1-1-1999

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Recommended Citation
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss6/3

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Doing Justice To Pauline: Strategies Of Representation In Television Current Affairs

While condemnations of Australia's One Nation Party president, Pauline Hanson, and the media coverage of her, have gone hand in hand, much of this criticism has failed to adequately address the complexity of Hanson's status as a celebrity politician. This has been compounded by a failure to provide an adequate explanation of the basis on which accusations of irresponsibility, targeted at both Hanson and the media, have been mounted. This paper examines the treatment Hanson has received in two current affairs programs in Australia in relation to both the criticisms of her and of media reportage on her. It identifies, in both cases, a tendency in both the programs themselves and in criticisms of them to essentialise what constitutes legitimate media representation. Finally, the paper explores the possibilities of a radical democratic approach to issues of media representation.

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For those who are marginalised into local game parks, whose cultural resources run to Rambo and White Australia, Hanson represents the last gasp of the damaged beast. The media chase uncertainly across the fields, pointing, commodifying, labeling, tracking hot-spots, flogging advertising space on the basis of the numbers, and uncertain as to what role they should be playing. Do they ultimately have any social responsibility for their actions, or is it their role to publish all the news that's fit to print? (Jakubowicz 1997:85)

In this passage, Andrew Jakubowicz draws together two of the most persistent images of the Pauline Hanson phenomenon. The first is that of Hanson as the grand manipulator, leading the media on a merry dance through territory long thought forgotten. The second, by contrast, views Hanson as the creation of an irresponsible media. To some extent, blaming the media has been a strategy employed by politicians to deflect responsibility from the Prime Minister, John Howard, who attracted widespread criticism for his initial refusal to condemn Hanson's views outright. Nonetheless, this explanation has also been taken seriously by both journalists and media theorists (Bell 1997, Kelly...
1998, Wark 1998). From this perspective, Hanson’s celebrity status has been regarded as an example of worrying trends in media representation. Glen Lewis (1997:19), for example, argues that the significance of the “Hanson debate” goes beyond particular issues, and is indicative of the increasing failure of contemporary media to enable the sort of free debate required to sustain democratic society.

This paper explores how media representations of Hanson and discussions of contemporary journalism have tended to mirror one another, each assuming a normative framework against which Hanson and the media respectively are regarded as transgressive. I will argue that in both cases this framework restricts the potential to understand Hanson’s significance as a media phenomenon. To illustrate this case, I wish to consider how representations of Hanson on two current affairs television programs, the ABC’s *Four Corners* and Channel 7’s *Witness*, articulate tensions and contradictions within Australian culture.

As a flagship current affairs program of Australia’s national public broadcaster, *Four Corners* is frequently discussed as an example of “quality” current affairs which upholds the traditional standards of Australian journalism. This reflects a tendency for “quality” to be defined in negative terms, by contrast to more “sensationalist” practices associated particularly, in the case of television, with current affairs programs produced at Australia’s three commercial channels. In view of this, *Witness* is a particularly interesting text, since it self-consciously attempted to prove an exception to this rule. After the program’s eventual withdrawal from the Channel 7 schedule in August 1998, *Witness* journalist and presenter Paul Barry wrote an article which expressed concern about the inability for “decent’ journalism” to survive in a market dominated by the logic of ratings. Notably, this article directly attributed the program’s attempt to challenge the quality/commercial dichotomy as a cause of its demise. *Witness*, he commented, “set out to produce a program that was somewhere between 60 Minutes and Four Corners in content. That’s roughly what we ended up with and, not surprisingly, roughly what we achieved in terms of ratings (The Age, 22 August 1998).

Clearly, however, what constitutes “decent” or “quality” journalism is not determined by content alone, since these terms express conceptions of social value that are not simply given but are themselves socially constructed. Initially, therefore, I wish to consider how such categorization has been figured in recent discussions of the role of journalism within democratic society.
Turner (1996: 88-89) recently criticised commercial television current affairs programs for their tendency to generate news events that will attract ratings, rather than report events of public significance, a trend he describes as “new news” or “post-journalism”. As he argued: “Journalism, for Ray Martin, simply supplies the rhetoric to defend the tactics of his program as fundamentally democratic; when that does not suffice, he invokes its popularity with the audience. I think we have reached the stage where we need to acknowledge the effective incompatibility of these two principles in practice”.

In an article which argues that the “mainstream” media must be seen as responsible for Hanson’s success, Meadows (1997) quotes these sentiments approvingly, while Lewis (1997) suggests that the Hanson phenomenon reflects an increasing tendency for commercial television, the tabloid press and talkback radio to set the news agenda. Like Turner, he suggests that a distinction must be drawn between “cheap talk” and “free speech” as “one of the preconditions for maintaining a democratic society” (Lewis 1997: 19).

Clearly, the media frequently do exploit the ambiguity of the notion of “public interest”, equating it with the number of viewers they are able to attract (the interested public) rather than an advocacy of democratic freedoms. However, the reason they are able to do so is that no clear distinction may be drawn between the interested public and the advocacy of democratic freedoms. Indeed, as Keane (1991) points out, the reason appeals to the public interest are persuasive is that they find their precursors in classic-liberal theories of the press. Liberal theory tended merely to emphasise the importance of a press free from state censorship, placing its faith in an unregulated media to both safeguard public liberties and to enable a consensus to form regarding standards of truth and justice. Since definitions of public liberties ideally depended on such standards, an implicit tension arose between the press’s function to inform the public and represent an allegedly sovereign public opinion.

Thus, while Turner is right to criticise the equation of audience ratings with the public interest, such an equation merely reiterates a fundamental modernist conceit: that conflicting interests may be resolved by reference to such an absolute standard. Democracy, on the other hand, necessarily depends upon what people define their interests to be. It is therefore contradictory to suggest that democracy must be delimited in order for it to function, since this effectively removes the question of what constitutes democracy from the field of politics. In addition, as Mickler (1997) has pointed out, it is difficult to sustain the view that media texts that strongly claim to represent the vox
**populi** may be summarily dismissed as an entertainment genre. This appeal to clearly defined genre boundaries underscores the critique of Hanson as a product of media manipulation. It suggests that politics and the media may be regarded, at some level, as independent domains.

However, Hanson's very status as a media celebrity illustrates that such distinctions cannot be sustained. While such an acknowledgment makes media critique as crucial as ever, it can no longer appeal to pre-given standards of reportage. Instead, it calls for an approach that refuses to essentialise democracy. Such an approach is enabled by Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) post-structuralist rearticulation of the concept of hegemony. Since this theory regards texts as sites of hegemonic struggle, it avoids the modernist tendency to essentialise particular genres of media text as either progressive or regressive. This tendency is not merely confined to critics who express a nostalgia for clearly defined standards of representation. It also emerges in work which tends to view popular texts (identified by their tendency to attract large audiences) as embodiments of popular subjectivities. As I argue below, neither position can adequately account for the simultaneous celebration and condemnation that have made the media's relation to Pauline Hanson so contradictory.

While Turner's concept of "post-journalism" draws on John Hartley's discussion of "journalism in a post-truth society" (Hartley 1992), the latter offers a rather different interpretation of the concept. What he refers to is a cultural change reflected in textual practices. Thus, while he argues that journalism has always worked to construct reality, the tendency to foreground such processes reflects an increased awareness that media define, as well as report, news. From this standpoint, journalism can no longer appeal to accepted standards of accuracy and truth, since the media are amongst the 'technologies of truth' (Miller 1998) against and through which various positions are negotiated.

Hartley therefore argues that the study of journalism requires an account of the context from which it emerges and within which it operates. It is from this perspective that he presents his thesis that journalism may be regarded as "the textual system of modernity" (Hartley 1996:34).

Through a demonstration of how journalists were instrumental in the dissemination and promotion of the principles which became the rallying cries of the French Revolution, Hartley argues that modernity's subsequent extension of democratic rights to numerous groups has been similarly enabled by forms of "radical journalism". These forms have worked, he suggests, to mediate social relations in "the advancement of the logic of democratic equivalence" (Hartley 1996: 29).
Since the concept of “democratic equivalence” is drawn directly from the work of Laclau and Mouffe, it is important to understand what this term refers to their theory of hegemony. Adopting the central Gramscian metaphor of “war of position”, they assert that a hegemonic politics necessarily involves negotiation and struggles between competing conceptions of society. However, where Gramsci presupposes that the subject positions of participants are ultimately determined by fundamental class identities, Laclau and Mouffe dispute this. They argue that: ....it is evident that this assumption is illegitimate. The existence of two camps may in some cases be an effect of the hegemonic articulation but not its a priori condition - for, if it were, the terrain in which the hegemonic articulation operated would not itself be a product of that articulation (1985:137).

This marks Laclau and Mouffe’s move away from class essentialism towards a thoroughly post-structuralist conception of hegemony. The central premise of this move is that social structure is a product of hegemony, rather than the other way around. In this sense, hegemony is not simply an effect of given power relations; rather, power relations are a product of hegemonic articulations.

To illustrate why Laclau and Mouffe regard hegemonic politics and democratic politics as congruent, we may refer to Calhoun’s (1992) definition of the public sphere, which is to some extent consistent with their model.³ Calhoun suggests that, where the public sphere has been regarded as simply an arena (or a variety of arenas) of dispute and debate, it is more productive to regard it as a field of discursive connections within which various clusters of communicative interaction take place. These, he argues, may be centred upon location or around particular issues, interests or identities:

For any such cluster we must ask not just on what thematic content it focuses but also how it maintains its boundaries and relatively greater internal cohesion in relation to the larger public, and whether its separate existence reflects merely sectional interests, some functional division of labor, or a felt need for bulwarks against the hegemony of a dominant ideology (Calhoun 1992: 38).

Laclau and Mouffe refer to these clusters as “nodal points” within discursive formations. Since these nodal points acquire their meaning from the various discourses within which they are articulated, they may, in certain circumstances, be subject to dispute. For such dispute to occur, it is necessary that the logic of difference, by which a given group defines itself by contrast to others, is counteracted by a “logic of equivalence” which enables mutually opposed discourses to enter into relations of dialogue.
and dispute. Where there is no significant dispute, or where all potential disputes are repressed, it is not appropriate to speak of either democracy or hegemony. It is from this perspective that Laclau and Mouffe characterise democratic advances as the extension of the logic of equivalence, as it is mobilised by various groups in their struggles for equal rights.

Extending this argument, Hartley (1996) emphasises the centrality of journalism to this project, arguing that popular media have enabled, through the formation of ever more diverse publics, the extension of the logic of equivalence to a “postmodern public sphere”. However, while the media are clearly central to contemporary struggles for democratic rights, it is in the return to a conception of an idealised space that the limitations of this position become apparent. For at the moment such a space is posited, the concept of hegemonic struggle is relegated to a secondary position, and ideological critique gives way to a defence of popular texts. This problem is evident in a section of Hartley’s analysis of a Vogue feature devoted to Nelson Mandela’s imminent election as South African President:

There follows a sequence that is not to my taste at all - several features which emphasize tribal and ritual aspects of Xhosa and Zulu life; which show too much of Mandela’s royal and tribal lineage; which show one or two more pictures than curiosity demands of half-clothed Zulu women and full-frontal tribal initiates (male) (Hartley 1996:136).

Hartley is both aware and critical of the colonial ideologies informing such representations, but his deliberate refusal to account for them transforms his misgivings into a matter of individual taste. While this effect is no doubt unintended, the reader is effectively characterized as an autonomous consumer in a free market of ideas. In the process, structural inequalities of power and access to define media representations are completely elided.

What underlies this problem is the persistence of a teleological model within which journalism, as a “textual system”, functions in the manner of an Hegelian dialectic enabling the formation of a utopian, postmodern, democratic state. Indeed, Hartley suggests that postmodernity itself is “a tendency within journalism” (1996:34) that has gradually gathered speed since the logic of equivalence was instated as a first principle of liberal-democratic societies. It is this image of popular journalism playing out the implications of a set of radical principles which leads Hartley to effectively shift the location of a quality media from broadsheet to tabloid, and from the past to the present, inverting the logic of Turner’s “post-journalism” argument.

If we refuse the temptation to define progressive and
regressive forms of journalism, the media as a whole may be considered subject to continual struggles for hegemony. This entails that we must instead pay attention to how specific struggles are mediated in a broad range of texts. Evidently, in the case of news media, any such mediation will be constructed in relation to a range of alternative discourses. Bearing this in mind, I will now consider how *Four Corners* and *Witness* each articulate subject positions for Hanson and the public.

*The New Believers* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 16 June 1997), the first of two *Four Corners* programs addressing the Hanson phenomenon, attempts to provide a sociological perspective on it. The aspiration of the program is to reveal who supports Hanson and the reasons they are attracted to her politics. Describing Hanson’s views as “her politics”, in this case, follows the approach taken by the program, as emphasised in its opening voice-over commentary:

*Tonight, Four Corners tests the mood of discontent so artfully identified and stroked by Pauline Hanson...* Pauline Hanson needed no scriptwriters for her rally in Newcastle two weeks ago. The looming closure of BHP’s steelworks in this battlers backyard made for easy exploitation of rampant fears of unemployment and insecurity. But Pauline Hanson has her own security worries that may last as long as she chooses to stay in politics. It’s a mark of the passion and division she ferments...

Hanson’s personal responsibility is stressed by the implication that it is her political statements which have articulated, in a particularly divisive form, what previously existed only as a mood in certain sections of the Australian public. The metaphor of “fermenting” public opinion is particularly striking, suggesting an evil brew reminiscent of Hanson’s caricature as “the witch of Ipswich”. In this way, Hanson is characterized by her idiosyncratic ability to exploit the insecurities and fears of the socially disadvantaged.

Such ability is in stark contrast to her supporters, who cannot articulate the feelings generated by their hardships, and are therefore ripe for exploitation. The identification of this public as “battlers” draws on historical narratives of Australian identity: as heirs to settlers’ struggles in a hostile climate, the term evokes an heroic national spirit in adversity. As the program focuses on Hanson’s popularity in the Queensland outback, the battling class is again identified by an inability to give voice to its frustrations. A segment highlights the difficulties faced by two pastoralists whose lands are subject to native title claims. One, identified by his refusal to support Hanson, suggests that “she seems to get to
people's emotions and they follow her”, a comment visually illustrated by a herd of cattle. This vision of bestial irrationality is contrasted to a common sense response: “so long as sensible debate and logical decisions are made that's all we require, isn't it?”. 

In this way, while the support Hanson has received might lead us to question the supposed egalitarianism of the Australian national character, it is instead positioned as the product of disease within the body politic. Thus, the narrator argues: “The hostility of the reaction to the Wik decision is a symptom of incessant uncertainty in the bush. Wik has piled uncertainty upon adversity. Infrastructure has shrunk with commodity prices -- and people have retreated.”

At the time this program was broadcast, the idea that the Wik ruling had produced uncertainty was central to calls for extinguishment of native title on pastoral leases, and had also been prominent in government criticisms of the High Court. The term had therefore become highly politicised, and the identifying of “uncertainty” as the cause of Hansonism may have lent such claims a certain legitimacy. On the other hand, it also suggests a failure of political leadership, since sensible, logical debate entails a responsibility for public figures to both articulate and respect its parameters. This point is explicitly made in the program, in a segment in which an Ipswich Anglican minister suggests such a role for the church by “...saying ‘Hey, this stuff’s off-field’, and the people must look very carefully at this candidate and consider other alternatives”.

It is in these terms that John Howard's initial refusal to rebut Hanson's views, as a tacit indication of their legitimacy as opinions, becomes a point of criticism. In a memorable segment, a Queensland speech by Howard is juxtaposed point for point with the letter which led to Hanson's disendorsement as a Liberal party candidate. Both make strikingly similar claims: that Aboriginal welfare provisions are excessive; that Aboriginal people are currently provided an unfair level of social advantage; and that present generations should not bear responsibility for the historical injustices suffered by Australia's indigenous people. In terms of revealing Howard's complicity in the legitimation of Hanson's claims, this is remarkably effective.

What remains absent, however, is any substantial critique of these claims, either within the program's narration or from interviewees. Since the program is presented as a call for an egalitarian politics, this is a glaring omission. But this is not merely an omission, for there is a strong sense in which providing such a critique would contradict the problem this program articulates. To address those politics would, by definition, involve a transgression of the boundaries of the public sphere by positioning
Hanson within it. Instead, therefore, the challenge elaborated is that of establishing a political centre to include those whose sense of exclusion leads them to follow an extremist like Hanson. This is highlighted in the closing statement of the program which asserts that: “The major political parties will ignore at their peril the mood of disaffection which Hanson has revealed”.

The ambiguous nature of this statement reflects a deep contradiction in this program’s attempt to explain the irrational in rational terms, since such irrationality should have no place within the sphere of politics. The program appears to call for a rational politics which placates the feelings of those who sympathise with Hanson’s views on what constitutes racial equality. This points to the major issue of concern in *The New Believers*. In order to maintain an image of Australia as an essentially ordered society, Hanson’s racial politics can only be seen as an aberration. Thus, her popularity is merely seen to signify problems facing white Australians and the dominant political parties. This works to effectively exclude any perspective that might consider the logic of Hanson’s statements. This is despite the evident bearing such representations had for Native Title issues in particular, and race relations in general, at the time the program was aired. In this way, the program reproduces the terms of what Stratton (1998) has described as “official multiculturalism”, based upon the reduction of racial politics to a problem of management for a dominant culture which remains empowered to define the forms that political action might take. This highlights the contradictory nature of the relation between Hanson and the media.

While a prevailing journalistic common sense clearly stands in an antagonistic relation with Hanson’s discourse, it is predominantly her non-conformity that has made her such a newsworthy figure. At the same time, in her challenge to the rationality of an official culture Hanson has gained both notoriety and popular support. Where she has attracted support, Hanson’s non-conformity must be regarded as a key aspect of her appeal (Curthoys and Johnson 1998). This emerges not only in Hanson’s well-publicised rejections of multiculturalism and globalisation, but in her vernacular accent and mode of speech, her status as a working mother, and her evident discomfort faced with certain lines of questioning. At the same time, she appeals to a commonsense knowledge acquired by experience. It is this claim which subsequently enables her to adopt the position of people’s champion, particularly in her opposition to the market determinism of neo-liberal discourses of globalisation (Johnson
Thus Hanson is a paradoxical figure in two senses. First, she attempts to criticise a mainstream politics through an appeal to common sense. Secondly, in doing so, she attracts media attention by adopting a position traditionally associated with the media's own role as the fourth estate of democracy.

This paradox is clearly apparent in *Witness*'s "last will and testament" story. In November 1997, Channel 7 agreed to film a recorded message from Hanson to be shown in the event of her murder, and to screen excerpts of the footage. Since *Witness* was complicit in this entire spectacle, the lines of demarcation between journalism and public relations appear even more blurred than is usually the case. This blurring is also evident in Hanson's attempts, within the segment, to deflect criticism which regarded the video as a publicity stunt. Thus, when interviewed, Hanson claims she doesn't "like to make a big thing of this", while her off-sider, David Oldfield, produces evidence of death threats, and suggests Hanson "is not concerned enough about her safety".

In contrast to these blatant attempts at justification, the position of the program is far more ambivalent. While the issue of whether the video is primarily a publicity stunt is explicitly raised, Oldfield's claims are also lent some credibility, both by a focus on the high level of security which the state has provided Hanson and through images of violent demonstrations outside her rallies. Yet, even here, there is some ambiguity, since these images are also used to signify the emergence of social division and racial violence in a post-Hanson Australia.

As the commentary suggested: "There's no doubt the threats against Pauline Hanson are being taken seriously. But she's not the only one getting death threats. Indeed, the climate of intolerance she's helped to create is getting very nasty." Here, while Hanson is again cited as a creator of racial intolerance, her statements are presented as having contributed to this state of affairs rather than being its sole cause. These comments are followed by an interview with a young Vietnamese-Australian woman who has received violent threats and racial abuse in the mail after nominating herself for the 1998 constitutional convention. Her vulnerability, in contrast to Hanson's security, is stressed as she recounts how the police responded to these threats by simply advising her to take care opening her letters. One of these letters is subsequently presented to Federal Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti, who suggests that an increase in racial intolerance is evidenced by an increased number of complaints to his office.

Here, "racial intolerance" is distinct from "racism" and is signified, in Sidoti's terms, by the experience of abuse and/or
violence on a racial basis. Witness journalist, Neil Mercer, subsequently asks Hanson if she feels any responsibility for this trend:

Hanson: I think there's always been racial intolerance out there but — erm ...
Mercer: Your critics would say that you've stirred that pot very successfully with intemperate language.
Hanson: Well I ask these people then what have I actually said?
Mercer: Remarks like that you don't want to go to Surfer's Paradise because it's full of Asians.
Hanson: Because it's true!

Here, Mercer draws Hanson out to make a statement that can be seen clearly as both ethnocentric and racially intolerant. In claiming that her justification is true, Hanson tacitly admits that her position involves not only a critique of Asian immigration, but a desire for a country in which being Australian and being Asian are not regarded as compatible.

Approaching the problem as one of increased intolerance, Mercer also interviews Aboriginal politician Noel Pearson about his views on the Hanson phenomenon. However, Pearson does not hold Hanson personally responsible for a deterioration of race relations in Australia. Instead, he deflates the Hanson myth by saying: "I mean, my goodness, she is not an evil witch. She is an ordinary Australian with questions. She's found some simplistic answers to those questions."

Positioned as an "ordinary Australian", Hanson's individual importance is greatly reduced. In addition, she is presented as having a right to express her opinions. For Pearson, the onus of responsibility for responding to these questions is shifted to Australian Prime Minister, John Howard. He argues:

When someone asks the question such as do Aboriginal people get an inordinate amount of benefits and so on - Are multinational companies taking over our economy? When ordinary Australians have these questions, it is up to the Prime Minister to provide those answers - to rebut some of the simple solutions that she's putting forward...and there's been an absolute failure of leadership on the part of John Howard.

While Hanson's right to express her views is not challenged, this does not excuse Howard's failure to respond to them. Here, "responsibility" is not equivalent to blame, but involves a positive responsibility to act. It is Howard's failure to fulfill his responsibility, as Prime Minister, to actively defend the rights of Australian people that is criticised.

The relation between Hanson and Howard is picked up again in the voice-over commentary which states: "While Pauline
Hanson seems relaxed and comfortable playing patriot games, it’s the impact of the race card that makes many people nervous”. In its play on Howard’s stated wish for a “relaxed and comfortable” Australia, this remark reiterates Pearson’s criticism of Howard’s refusal to respond to Hanson’s claims. This suggests that Hanson’s position as an extremist, and Howard’s position as a mainstream politician, have become blurred. Thus, it is implied that both have exploited, and continue to exploit, Hanson’s racial politics for their own ends. However, where Pearson assumes a positive conception of responsibility, Mercer’s commentary suggests that by playing the race card Hanson has made an illegitimate move, an act in which Howard is also implicated. As in the previous examples, this negative conception of responsibility is linked to the problematic formulated by the program: that is, the problem of a rising level of intolerance.

Ghassan Hage points out that, historically, an advocacy of tolerance has tended to go hand in glove with instances of intolerance. Hage explains this tendency thus: 

*those interpellated by the discourse of tolerance see in the very address a confirmation of their power to be intolerant. In fact, they would not be interpellated by this discourse if they did not recognise that they are already in a position of power which allows them to be intolerant* (Hage 1998:87).

To the extent that Hanson’s views are regarded as an example of intolerance towards a non-dominant cultural group within Australia (i.e. “Asians”), what Hage describes as an imaginary of white dominance is reproduced. However, the discourse of tolerance is not, in this case, entirely reduced to these terms. For if we recall the context of the story, this issue is paralleled to the threats which One Nation claim as the motivation for the video. If Hanson’s safety is in jeopardy, this may be seen as another example of intolerance, in this case a refusal to respect Hanson’s right to freely express her opinions. In this way, there is a sense in which this assumed meaning of “intolerance” is called into question, in a manner which recalls Laclau’s argument regarding the principle of toleration. He argues: “If what I tolerate is what I morally approve (or, at the very least, that vis-à-vis which I am morally neutral) I am not tolerating anything. At the most, I am redefining the limits of a perfectly intolerant position” (1996: 51).

Thus, Laclau argues that where “tolerance” and “intolerance” are assumed as fixed, the concept of toleration is rendered meaningless, since this excludes any possibility of tolerance. It is this assumption that Hage criticises when he suggests the principle of toleration itself leads to intolerance. But since a principle defined in these terms is entirely self-defeating, what constitutes “tolerance” and “intolerance” can only be defined in relation to particular contexts, and any such definition is
potentially subject to dispute. In this sense, rather than simply providing grounds upon which individuals and groups may justify their own intolerance, a discourse of toleration interpellates subjects empowered to have a stake in struggles to define its meaning. We might question the assumption that it is preferable to live in societies where people are not thus empowered. Moreover, to the extent that this principle implicitly acknowledges the importance of diversity, it supports a conception of equality that cannot be reduced to the terms of a dominant culture.

Conclusion: Redefining Post-Journalism

By calling the terms of its own critique into question, Witness proved able to approach the Hanson issue with a certain dexterity absent from the discourse of Four Corners. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that the stance the program adopts is entirely unproblematic. There is clearly some duplicity in the manner Witness calls into question the responsibility of actions in which Channel 7 are heavily implicated. In addition, the extent to which the questions raised by Hanson are addressed in any detail is minimal, despite the fact that it is Hanson’s political deviance that made her stunt newsworthy. Nonetheless, the program does manage to highlight both the inconsistency in Hanson’s calls for an equality based upon an ethnocentric definition of Australian culture, and its troubling implications. In this sense, it provides a more complex and differential approach to political issues, which notably opens a discursive space for a greater diversity of groups.

Four Corners, by contrast, in its refusal to engage with Hanson’s position, does not take her claim to be the voice of ordinary Australians seriously, but instead suggests that her popularity represents the threat of irresponsible extremism. In effect, this displaces attention from Hanson’s discourse to its speaker, who has abused her right to speak. The failure to engage with the complex and contradictory appeal of Hanson’s discourse works both to uphold an existing order and to provide legitimacy to her claims that social elites ignore the concerns of ordinary Australians. While One Nation has articulated this process as a conspiracy, it is notable that it is one which the media has been considered a party to.

While such claims are evidently implausible, it seems probable that a continued tendency to discuss journalistic representation in realist terms has contributed to Hanson’s success. Journalism, like Marxism, assumes the existence of a foundation on which a knowledge of reality and a representational order may be based. This tends to constrain discussions of media performance within a modernist framework which disputes whether current media forms may be defined as progressive or regressive. It seems
to me that there may be good reason to question this approach, since it involves the delimitation of a preferred model.

An alternative approach, which remains consistent with a radical democratic politics, may lie in a rearticulation of the concept of ‘post-journalism’. This would not entail a particular form, but might act as a principle which recognises the polysemy of social relations. Defining post-journalism in these terms may provide a horizon against which our current media culture could be considered. Calling the possibility of a realistic journalism into question in this way does not provide a license to fabricate, nor need it lead to abandoning a concern for media ethics.

On the contrary, it provides an ethical principle by which media workers might remain mindful that they can only claim to be representative in a limited sense. Such an ethics bears some similarity to Derrida’s position regarding the possibility of a deconstructive approach to justice. He argues that a form of ethics that would “maintain an interrogation of the origin, grounds and limits of our conceptual, theoretical and normative apparatus surrounding justice is ... anything but a neutralization of interest in justice, an insensitivity toward injustice” (Derrida 1992: 20). In a similar way, an interrogation of the basis of the media’s own critical stance hardly nullifies its democratic potential, but actually expands it.

I accept that it is possible, given the range of interpretations to which the notion of “post-journalism” is subject, that this term may prove as much a hindrance as a help in enabling media reform. Nevertheless, it seems to me that a further elaboration of the kind of post-journalistic ethics I have outlined might prove useful to media research, media workers, and democratic struggles for media representation.

NOTES
1. This image of Hanson was recently epitomised in The Australian’s Media section (8 April 1999), in a segment titled “rethink”. Alongside Hanson’s image, a caption read “Whether or not you agree with her policies, Pauline Hanson was one of the most successful brand launches ever. Who says you can’t build brands in newspapers?” This “rethink” actually repackages a very old view of journalism: For while it appears Hanson has successfully wagged the dog, this is merely a contemporary product in a free market of ideas.
2. A good example of such strategic media criticism came from Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett, following One Nation’s major gains at the Queensland state elections in June 1998. In response to a question about the irresponsibility of the Liberal party’s refusal to direct voting preferences away from One Nation, Kennett replied: “If you’re looking strategically, then I think you should also look at the role of the media. You guys have got yourselves all whipped up over the...
last few months; you have given to one political individual coverage, unfettered opportunities that you have given no other politician...you have given Miss Hanson an unbelievable run” (Radio National’s Media Report (18 June 1998), transcribed online at www.abc.net.au/rn).

3. While he provides a useful model, I do not want to follow Calhoun in using this term, since (as has been widely pointed out) it presupposes that clear boundaries exist between public and private life, as well as state and society. Such an assumption seems incongruent with Calhoun’s understanding of discursive identity formation and, as I discuss below, cannot be reconciled with a conception of hegemonic politics.

4. This shift may be seen in Hartleys’s valorization of post-modern journalism, which he describes as “the outer extremes of popular journalism (trash or tabloid) and academic journalism (avant-garde or hyperliterate) respectively” (Hartley 1996: 34).

5. This discomfort is evident in an earlier Witness segment in which Hanson was asked patronisingly if she felt out of her depth in politics. She responded “I’ve never claimed that I’d know everything to do with this job, and I’d challenge anyone who comes into this position - to know - to know it fully” (Witness, 18 June 1996).

6. This appeal was most famously articulated in Hanson’s parliamentary maiden speech, in which she said said ‘My view on issues is based on commonsense, and my experience as a mother of four children, and as a businesswoman running a fish and chip shop’. See Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 10 December 1996.

7. The irony of this practice, of course, is that these demonstrations were predominantly anti-racist.

8. The contradictory nature of Hanson’s appeal is explored in relation to a variety of issues in Curthoys and Johnson (1998).

9. While Hanson and One Nation have consistently criticised the media, this antagonistic relationship became most prominent when One Nation placed a ban on media coverage of their campaign five days before the 1998 federal election (The Age, 30 September 1998).

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