest the need to critique news values and story agendas, rather than merely accessing 'ethnic community representatives' in response to existing storylines. The politics of inclusion is a minimum but not sufficient strategy for the reporting of cultural differences. Where media power operates through symbolic exclusions, those working to intervene in the news demand expanded news agendas. In addressing the news media directly and appropriating key conventions of news reporting, news interventions of 'talking back' critique the operations of media power, whereby 'community representatives' and activists do not determine the selection, naming or framing of news. Projects such as GENERATE!, Women Report Violence in a Time of War and Media Spaces and Places also suggest different ways of identifying stories and news sources, and enact a range of ways of collecting and presenting information — from interviews to storytelling to artistic production, through workshops and performance.

News intervention strategies of pushing the boundaries of news and talking back can also enact a politics of representation, highlighting the constructedness of both news and 'community'. These strategies denaturalise the news and its claims to simply 'reflect reality'. Linda Hutcheon has argued that the politics of representation requires strategies which problematise representation itself — by making the conventions of representation visible and by reappropriating familiar

narratives and images. The aim is to denaturalise the conventions of representation 'in such a way that the politics of the act of representing are made manifest' (Hutcheon, 1989: 59). The projects discussed here suggest comparable possibilities for shifting the conventions of news. Media Spaces and Places appropriated stereotypical images to make ironic comments on the process of racialisation. Women Report Violence used the codes and conventions of election coverage to claim public space for the very voices excluded by news reporting. GENERATE! utilised the news value of youth culture to shift the news frame of crime and deviance which characterises racialised reporting of young people.

As scholars and commentators continue to critique news reporting of Arab and Muslim communities both within Australia and in global news, the media intervention projects developed by people working with 'othered' communities in Sydney's southwest provide a range of strategies and models for changing the news. The purpose of this paper has been to highlight the insights to be gained from those working with the politics of representation in racialised communities. Significant change, however, depends on professional journalists. Beyond small-scale news intervention projects, a critical but collaborative engagement between professional journalists, media researchers and people working with racialised communities is vital. The experiences and insights of people working for change in the news can contribute to a critical reflection on conventional news values and journalists' responsibilities that might expand those conventions to encompass a wider view of the challenges and possibilities of living together in cultural differences.

In our discussions, people working on news intervention projects often described the development of productive professional relationships with journalists as the most important outcome of their efforts. These professional relationships require a recognition of those positioned as marginal, 'alternative' or 'other' as subjects of news with valuable perspectives on the conventions and possibilities of journalism. Melissa advocates greater involvement of young people in developing professional standards:

> Get young people from Middle Eastern and Asian backgrounds involved in devising the codes of conduct for journalists. If you want that code of conduct to be relevant, sit down with young people and say, 'Well, OK, this is how …' And that also puts responsibility back on the kids. So then they can't whinge, 'Oh, we're not involved!' (Melissa, researcher)

Nada spoke of cultivating relationships and developing a mentoring program in which women journalists would provide media training or internships for young Muslim women. Several interviewees spoke of the importance of dialogue and interaction between journalists and community workers and representatives. Thus news intervention projects raise an important challenge for professional journalists and for media researchers: to engage the alternative stories and professional practices suggested by those projects, opening up the operations of media power in order to produce better journalism for living together in a multicultural society.

Notes

1. In the period 2001–02 I have spoken to secondary school principals and community representatives, local councillors and youth workers who are working to respond to the media, and I have participated in workshops, meetings and production projects with organisations working with women, young people and community workers from a wide range of refugee and migrant communities.

2. See Powell (1993) and Collins and Poynting (2000) for the marginalisation of Sydney's western suburbs.

3. During my research, I also conducted media skills workshops for refugee women through the Refugee Council of Australia, for groups of youth workers in Community Drug Action Teams in several suburbs in western Sydney and for the Bankstown Media Watch Response Group. In addition, the Anti-Discrimination Board organised a public meeting in November 2002 which included media skills training and public relations advice for community groups and recommended further assistance with media training as part of the Board's anti-racism project following the media panic and increased racial vilification in 2001 (available at www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/advanceaustraliafairly).

4. For extensive documentation of GENERATE! outcomes and activities, see the project website at www.uws.edu.au/ccr/generate

5. All images are copyright and used with permission of Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE). Project managed by ICE and supported by the Commonwealth government's Living in Harmony initiative. Images and concepts created in consultation with Western Sydney communities. Photographer and graphic designer Garry Trinh, project coordinated by Nadya Stani.

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Acknowledgment

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