What is the solution? Moving cultural diversity to the centre of journalism debates

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One way I could try to explain it to you is to point to Emily Kame Kngwarreye, a famous Aboriginal artist. Her work dealt for many years with the dreaming of her people, the Anmatyerre, and she must have done thousands and thousands of interpretations of that yam dreaming. Her vigilance to that one story, her continual practice of it, and singing and enchantment of it, that’s the real commitment that Aboriginal people have to particular concepts. I feel that kind of commitment. It goes contrary to Western news values that say that there is a timeframe on this and in a week’s time it is not going to be that important.

What was the main criticism of Geoff Clark? As with other Aboriginal leaders, he was criticised because he seemed to be in disarray.

We all seem to be in disarray in the news. The message that comes across is that we cannot control our own lives, and that self-determination never really worked. It may not be our fault, it may be the fault of our culture...you know, we are susceptible to nepotism or something, or we cannot manage money, or we have not been taught to administrate for ourselves. Of course, then, under these circumstances there is a valid reason for the Government to step in and say, “Well, we’ll have to do it for you.” Geoff Clark is a perfect case in point of this kind of thinking. For the very first time in ATSIC’s history, Aboriginal people democratically elected him to be their leader. Yet, he is the one who is brought down and dismissed by the Government. I mean, I just find that astonishing.

As I acknowledged, that is my bias. What it leads me to believe, however, is that if as Aboriginal people we cannot be trusted to manage our own affairs, then there is not much honour in the idea of diversity or respect in this country. We seem to be going the other way and shrinking our ideas of governance, autonomy, and how to live a life and engage with one another in a respectful fashion.

As an Indigenous reporter I would like to see more people out here of different cultural backgrounds and more people bringing their cultural baggage into the newsroom. If we did that, then we could grapple with these sorts of concepts and debate them in a more challenging way, rather than the less challenging way that is often found in newsrooms of “That’s not important today; forget about that; the story’s been done; let’s move on”. The idea of cultural diversity should really be about what Jesse Jackson said – do your homework, tell the truth and let as many different perspectives as possible get through.

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Like Ghassan Nakhloul, I want to look at the recent open season on the Lebanese community in the Sydney press, following the fatal shootings at Greenacre in October. The news coverage of these events provides us with a good opportunity to assess the impact of considerable public debate and research about reporting cultural diversity that took place in the second half of 2001, in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. Of notable significance in 2001 was the media panic about ethnic gangs in Bankstown. News reports at the time often linked ethnic gangs to the scandal involving the asylum seekers stuck on the Norwegian tanker, the Tampa, off Australia’s shores. Furthermore, many public figures and journalists linked the gangs and the Tampa crisis to the events of September 11 and the so-called “war on terror”. Communities in Bankstown and surrounding suburbs have therefore been in the media spotlight for quite some time. So, in looking at this recent flurry of stories, we can ask whether lessons have been learnt
or not learnt in terms of reporting cultural diversity in Sydney’s western suburbs.

I should say here that I have been working on my doctoral thesis (Dreher 2005) at the University of Amsterdam this year, so I do not claim to have followed very closely what has been happening in the Australian media. Nevertheless, I did notice there had been a reopening of the Lebanese season on the news websites. I can also add that although I have not been asked to put journalists in touch with gang leaders, I have often been asked whether I get scared on my research trips to Cabramatta and Bankstown, or whether I have been offered drugs, am buying drugs, or am hanging out with drug dealers. Most people assume that I must be researching gangs. I have not, however, done any of those things.

The first thing to note, from my brief examination of the coverage, is that there seems to be a lot of tiptoeing in the 2003 reporting of the violence in Greenacre. This involves very careful use of direct religious and ethnic descriptors, in a way that was not evident in the earlier reporting in 2001. You will see much less evidence of phrases such as a “Lebanese gang” or claims that people are “Lebanese” or “Muslim offenders” in the lead paragraphs or headlines of these stories. There seems to be a real awareness of Clause 2 of the AJA Code of Ethics, which draws attention to the need to avoid words such as “Lebanese” and “Muslim” when referring to individuals, unless such details are pertinent.

Of course, there is still a problem that three sentences later, the report will say that a particular defendant said in court that he was having problems presenting evidence because he was told by his former lawyer that all Muslims were rapists, and he was going to prove that as a Muslim he was a rapist. So these racial or religious descriptors may find their way into the story in various forms.

Another indication that a lesson has been learned is evident in examples of journalists challenging some of the elite sources in the story, and challenging those sources’ use of ethnic descriptors and of racialised framings of the issue. In the example Ghassan Nakhoul mentioned earlier about Bob Carr’s “ship out” warning, I’ve been told that journalists at the press conference did ask: “Isn’t that a bit of problem, because it is most likely these people are Australian citizens?” “Who exactly are you putting back on the boat, and where to?” Unfortunately, those questions and the Premier’s responses did not make it into all the reporting. However, at least there was this challenge going on at the news conference.

That said, there are also indications that some lessons have not been learnt so well. There is still an overwhelming focus and attention on community leaders and, for this story in particular, on the Australian mufti, Sheikh Taj el-Din al Hilaly. Community leaders are asked to explain or respond to these events, and so they must be accountable for their versions of what is happening. This demand for accountability is very unevenly distributed. All sorts of other community leaders are not asked to respond in this way.

There is also the old problem of the use of sloppy and very loaded language. You may recall that in the coverage of the Tampa incident, the efforts of asylum seekers trying to reach our shores were often framed in terms of a trail of terror. In 2003, I cannot think of a more loaded word than “terror”, and to describe a crime in a Sydney suburb with the word “terror” immediately conjures up associations and linkages that do not help our understanding of the story. There is also talk about warring parties. These metaphors of war in reporting incidents in Sydney’s southwest have been identified and analysed by Media Studies’ researchers, particularly Scott Poynting and Greg Noble (2003), in terms of how such language creates restrictive meanings for the events and frames those events. That is why I want to highlight the fact that you do not need to use ethnic descriptors in order to produce racialised reporting.

This has made me reflect on the ways in which Clause 2 of the AJA Code of Ethics is so central to our public debates about what we
expect in terms of reporting of cultural diversity in the news media. It seems to me that the Clause 2 framework is far too narrow for the complex issues that we must deal with. I would like to suggest that it would be more proactive to think about the ways we develop different languages and to devise more concepts for thinking through reporting about cultural diversity and what we can do.

We have heard a lot of really interesting and useful suggestions in terms of journalism practice. I want to ask: what sort of concepts might help us in this project of improving the reporting of cultural diversity? One useful concept, which I have already hinted at, is the idea of thinking in terms of racialisation. This involves thinking not only in terms of media and racism, but about the process of racialisation, which is a process of creating meaning. If we think about media and racism, then we are interested in identifying attitudes and prejudice. Racialisation puts the focus much more on production, meaning-making and framing. Racialised reporting is the sort of reporting that explains events in terms of race, ethnicity, culture or religion. By doing that, it obscures and sidelines all sorts of other factors and explanations – particularly social analysis and other causes of factors involved in events. To think in terms of racialisation involves an interest in journalism as cultural production. To think of journalism as cultural production means journalism is about creating meaning, and journalism is central to our processes of understanding ourselves and others – who we are, who others are, how we get along. It is a cultural process.

It is also important to think beyond critique and reacting to particular examples. We are already very good at that, and as journalism educators, we can see that our students are very good at that. We need to spend as much energy on developing proactive strategies and looking at solutions and possibilities as we spend on critique, because at least in my own experience as a journalism educator, that is what our students are really lacking; that’s what working journalists are really lacking. We do not need to ask simply what is the problem, but what can we do about it. What is the solution?

This cultural approach entails a conceptual shift in how we think about journalism, what journalism does and why it is important. I would like to think about journalism and journalists as already within difference and already producing culture. So rather than a vision where journalists stand outside cultural diversity, and figure out the best way to report on it, we see that journalists are already implicated in it. All of us, already, are living in difference. This echoes, in some senses, Michael Meadows’ suggestion to think about identity, communication and culture as dialogue, negotiation and exchange.

I will conclude with mention of a few other concepts that I have found useful and that might generate discussion. We need to be able to think in terms of whiteness and not always in terms of cultural diversity as ethnic “others” or as Indigeneity. It is absolutely crucial that we find a way to talk about whiteness and think about what it might mean to write whiteness into reporting. It is also very important that we find ways to talk about cultural difference as everyday, and cultural difference as cultural exchange, rather than always difference as a clash and conflict. Those are really important concepts and ideas to add to our interest in avoiding ethnic descriptors or talking about racialisation, and to expand the conversation. We need to expand the conversation because the issue of cultural diversity is absolutely central rather than marginal. I see it as much more than an “add on” to “business as usual” reporting. The central challenge in a globalising world is to learn to live in difference and journalism is a central part of our process of completing that project.

References
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Afterthoughts: Where to for journalism and cultural diversity?

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The participants in this colloquium on journalism and cultural diversity offer new ideas and frameworks for thinking about culturally competent news reporting, as well as practical examples of their own attempts to engage with diversity issues in journalism. While hope for change in journalism typically needs to be tempered by consideration of the political and market pressures under which journalists work, here it appears to be attached to specific historical shifts in news priorities and consequent demands for a broader range of professional skills in journalism. “Cultural competence” (Stockwell & Scott 2000) might once have been dismissed as mere “political correctness”, but it is fast becoming an essential part of the journalistic tool-kit for those reporting the “war on terror” and issues of homeland security, citizenship, Reconciliation and multiculturalism.

The colloquium provides valuable signposts for the path ahead. Three participants — Meadows, Nakhoul, and Nimmo — remind us that the Australian news media encompasses many kinds of journalism, with multiple news agendas distributed in many different languages to diverse communities. This is an historical achievement, and it merits closer investigation and analysis. These participants suggest that mainstream journalists needs look no further than their own backyard for news practices and projects that successfully grapple with the demands of reporting cultural diversity on an everyday basis. Two participants — Nakhoul and Dreher — flag concerns about non-compliance with the AJA Code of Ethics, as well as the inevitable limitations inherent in this self-regulatory mechanism. The concerns raise the perennial question of the professional association’s role in providing leadership and guidance to members on topics such as cultural diversity, that require ongoing research and discussion. The danger, implied in the colloquium in different ways, is that journalism’s profile across the board suffers because minimal professional standards such as Clause 2 are ignored without due protest or strategic intervention.

To talk about journalism and cultural diversity is to raise challenging questions about existing news conventions and practices. These participants ask us to be open to different worldviews, cultural values and news priorities in thinking about journalism’s future. This means more than just expanding our existing cultural horizons. It is an invitation to take the further step of reflecting systematically on the cultural specificity of our own ideas and backgrounds in order to understand how they bear on our journalistic and academic work. In other words, we also need to reconsider how we have conceived and analysed the history of the Australian press and its place in the development of Australia’s multicultural society. Perhaps the most effective way of building dialogue on this topic is through the study of Australia’s journalistic traditions and the categories of analysis that have been used in the past to interpret and evaluate those traditions. Everyone has a stake in developing effective ways of talking about and reporting cultural diversity in journalism. It is not only an urgent task but, as the participants in this colloquium make clear, an invigorating one for journalism.

Reference