

1-1997

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P. Bell

University of New South Wales

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Recommended Citation

Bell, P., New values, race and 'The Hanson Debate' in Australian media, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 2, 1997, 38-47.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss2/4>

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News Values, Race And 'The Hanson Debate' In Australian Media

While the media are not to blame for racism, they are deeply implicated in reproducing the assumptions which maintain popular misconceptions about race as an inevitable cause of social divisions. This is evident in the Australian, as well as Asian, media focus on Pauline Hanson's politics of fear since her maiden speech in the Australian Federal Parliament in September 1996. This article outlines some of the ways by which the 'quality' press, Sydney Morning Herald; and populist television program, 60 Minutes, developed the public discourse around race and immigration which effectively legitimised the unsupported assumptions of Hanson and her supporters.

Philip Bell

University of New South Wales, Australia

Few media-literate Asian residents will be unaware of the name of the recently-elected Australian politician, Ms Pauline Hanson. In Australia her name has become the provocation to arguments and conversations in private and in public which centre on race, immigration, and what it means to be a 'real' Australian. Yet Pauline Hanson has offered no precise or reliable position or information on these questions, nor has she proposed particular viable policies (except negatively) in the areas about which she has been so vocal since September 10, 1996, the date of her maiden speech to the Australian Federal Parliament. Her speech began:

"Mister Acting Speaker, in making my first speech in this place, I congratulate you on your election and wish to say how proud I am to be here as the Independent Member for Oxley. I come here not as a polished politician but as a woman who has had her fair share of life's knocks.

"My view is based on common sense, and my experience as a mother of four children, as a sole parent, and as a businesswoman running a fish-and-

chip shop. I won the seat of Oxley largely on an issue that had resulted in me being called racist. That issue related to my comment that Aboriginals received more benefits than non-Aboriginals.

"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 taxpayers 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. They screamed the loudest because they stand to lose the most - their power, money and position, all funded by ordinary Australian taxpayers."

The speech continued to outline foreign threats (economic, military) to Australia, espousing the need for compulsory military service and a range of measures aimed at defending her vision or (version) of Australia against threat from without and within. Immigration constituted one such threat (to local employment, for instance).

It is possible to argue that these opinions, beliefs and fears made are coherent only as they all express intense insecurity in the face of the social and political realities of modern Australia. Insecurity about 'them', the powerful, the foreign, the elites (regardless of their actual power or policies in relation to Australia). They represent a racially besieged, paranoid reaction to the world and an attempt to retreat and fortify the self (literally the ego) against anything which symbolically threatens it.

Hanson's speech was the classic defensive, reactionary cry of the alienated and disempowered. But it was reported as part of the legitimate, perhaps popular, if unfashionable, spectrum of political opinion. And, as its extremism provoked condemnation and debate, so the media produced story after story, image after image, program after program to construct "the Hanson phenomenon" or "the Hanson Debate". Seven months after her only parliamentary speech Pauline Hanson is still one of the most visible and audible 'personalities' in the Australian media.

The Western media report 'news' through the complex filter of news values -- assumptions which prioritise the unexpected, the unusual, the conflictual, the discrete, the dramatic or the extraordinary, over the consensual, the harmonious, the

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predictable. That which threatens (at least symbolically) those values espoused by the State (liberalism, tolerance, rule of law, competitive corporate capitalism, protection of the innocent and the weak) is likely to be newsworthy as long as conflicting opinion, personalities or social interests are mobilised around the 'pro-and-con' of the media-labelled 'issue'. Of course, these conflict-based mini-narratives do not necessarily aggravate social division because the core of assumed consensual values (individualism, patriarchal power, private property rights, the rule of law, the family as sanctified, etc.) are usually reinforced by the example of those who threaten them. That is, deviance, criminality, corruption or flagrant immorality are recruited to moral fables in which those who violate the assumed consensus are symbolically or actually punished or condemned. The media, therefore, both threaten and reinforce those values which their news stories continually represent under conflictual headlines .

Headlines employ metaphors of war, aggression, conflict and catastrophe ('crises', 'rows', 'routs', 'debacles', 'clashes' etc.). When these refer to potentially socially divisive processes such as immigration or to actual conflict between ethnically-labelled minorities (or between them and an assumed homogeneous majority) the intergroup conflict assumes a particular interpretation in which the minority is posed as an active threat to peace, stability, the majority and "normal" life itself. Examples from different Western countries show that postwar immigration has frequently been represented as a 'danger', 'invasion' or (tidal) 'wave', a force acting on and threatening the host economy and society (Bell, 1987:32; Van Dijk, 1991).

In Australia, immigration has frequently been presented by the media within such frameworks of interpretation. This is despite an extremely successful, large-scale immigration program since the Second World War and despite the development over two decades of a bipartisan multicultural policy which ostensibly celebrates, not merely tolerates, ethnic diversity.

Indeed, racial (and ethnic) vilification is explicitly outlawed in Australia and extensive government support is provided for actively encouraging multiculturalism and for acting against racist vilification and violence. Nevertheless, the eruption of a bitter public 'debate' (to use the media's term) was initiated by the 'maiden' (first) speech of a newly-elected 'independent' (non-aligned, in party political terms) member of the Federal Australian parliament in September 1996. The public (read 'media-based') debate was a reminder that immigration and questions of ethnic homogeneity are never far below the surface of public discourse in modern Australia.

As recently as 1984, a speech by Professor Geoffrey Blainey

similarly had been taken up by the media and amplified to become "The Blainey Debate". Now, in 1996-97, it was the "The Hanson Debate", a label covering opinions and arguments about levels of immigration, the status of indigenous Australians, multicultural policies, exotic (especially Asian military and economic "threat"). Yet what was most newsworthy proved to be those issues which could be reduced to conflicts based on "race" (on skin colour or national origin).

After only a few weeks of intensive media coverage Ms Hanson's face was as recognisable as the Prime Minister's (and certainly more than that of, say, the Head of State, the Governor General). Her grim portrait flagged what the media now called a "race row", and Ms Hanson's words which lit the fire had consumed front pages and radio talkback programs across the country, leading to increased reports of public racist vilification and violence.

The media did not initiate this cycle of reports, nor are they the cause of racism. However, the issue does highlight the significance of the media in actively defining public agenda, knowledge and attitudes and in reproducing certain ways of understanding social relationship and 'race' itself.

I want to briefly outline some of the ways by which the 'quality' press (*Sydney Morning Herald*) and populist (*60 Minutes*) television developed discourses around race and immigration which gave legitimacy and currency to points of view and unsupported attitudes which they ostensibly rejected (in editorials, for example).

Just as racists point to biological differences (skin colour, facial features) to explain or justify political and social generalisations, so the popular media posit race as an inevitable cause of social division, conflict and difference. Because conflict is always newsworthy, the Member for Oxley found her opinions on immigration and Aboriginal welfare taken up by the press and electronic media, giving these viewpoints an unearned sense of legitimacy.

The media selectively amplified some, but not all, of Ms Hanson's opinions. Significantly, they largely ignored her suggestions that Australia withdraw from the United Nations, prepare for invasion from Asia and reintroduce national service. These proposals were, it seems, too "deviant" to be represented as debatable within the consensus band of the mainstream Australian media. Yet the media selected some of her agenda for further publicity: but race, immigration and Aboriginal rights were judged to be debatable within the consensus -- which the press quickly justified by claiming that Ms Hanson spoke for "ordinary Australians", the "mainstream", or the "silent majority".

By continually linking race and immigration to Ms Hanson, the press exploited the newsworthiness of an atypical "non-political politician". They uncritically spun out stories of the stereotypical ordinary Aussie, even resorting to the clichés of the "battler" and the "mum". This cycle of stories naturalised and neutralised the political import of her viewpoints, giving her position the legitimacy of the silent, disempowered ordinary person. The less charismatic, less articulate and less professionally "political" she appeared (initially, at least) the more news value she was attributed and the more her policies were portrayed as "common sense".

60 Minutes' attempt to exploit Hanson's negative charisma led to its arranged profile of the rising media paradox. *60 Minutes* might have assumed that its populist rhetoric would resonate sympathetically with Hanson's views and with the program's audience. But, conflicting, indeed competing versions of this populism seemed to emerge as the program unfolded, and the *60 Minutes* reporter became increasingly (if somewhat patronisingly) distant from her media phenomenon. Television was, in a way, caught with a problem of its own making: would the program or the politician retain the ideological allegiance of the (assumed) audience? How could a populist Aussie program criticise Hanson without offending its habitual viewers?

Sydney Morning Herald fell into a similar linguistic framework, with Hanson herself presented as a personality or "phenomenon". The issues were then debated by the usual media convention of presenting opinion for and against vaguely defined propositions (for example, was the immigration debate about numbers, ethnicity or economics/unemployment?). The paper spun out such "debates" by progressively quoting more and more varied opinion in news reports, commentaries, features and correspondence. Within a month of the initial speech, the media debate had become a "race row", one that included even the most bizarre excesses of racist opinion. Because the unexpected and the unusual are newsworthy, this included claims that the children of mixed ancestry were "mongrels" (!) as well as opinion representative of established stakeholders or opinion leaders (politicians, ethnic community leaders, Aboriginal Torres Straits Islander Commission representatives).

But such opinions are not enough to demonstrate the "reality" of the issue. This requires "scientific" evidence. Even the numbers of talkback callers who are 'pro' or 'con' (Ms Hanson, not any particular policy option) are not sufficient evidence of public opinion. To demonstrate that race is a real, controversial issue in the Australian nation, a quality newspaper must report a poll. *Sydney Morning Herald* commissioned such a

poll, by AGB-McNair to give itself just such credibility.

The poll provided the pretext for a factitious elaboration of stories claiming national divisions ("Nation Divided Over the Hanson Agenda" was the headline). In commissioning the poll, *The Sydney Morning Herald* chose to frame the issues in very particular ways. It did not seek evidence of racist or ethnicist beliefs or attitudes, but of agreement with or opposition to "economic and social policy measures proposed by ... Hanson". This was reported as "The Hanson Factor" in a colour graphic at the top of page one, November 5, 1996.

Despite its leading questions, and the likelihood that this led to high agreement with the poll's formulation of Hanson's "policy measures", the poll was used as evidence for the extravagant claim of a "Nation Divided". Yet even the Herald couldn't explain the poll's findings of:

55% agreement with: "Federal Government treats Aborigines over-generously"; and, 70% disagreement with: "Abolish multiculturalism policy".

By early November, the quality press had largely exhausted the "public debate" and was increasingly embarrassed by Ms Hanson's limited news value. *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised against the excessive features of her views, but allowed that immigration could be debated without reference to race, and that "There is ... real concern over the levels of immigration". It chose to label migrants "newcomers" in its front-page manifesto.

Sydney Morning Herald editorialised against racism and xenophobia on November 2, even as it commissioned the empirical pretext for its "divided nation" report of November 5. But by then the "divided nation" seemed unproblematically to represent social reality itself. It certainly represented the spiral of increasingly alarmist news reports and commentary of the previous two months. And the public had no other way of knowing about abstract issues such as race.

The media do not reflect on the nature of racism, its causes, or why it is linked to other attitudes and behaviour (such as fear of foreign invasion, the need for national service, antagonism to the unemployed). Racism, despite its prominent place on the media agenda, is accepted as natural and inevitable. Conflict around race is built into the ways by which it is selectively incorporated into the language of news. News media proclaim their populist or their liberal credentials by their attitude to racism and racists (always, of course, someone else), but they reproduce at the same time the assumptions and vocabulary of race discourse and its apparent "naturalness"; "of course there'll always be racists"; "everyone is racist underneath"; "look at the Japanese", etc.

Media reports, especially those based on polls and profiles

(manufactured as news) are riddled with contradiction: the media speak for their readers as they speak about them and to them. If we believe the evidence of the "Hanson debate", neither the media (quality or populist) nor their various audiences can imagine a world where "race" and "immigration" are not inevitably divisive social issues.

Although the media canvassed diverse opinions during the course of the debate, fundamental "knowledge" about race itself has not changed. Indeed, even in the quality press, the details of immigration levels or policies, let alone comparative or historical analyses of Australia's immigration and 'multicultural' successes were seldom canvassed despite literally hundreds of reports linked to the debate.

During the mid 1980s (the Blainey Debate), it could be seen that race threats had to be euphemistically transposed into immigration threats or potential 'takeovers' which, of course, are only threatening to an assumed non-immigrant (non-Asian) reader or audience. These readers were addressed as though they were ethnically alike and consensually integrated. Thus a set of implied polar opposites underlay the Blainey debate which boiled down to 'us' versus 'them':

Us	Them
Normal	Alien
Non-Asian	Asian
Economically united	Economically disruptive
Consensus (harmony)	Dysensus (conflict)

In a similar if more complex way, the Hanson debate was constructed around 'us' as multicultural (but not multiracial), 'tolerant (or not) mainstream', 'ordinary' and, of course, Australian in contrast to a range of threatening others (Aboriginal activists, élites of various kinds, the politically correct, the 'ethnic lobby/industry').

By the new year (1997), the contradictions of the media's coverage had become apparent. By reporting prominently the racist elements of Hanson's speech the media helped to create a sense of panic or at least anxiety, attributing this to ordinary Australians' only thinly disguised racism. The 'mainstream' (media and Anglo-Australian population) was assumed to be justifiably antagonistic to Aboriginal welfare and to high (?) levels of non-European immigration.

The media coverage of these issues in the three months following Hanson's speech might be seen to have legitimised her

extreme positions by aligning them with the fears and desires of otherwise tolerant, ordinary 'Aussies'. There was an inevitable difficulty in the debate arising out of the way the quality papers had crafted Hanson's beliefs into discourses of the 'mainstream'.

In representing her as one of 'us' she could not be condemned, and yet in a 'multicultural' society her views demanded criticism. Because she was portrayed as so very 'Australian', to call her a racist was to label 'mainstream' Australia as racist, and by extension this could be seen to be anti-Australian. Hence, the euphemisms littering the discourse: 'racism' became 'hostility', 'mischief', 'foolishness' or 'lame-brained', 'misguided' and 'ignorant' behaviour, with rarely even a hint that it could be otherwise.

By omitting any exploration of the history and social contexts of 'racism', the discourses surrounding it largely ignored the possibility of its existence. Another result of referring to Hanson's views as 'misguided' or 'mistaken' was that the responsibility was lifted from Hanson and redistributed onto those who should have better explained the situation – the previous government and 'a generation of leaders' 'with a 'tendency to bottle up debate'. Not only did the reactions of Hanson and the 'mainstream' become the fault of others, but they seemed to be natural, understandable and logical. Hanson came to symbolise 'the forgotten people', the battlers' without power, more deserving of pity than condemnation.

Hanson was an atypical, indeed unusual politician: a woman, an unexpectedly successful candidate even after being disowned as racist by her own party. She was, in a sense, 'deviant' but also a self-proclaimed champion of the 'silent majority' (itself a media fiction). By personalising and personifying a complex of issues around race/ethnicity and immigration in the face and persona of Ms Hanson, the media guaranteed easy, controversial (hence saleable) copy.

An alternative approach (unlikely to be as lucrative) would have been to ignore her speech or to report it as other maiden speeches are (politely summarised and noted on page five). Another would be to have contextualised her claims historically by showing how they echoed earlier reactionary pleas for an authentic Anglo-Australia so that the agenda was not conceded to the provocateur so easily or readily. A third would have been to restrict reportage to facts, figures and competing claims without linking these to celebrity or popular personalities (of which Hanson, of course, became one). None of these alternatives is any less objective or balanced than the publicity that resulted from

**Alternative
news
frameworks?**

the automatic application of conventional criteria to her (not the 'issues') newsworthiness.

Why was there so little factual information presented about actual immigration levels, Aboriginal welfare (of other welfare)? For example, in April 1997, at the bottom of page three under a very small headline, *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the Bureau of Census figures for immigration. These were headlined: "Kiwis pip Brits as our biggest import", (i.e.. New Zealand was the source of the greatest proportion of new migrants, followed by Britain).

These figures were not linked by the reporter to Hanson's claims about non-Anglo migration threatening Anglo-Australia. Yet the census data were precisely what was at stake in the saturation coverage of her position. News practice did not link these figures to the debate because they did not further amplify the conflict; nor could they be attributed to a personality or celebrity.

The alternatives to the news values I have discussed in relation to the Hanson phenomenon are difficult to imagine in a competitive commercial media system. Yet even the media began to question their own role in fanning the flames of the Hanson fire by early 1997. They stopped short of analysing their own habitual practices but did publish considerable opinion against Hanson's position. The problem is that 'opinion' was never the issue, it was in the 'factual' reporting of the newsworthy personality (a self-fulfilling process) that the media complicity occurred. Only thoroughly researched, historically contextualised, non-personality-based reporting could have doused the flames.

I began by noting that the media are not to blame for racism. But the media are deeply implicated in reproducing the assumptions which maintain popular misconceptions about race as an inevitable cause of social division. Such assumptions form the contexts within which social policy is formulated and social life lived. It may be significant, therefore that the Australian (Liberal-National Party Coalition) Government revised its immigration policy in May 1997. By this time Pauline Hanson had formed the 'One Nation Party' and opinion polls had been conducted which ostensibly showed that her new party might garner one vote in five at a future election. As most of these votes would be at the expense of the conservative Coalition, it is possible to trace direct effects of the highly-publicised Hanson agenda on policy decisions. Indeed, *Sydney Morning Herald* reported:

"The Howard Government plans legislation to give it more power to control immigration ...

The move came as Cabinet approved a 6,000 cut in immigration – to be borne mainly by aged people seeking to join children in Australia – in changes that won the

support of the Queensland Independent, Mrs Pauline Hanson." (22 May 1997).

The newsworthiness of conflict, novelty and ahistorical news frameworks combined with the populist antagonism to the powerful and the 'elite' which characterises much social and political debate in Australia, converged in 1996-7 to elevate race and immigration to front-page prominence. The "Hanson debate" shows how the ostensibly independent media are inevitably implicated in, amplify and codify, the terms of the politics of race.

By making an inadvertent politician, Pauline Hanson, into a icon of reactionary, but understandable ideology, the media produced political effects as unintended as they are significant. The personalisation of reactionary, populist politics in the image of the hard-eyed independent member of parliament has ensured that race remains a founding assumption of public discussion in Australia, erupting whenever immigration or multiculturalism are debated. ■

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PHILIP BELL, is professor and head of Department of Media and Communication Studies at University of New South Wales, Australia.
Email: pbell@unsw.edu.au
