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Guest Editors' Introduction

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Editors’ Introduction

If one of the roles of the news media is to reflect society to itself, what do we see in the mass media mirror? Many of us see something that looks at least a little like the world we live in – a world in which our activities, our needs and wants, perhaps even our thoughts, are represented in the news media. Others, however, see a world that’s alien and unrepresentative of them. When they are represented in the news media, they are depicted as the “other” – as different from “mainstream” society. It is not difficult to be depicted as “different” and hence deserving of different news treatment – membership of any minority grouping will confer that status. In Australia, that could mean belonging to an ethnic minority, perhaps a religion, being a person with a physical or mental disability, being old, or poor, or even a victim of crime.

The news media are governed by constraints of space and time (and the need to make a profit), so reporting practices that recognise those constraints make sense in the newsrooms of the nation. It is quicker and easier to get quotes from a police spokesperson than from a victim of crime, for example; and government spokespeople provide figures (and quotes) that are beyond the resources of special interest groups. The resulting hegemonic media influences work to deny minority groups adequate voices in the news media; they struggle to be heard, to tell the world they experience it differently, and to advocate for their own causes, needs and wants.

Worse, many groups are simply invisible – they do not appear in the mainstream news media’s reflection of the world. And even when they do, they are often not represented as they would want to be. Stereotypes of minority groups can be perpetuated by the news media, and many groups struggle against this. Kabir (2006), for example, says:

Many of Australia’s 281,578 Muslims … believe that as a result of media bias, they are vilified in society as “terrorists” and discriminated against in the workplace.

And Seneviratne (2002) says:

In Australia, the majority Anglo-Saxon community maintains their cultural hegemony through the mainstream media with a peculiar form of professional standards known as “our style and standard” which effectively keeps out well qualified first generation ethnic migrant journalists and broadcasters from the mainstream media.

But it is not just ethnic minorities who face hegemonic influences – all minorities struggle to make their voices heard.

This issue of the Asia Pacific Media Educator looks at research into various aspects of those struggles.

In part it flows from the success of the editors and a group of other senior Australian Journalism academics last year in applying for and winning an Australian Linkage Grant to investigate media coverage of vulnerable groups in society. While the papers do not flow directly from that research project, the special edition of APME did grow
from our desire to find out how broadly encompassing the term ‘vulnerable groups’ is when applied to media coverage. From a call for papers grew the realisation that there were many researchers working in this field and that they were doing some interesting work that impacts on a broad cross section of society. In short, we found that the ‘vulnerable’ are not a small minority of people within society, but a broad cross-section that covers both the mainstream and the less visible.

While the essence of this project is research, as Journalism educators we were keen to ensure that the importance of training is not overlooked. This is reflected in the findings of a number of papers that appear in this volume. They explore the teaching-research nexus and either highlight the improvements that have taken place in terms of journalistic understanding of, and empathy for, vulnerable groups within society, or recognise that progress has been slow and that further work needs to be done to open the eyes of journalists and instil in them a greater understanding of how society works and the contributions that vulnerable groups and individuals may make. Linked to this is a greater understanding of their role as journalists and the obligations they bear to tell society about itself, while putting aside their own prejudices. For example, the article by Vicki Lee Thomas and Rosemary Green concludes with recommendations on media reporting of family violence. Likewise, the report on the Bar None project, by Nick Richardson, provides both an academic and practitioner’s insight into this issue.

This edition begins with two thought-provoking pieces. The first, by Gerard Goggin, asks some challenging questions. While Goggin’s background is disability research, the questions he raises apply broadly across the field of vulnerability research, particularly when discussing how the ‘relationship between vulnerability has taken a heightened role in shaping the quality of relationships between media and its workers (especially journalists), and their sources and audiences’. This theme is picked up by a number of other papers. The second paper, by Ian Richards, discusses the ethics of media reporting on vulnerability. His message is a poignant one, recognising that people situated ‘at society’s margins’ are ‘especially vulnerable to journalistic exploitation or misrepresentation, with the attendant risks of public embarrassment, humiliation or psychological trauma’. Richards writes about the ‘tightrope’ journalists have to walk in writing about vulnerability ‘between reporting as comprehensively and accurately as possible and treating their news subjects with respect and dignity’ and questions whether the existing codes of conduct apply the appropriate level of guidance required by journalists when covering such complex stories.

The remaining articles highlight the broad base of vulnerability studies. The papers are presented in two groups: the first involving Australian Studies, while the second focuses on the international scene. Three of the papers – by Richardson, Ellis and Green and Tanner – provide a spotlight on media and disability. The Ellis paper uses media coverage of the 2008 Paralympics in two television programs – 60 Minutes and Australian Story – to discuss the role of the media ‘in reflecting and reinforcing social disablement’. Ellis’s paper is important in that it highlights the extent to which journalists struggle with the language of disability. This paper highlights the ‘innocence or ignorance dilemma’ which underpins much media reporting of disability (and for that matter, the broader issue of vulnerability). This dilemma is also reflected in the papers by Green and Tanner (a pilot study on media coverage of disability in South Australian newspapers) and Richardson’s report on the Bar None campaign which
was run in Victoria in 2007. Both studies reinforce the findings of the Ellis paper and highlight the difficulty disability campaigners have in changing the attitudes of journalists to disability reporting. However, as the Richardson paper reveals, there is plenty of room for hope.

This theme is also evident in the paper by Thomas and Green on the reporting of family violence. This is a major societal issue — and another of those topics that the media struggle to cover, despite the guidance offered by the various codes of conduct. Perhaps highlighting the journalistic conundrum that vulnerability seems to inspire, Thomas and Green point to the fact that reporting ‘varied significantly depending on the ethnicity, gender, age, status and/or religious affiliation of those involved’.

Still dealing with the issue of domestic violence, Waller and Oakham introduce an additional ingredient: the cult of celebrity. In their paper, the authors explore media coverage of retired high profile AFL footballer Wayne Carey. In doing so, they extend the concept of vulnerability to the journalists themselves, arguing that they often look for excuses to explain the behaviour of high profile individuals such as Carey.

The paper by Holland, et al offers a sense of hope. Mental illness is broadly covered by the media, but not from the perspective of postpsychiatry, the approach adopted in this paper. Holland et al call for a move ‘away from the assumption that people diagnosed with a mental illness are the passive and vulnerable recipients of ‘negative’ media coverage and, instead, recognising them as active audience members, media participants and critics.’

While this may involve ‘talking against the grain’, the authors discuss the need for lay voices to be heard, rather than the traditional expert voices preferred by the media.

Ethnicity was the focus of the paper by Grant Hannis on the reporting of the Chinese by a New Zealand newspaper 100 years apart. Perhaps not surprisingly, the paper shows that ‘the newspaper portrayed Chinese largely through the eyes of white New Zealand, the country’s dominant cultural voice’. Hannis found that while the reporting of the Chinese at the start of the 21st century was more tolerant than during the start of the 20th century when a yellow-peril stereotype was adopted, coverage in the latter period was still negative, with a focus on crime.

The question of stereotyping emerges in the next three articles: Cullen’s assessment of media reporting on HIV-AIDS in Asia and the Pacific; the study of an alleged gay-hate murder in the US, by O’Donnell, and the investigation into media coverage of the children of illegal immigrants who enter the US, by Chen Berggreen, Crapanzano and Skogberg Eastman, and the analysis of mental illness, by Holland, Blood, Pirkis and Dare.

Cullen’s paper provides a detailed analysis of HIV-AIDS reporting. He concludes that Social Change Communication (SCC) theory ‘challenges the media to extend the framing of HIV from primarily a health story to one that is linked to more macro socio-economic, cultural and political factors.

O’Donnell’s paper looks at two media reports into the 1998 murder of 21-year old gay US university student Matthew Shepard. The two articles (one in *Harpers* by JoAnn Wypijewski, the other a piece on ABC TV’s 20/20 program by Elizabeth Vargas) highlight the contrasting approaches that journalist can adopt in covering emotionally charged stories. According to O’Donnell, the first is compassionate and
non-judgmental; the latter is hard-hitting and judgmental. Both provide an important insight into the ethics of media reporting of vulnerability.

Still in the US, Berggreen et al consider media reporting of an often ignored, but nonetheless vulnerable group: the children of illegal aliens who have found their way into the US, predominantly from Mexico. The authors argue that these children have historically been voiceless and that they deserve to be heard.

The final paper, by Finney on embedded journalism, also looks at vulnerability from the perspective of the reporter. In this analysis – of the 2003 invasion of Iraq by US troops – Finney explores the extent to which embedded troops were manipulated by spokespeople from the White House and Pentagon: their goal to ensure favourable coverage of the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.

We hope this issue contributes to the debate and research activity surrounding news media reporting on groups with limited power to affect they way they are depicted in the news media, and that it encourages a redoubling of research effort into an important aspect of mass media activity.

Stephen Tanner and Kerry Green, editors

References


Contents

Research Articles

- **Gerard Goggin**
  Disability, media and the politics of vulnerability ........................................... 1

- **Ian Richards**
  Managing the margins: how journalism reports the vulnerable........................ 14

- **Katie Ellis**
  Beyond the Aww Factor: Human interest profiles of Paralympians and the media navigation of physical difference and social stigma............... 23

- **Nick Richardson**
  Writing about disability: Victoria’s Bar None campaign................................. 36

- **Kerry Green and Stephen Tanner**
  Reporting disability: South Australian newspapers analysed............................. 43

- **Vicki Lee Thomas and Rosemary Green**
  Family violence reporting: supporting the vulnerable or re-enforcing their vulnerability ............................................................................ 55

- **Lisa Waller and Katrina Mandy Oakham**
  The Carey “king hit”: journalists and the coverage of domestic violence ............ 71

- **Kate Holland, R. Warwick Blood, Jane Pirkis and Andrew Dare**
  Postpsychiatry in the Australian media: The ‘vulnerable’ talk back............... 85

- **Grant Hannis**
  From yellow peril to model minority?
  A comparative analysis of a newspapers’s depiction of the Chinese in New Zealand at the start of the 20th and 21st centuries ............................... 99

- **Trevor Cullen**
  Health Communication Theories:
  Implications for HIV Reporting in Asia and the Pacific................................. 112

- **Marcus O’Donnell**
  Gay-hate, journalism and compassionate questioning:
  journalism’s response to the Matthew Shepard case........................................ 126

- **Shu-Ling Chen Berggreen, Theresa Rose Crapanzano and Cari Lee Skogberg Eastman**
  Framing the Voiceless:
  News Conventions and the undocumented children in the United States...... 142

- **Mark Finney**
  Good embed: How the White House and the Pentagon improved favourability of coverage through embedding journalists................. 158