

# Ethnic conflict and the Australian media

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“Ethnic Conflict and the Australian Media”,  
1996.

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## Excerpts

### ***The Media and the State in a Poly-ethnic Context***

#### Social Institutions

The Australian media and their relationship to governments are complicated by the existence of states and territories, as well as a central Commonwealth national government. Thus some legal responsibilities rest at the national level (posts and telecommunications, television and radio regulation and licensing, “Australian content”, film censorship of imported material, multicultural affairs, immigration, foreign relations, overseas investment, funding for the arts, national security, intellectual property, company law) while some rest with the states (defamation, censorship, arts funding, ethnic affairs). In some cases, it is apparent that responsibility overlaps.

The electronic media are far more closely supervised by government than is the press, but the emphasis on deregulation and industry self-regulation, reflecting moves in the USA, the UK and New Zealand, has intruded heavily into television and radio. In addition, the development of new narrowcasting and pay and satellite television delivery systems has raised issues of control which have yet to be resolved.

In this context the national government has focussed on the development of its own Special

Broadcasting Service (see Jakubowicz and Newell, 1995), through an arms-length Board (which at times has been in major conflict with the government over the future of the service). The other national broadcaster (ABC) has been reluctant to “go multicultural”, though it has moved strongly in areas associated with Aboriginality, including a drama series in which the male Aboriginal star is allowed to have a continuing love affair with a white actress - a rare event in Australia’s monochrome media.

A number of government inquiries into racism and race relations have focussed on the media as a key point of concern. Thus the Inquiry into Black Deaths in Custody, a four year project which examined over one hundred cases of Aborigines who had died while in police detention or in prison, recommended immediate action to improve media reporting of Aboriginal/white relations. Proposals included a major development of curriculum concerning race, in the education of journalists.

The National Inquiry into Racist Violence also found that the media played a crucial role in limiting communication between ethnic and racial groups, to the point where the population was seriously under-informed about diverse experience. While it pointed to particular newspapers in some rural areas as key contributors to increased local interracial tension, its more general point was that the media failed to reflect diversity, and only reported minorities when they emerged as a threat to the dominant value system or social order. It also recommended action to improve education and training of journalists, and supported affirmative action strategies to recruit minority community people into mainstream media positions.

Given the formal government commitment to multiculturalism in relation to cultural diversity,

and reconciliation in relation to settler/Indigenous people relationships, it is not surprising to find these same principles espoused throughout the bureaucracy. In relation to its own media the national government requires that they follow principles of Affirmative Action in relation to the employment of women, Equal Employment Opportunity and a principle of appointment and promotion on merit throughout the public sector, with principles of Access and Equity being applied to the delivery of services and the meeting of client and consumer needs. Needless to say, these principles can face difficulties in their implementation, with sustained criticism that the underlying values embedded in the services and the expectations of appropriate performance embody assumptions which discriminate against people from minority cultural groups. The more distinctively different from the mainstream norms those people are, in terms of colour, belief systems, cultural practices, language, accent etc., the more difficulty they will have in meeting the unspoken rules that guide decision makers.

In order to handle these sorts of problems, Australian governments at various levels have established human rights institutions to monitor and defend the interests of minorities. At the national level, these institutions include the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, with Commissioners covering Affirmative Action (women only), Race, Aboriginal Social Justice, general Human Rights (with recent reports on homeless youth and mental illness), Disability, and Privacy. There are also government direct policy and service agencies such as the Office of Multicultural Affairs (in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet), and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, with its board elected by Indigenous people from around the country.

State bodies include Anti-Discrimination Boards and Equal Opportunity tribunals, as well as departments of Aboriginal Affairs, Ethnic Affairs Commissions or departments. In some circumstances state bodies act as agents for

national bodies.

This confusing overlay of jurisdictions and agencies can create difficulties in taking action on race related issues. Thus in New South Wales there is racial **vilification** legislation, though there is no national legislation in this area (despite years of promised action). The distinction between discrimination and vilification is important, as it affects the sort of legal recourse groups and individuals have when they experience discrimination. Self-regulation in the media has proved unsatisfactory; action under the NSW law against media organisations has provided a way forward - however all such action is confidential, so that while individuals may gain redress, the wider society never usually hears that a case has even occurred.

### **Australian Broadcasting Law and Regulatory Bodies**

The confusion in regulation has been further exacerbated by the process of deregulation to which we have referred. In 1992 the Commonwealth revised the legislative base of the electronic media, through the Broadcasting Services Act. One effect of this Act was to replace the former Australian Broadcasting Tribunal with its powers to set standards and hold inquiries, with an Authority which was to oversee the process of industry self-regulation.

By November 1993 there were at least eight different places in which standards, guidelines and codes of practice could be found which were concerned with issues of ethnic and race relations. Both of the electronic industry bodies (Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations - FACTS, Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters - FARB) had developed and circulated draft codes, which had been finally published in August 1993.

The Australian Press Council principles had been in the public domain for a number of years as the basis for community complaints. Both the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Special Broadcasting Service had Codes of Practice which allow for community

consultation and complaints. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission administers Commonwealth law on racial discrimination in the provision of goods and services, while a number of states have racial vilification legislation either in place or under preparation. The Screen Producers' Association adopted a policy on cultural pluralism and non-traditional casting in 1992. The Advertising Standards Council monitors advertisements, and participates in the Media Council of Australia. Finally the Media Alliance (the union covering journalists) has an ethics statement which seeks to constrain journalists from using race or ethnicity in inappropriate ways.

### Guidelines and Practices

When the Broadcasting Services Act was about to come into effect (October 1 1992) the commercial television industry produced a series of Draft Codes for public discussion. These were the positions preferred by the industry, though they realised that there might have to be some movement if public reaction was hostile. It was good that the realisation was there, as ethnic organisations such as the Queensland Ethnic Affairs Bureau and the various ethnic communities' councils were decidedly unimpressed by the first offerings from the channels. It is important to recognise that the Codes arose in an attempt by government to give the industry what it had desired for many years - a chance to run its own affairs. In return the government asked that the industry undertake consultation and have a procedure in place for managing complaints.

The most surprising element of the draft new codes was the total silence on any issue that vaguely resembled the Racial Vilification clauses of the old standards. In the crucial area of "proscribed material" where one might have expected some reference to these issues, there were four items - no simulation of news so as to alarm viewers, and three clauses banning hypnosis and subliminal techniques. It was as though the industry response to the debates over multiculturalism, over racism and over the processes through which discrimination and

marginalisation were reproduced, was to demonstrate a total ignorance. These concerns had apparently made no impact at all on the industry managers, leaving them as monocultural in their perspectives as their predecessors who had established television in 1956.

The organised political reaction from the ethnic communities made dramatic inroads into this structure of denial. One senior state ethnic agency bureaucrat observed that a sustained campaign had been run, with FACTS boss Tony Branigan being particularly targeted. By May 1993, when the Office of Multicultural Affairs organised a round table conference in Sydney on media self-regulation, FACTS had moved its position significantly. FACTS Chairman Bob Campbell, could write then that "the Code sets out requirements which the industry has willingly (sic) embraced as part of its service to viewers". These now included two additional prohibitions.

A program may not now be broadcast which:

- 1.6.5 seriously offend the cultural sensitivities of Aborigines or of ethnic groups or racial groups in the Australian community
- 1.6.6 stir up hatred, serious contempt or severe ridicule against a person or group of persons on the grounds of race, colour, national or ethnic origin, gender, sexual preference, religion or physical or mental disability.

These proscriptions do not apply where it is done reasonably and in good faith, in any artistic work including comedy and satire, in the course of a broadcast in relation to an academic, artistic, scientific or any other identifiable public interest purpose, or as a fair report of or comment on a matter of identifiable public interest.

In addition, news and current affairs have to take account of cultural differences in the community, so that they:

- 4.3.7 must not portray any individual or group in a negative light by placing gratuitous emphasis on

race, nationality, religion, colour, country of origin, gender, sexual preference, marital status or intellectual or physical disability. Nevertheless, where it is in the public interest, licensees may report events and broadcast comments in which such matters are raised.

So how does this procedure work for the affronted viewer - who has to be an individual, rather than a group representing a class of people ?

Our viewer is affronted. She phones the station. Her message is taken and if she leaves her name and number, a staff member has to phone her back. If the matter cannot be resolved she can complain that the material breached the Code (if she knows about the Code... however the implication is that the staffer will tell her of this provision). She then has thirty days from the broadcast to complain in writing. The licensee has to reply in writing, within ten days if possible but within thirty days all up (unless the material was on relay from another licensee and then the complaint is passed on and another thirty days is available before a reply). If the concern is about an advertisement, then the complaint has to go to the Advertising Standards Authority or to the ABA if it is advertising directed at children.

If the complainant is not satisfied after all this, she can write again... the licensee has three choices: reply again, advise she complain to the ABA, or refer it on to the chair of FACTS.

If it goes to the FACTS chair, the complaint is referred back to the licensee for comment! Then after a response, the FACTS chair decides on any further action, and lists the complaint and outcome in the Annual Code Administration Report.

In addition every licensee has to report every quarter on complaints received and dates of response. FACTS then reports these quarterly to the ABA.

By the time this process is completed the complainant may well have exhausted herself.

The radio broadcasters stayed closer to the former ABT standards, preferring not to venture into the uncharted territory of new semiotic voyages. For FARB the arrangements are that no commercial broadcaster shall broadcast a program which:

- (a) is likely to incite or perpetuate hatred against; or
- (b) gratuitously vilifies

any person or group on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, sexual preference, religion or physical or mental disability.

Presumably the radio codes miss out television's "colour" because the listener cannot see radio... The complaints system also misses out both the specificity and the feedback loops of television. Complaints can be made orally or in writing, in normal office hours, and must be "conscientiously considered, investigated if necessary and responded to as soon as practicable" (5.2(b)). If the licensee thinks the complainant is not satisfied with the response, the licensee shall advise the complainant of her right to complain to the ABA. Records need to be kept, and on request from FARB, sent to FARB for FARB to report to the ABA. No indication is made as to how often this takes place.

These arrangements in the electronic media reflect the "stick" rather than the "carrot" approach to the whole issue. While FACTS head Campbell affirms the record of the television industry as an EEO employer and its commitment to reflecting "our complex multicultural society" (a position that most independent research in the field suggests is not reflected in on-air practices of the channels), there are no broadcaster guidelines for improving practice. This issue is left to producers who choose to follow the SPAA commitment on non-traditional casting in relation to drama etc., and to the advertisers in their relationships with their advertising agencies.

The Advertising Ethics Code of the Media

Council indicates similar sorts of problems. The concern is for the impact of ads on reasonable people in the class to which the ad is directed, and to others who may have the ad communicated to them. The only prohibition in this regard is on unlawful discrimination, while “general prevailing community standards” are used as the basis of assessing “serious offence to the community or a significant section”. The concept of significant is extremely important here, as the women’s movement has found in its forays against sexist advertising. Feminist values have been found for the most part not to be “significant”, and indeed the code leaves itself open to being used to justify racist advertising if racist values extend significantly through the community and anti-racism is not voiced widely.

The commercial press have long had a fairly protected run under the benign gaze of the Press Council. While the Council affirms the public interest as the first and dominant consideration in its principles, and is committed to news and comment as honest and fair, it does not address issues of structural discrimination in the media. Thus the prohibitions are made against gratuitous emphasis on race, nationality, religion, colour, country of origin etc., and irrelevant references to race, nationality, religious or political views of people charged or convicted of crimes. Where material damaging to the reputation or interests of a group is published, the press are required to provide an “opportunity for prompt and appropriately prominent reply at reasonable length”, where fairness so requires.

Two adjudications in 1993 provide evidence on how the Council deals with the rare examples of complaints over racism. (The Council will not deal with any matter which is before any legal body for determination). Both related to concerns from members of the European/Jewish communities over the use of what they saw as racist slurs. In one a Sydney columnist was criticised for comments which were made against Hungarians - in the context of foreign takeovers. The Council ruled that the comment was “clearly intended as a joke.(It was not) a

deliberate attempt to incite racial and ethnic disharmony”. The decision in this case was that the right to “joke” was more important than the offence taken by a Hungarian Australian at the joke.

In general the Press Council affirms the right for outrageous statements in relationship to race and ethnicity to be made, as long as they are not gratuitous and do not **intend** to cause offence (Adjudication 639, Press Council News, May 1993), are the views of a columnist and not news or editorial content, and a full right of reply is given to persons who feel offended. However the Chair of the Press Council has vigorously defended its record in relation to multiculturalism, arguing that “the Australian Press Council has provided a significant forum where the balance between free speech and ensuring that gratuitous reference to race is avoided can be tested” (Flint 1994:8). In reference to the standards for the portrayal of cultural diversity sought by public interest groups against the electronic media, Flint went on to argue that “while such an approach would not be acceptable to the press if imposed from without, there remains scope for the encouragement of positive portrayals of multiculturalism in the press” (Flint 1994:8). As we report below, an analysis of the current press scene suggests the need is rather more urgent than the Press Council’s protestations might indicate.

In summary, the regulatory environment gives some limited protection to individuals to seek redress once the damage has been done. However the most valuable avenue remains action against racial vilification under state laws where these exist. Arab Australians have used complaints under this legislation to force negotiated changes with conservative newspapers such as Sydney’s Telegraph Mirror, a News Ltd tabloid that had run a series of denigratory editorials and cartoons during the Gulf War. The details of these negotiations are not in the public domain, as they were conciliated through the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, which does not reveal the outcome of satisfactorily conciliated complaints.

## **The Media System**

### **Media Structure and Ownership in Australia**

It is not an exaggeration to say that Australia has one of the most concentrated media ownership structures in the world. It is most acute in the newspaper industry where just two organisations control almost all the metropolitan dailies and suburban newspapers. Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd owns about 70 percent of these and the Fairfax group (taken over by the Canadian Conrad Black with support from Australian television and magazine magnate Kerry Packer in 1992) most of the rest.

In 1923 Australia had 26 metropolitan dailies owned by 21 companies. By 1950, this had dropped to 15 newspapers and 10 owners. Today there are only 8 metropolitan dailies and 5 of these are owned by Rupert Murdoch, two by Conrad Black. Among the 38 regional dailies, Murdoch controls 5 with the Fairfax group 3 and 13 by Irishman Tony O'Reilly who bought them from Murdoch after Trade Practices Commission pressure.

In television just three companies among them control almost the entire metropolitan commercial market with the government-funded ABC and SBS providing two other national channels. The smaller regional commercial TV stations are either owned by subsidiaries of the large metropolitan companies or are dependent on them for the supply of programs. In 1993, the government issued a number of community television licences around the country but most community groups have found that without any substantial government financial support it is almost impossible to set up a community television station. Subscription television (PAY-TV) is expected to be introduced to Australia in 1994 or 1995, but again it's the big boys who are expected to dominate the sector ultimately.

In radio, four companies control a large chunk of the commercial radio market especially the highest rating metropolitan stations. The

commercial radio industry has been in a state of flux in the last few years and many major radio stations have changed hands recently.

In the magazine publishing business the concentration of ownership among the top circulation magazines is not any different to the newspapers. Kerry Packer's Australian Consolidated Press controls 47 percent of the market while News Ltd has 26 percent of the market.

Packer owns Australia's biggest commercial TV network, Channel Nine, which has an audience reach of over half the market. He also owns a string of radio stations. His initial attempt to buy into the Fairfax group in 1991 was thwarted by complications in the cross-media ownership laws, but he was able to ensure changes in the law occurred which allowed him to continue with his plans, albeit as a minor player in the short term. His strategy is to argue for changes in the law which will enlarge his opportunity to extend his role in newspapers.

The domination by Packer and Murdoch of the Australian media and the way they were able to extract concessions from the Bob Hawke Labor government in the 1980s prompted media analysts to dub the Minister for Communications as the "Minister for the Mates".

Referring to how the Labor government had bent rules to accommodate these two men, leading economics writer Max Walsh wrote in the Fairfax press in June 1991: "A national media dominated by two men would be the antithesis of what any fully-functioning democracy should accept. It is no exaggeration to say a media duopoly would simply be a temptation to institutionalised corruption and the undermining of our political system".

Referring to News Ltd's domination of the Australian newspaper industry, leading media analyst Paul Chadwick (1989) says: "It has gone from being one of three roughly equal competitors in the Australian press to being the dominant player, with only an enfeebled Fairfax

for competition. As a result, News may become more arrogant, more overbearing in the exercise of its political influence”.

### Alternative Media

Community Radio was introduced to Australia in 1974 after the election of the Gough Whitlam Labor government. The number of community radio stations has gradually increased since then and currently there are over 120 licensed community radio stations broadcasting around the country.

Australia can rightly claim to be a world leader in the field of community radio. Perhaps there's no other country in the world where a strong independent sector has arisen where established state and commercially operated systems were already in existence.

The community radio stations are spread through all states and territories of Australia - in capital cities, country towns, big city suburbs, and remote Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, agricultural and mining communities.

The stations vary from large university or community owned operations serving one to three million population, with paid staff approaching 20, to little stations with 10 watt transmitters, entirely volunteer operated and serving as few as 2000 people.

Some stations have a charter to provide specific kinds of programs like specialised music, multilingual programs, Aboriginal programs, Christian programs, educational services or even radio for the print handicapped. Others are to respond to any need in their communities which the established services are not meeting adequately. Community radio is essentially a service for the community by the community, whatever the mix of programs it offers.

Because Australia has a fully funded national broadcasting service (ABC and SBS), the community broadcasting sector does not receive massive government funding, although it continues to lobby hard for more government

assistance, particularly to help community broadcasters to equip themselves better. In 1991-92, the community radio sector received a mere A\$2.9 million from the Government.

Community radio is non-profit and non-commercial, thus it cannot broadcast conventional advertising. Most stations are funded by listener subscriptions, regulated sponsorship announcements, selling of air time to community groups, community fundraising ventures, donations, limited government subsidies and the efforts of volunteers.

The community radio sector employs around 300 people and is supported by over 30,000 volunteers. It has over the years become the current and future breeding ground for many radio presenters, editors, technicians and so on.

A survey conducted for the Federal Government in 1992 by a leading audience research body estimated that around 2.5 million people over the age of 14 years listen to community radio during any given week.

Community Television is a second and more recent area for alternative media. In early 1993, the Federal government issued four community television licenses in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Lismore - a small country town in northern New South Wales. There are at least another 15 groups in capital cities and rural Australia awaiting a decision from the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA). These licences are valid for an initial period of three years only.

Lismore and Adelaide went to air in late 1993, but within months both stations were in financial strife. Almost a year since being granted a licence both Melbourne and Sydney are yet to go to air.

### Ethnic Press

Ethnic newspapers are those which are published in languages other than English or that are published in English by ethnic community based groups targeted at a particular ethnic community. These are basically

community publications directed at those who have migrated to Australia as adults or late adolescents.

Ethnic press varies widely with both format and contents. For many, it's the link with their place of origin keeping them up to date with news about their old country. Given the Anglo-centric bias of Australian mainstream press and sometimes the language barriers, the ethnic newspaper fills this gap. Also for older migrants, keeping track of significant cultural and social changes in the old country helps them to understand younger, newer migrants from the same country and accept them readily.

There are over 100 ethnic newspapers published in Australia, with over half of these published from Sydney and another one-third from Melbourne. Twenty one of these newspapers are more than 30 years old (Bell et al. 1992). However, many of the ethnic publications are published infrequently and many struggle to survive financially, but it could also be said that there is a thriving ethnic language press in Australia.

While the concentration of ownership and financial constraints of the mainstream English press in Australia have been on the public agenda for many years, the ethnic press is seldom seen as publicly significant. The lack of data and information on the ethnic press has also got to do with the fact that mainstream newspapers are in the limelight on business monopoly issues, while radio and television services come under government controlled spectrum space licensing. No such government controlled licensing regime applies to the ethnic press which in turn results in a lack of economic data on the industry.

However the government is discreetly curious about the ethnic press and the Department of Immigration and the Office of Multicultural Affairs have recently commissioned studies on the ethnic press. The Departments of Immigration and Social Security are also known to employ "stringers" to monitor some of the more widely read ethnic newspapers,

particularly their editorial comments on issues like immigration, multiculturalism, foreign policy and ethnic affairs.

In Australia, historically there has been xenophobia towards the ethnic press. As recently as 1934, a regulation was passed specifying "the consent of the Prime Minister to the publication of a newspaper or periodical in a foreign language". This was of course difficult to enforce and the government relinquished its control in 1956. Nowadays, governments are more tolerant of such publications and in fact, have even given seed money to help establish such ventures, especially for small newly arrived migrant groups. Recently, government departments have also started targeting some of the important ethnic publications to place their community information bulletins and advertisements.

In its discussion paper, "Towards a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia", the government's Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs said: "The ethnic press helps to preserve interest in its readers' original culture or country of birth. But, equally important, it provides critical information on Australian society and a valuable sense of belonging to many non-English speaking background Australians".

As recently as 1988, 72% of 'recent arrivals' in Australia, whose first language was not English reported reading newspapers in their own language. A 1983 study by Tenezakis (reported in Bell et al. 1992) indicated that the percentages of people reading ethnic publications varied widely between different ethnic groups with Greeks, Turks, Argentinians and Chileans having high readership rates.

Among the biggest ethnic newspapers in Australia is the Greek Herald, which was established in 1926 and is now published daily - the first ethnic newspaper to do so in Australia. It prints 24,000 copies daily and is distributed nationally. They employ 15 journalists and even have a news bureau in Athens.

Vietnamese newspaper Chieu Duong is the

biggest Asian language newspaper in Australia. Started 12 years ago, for the last five years it has been published daily from Sydney with a circulation of 100,000 copies per week. As David Giang, Assistant Editor put it: "This is not an alternative newspaper, it is the main newspaper for most of the readers".

By May 1994, there were four Chinese language dailies selling into the Sydney 115,000 strong Chinese community. In addition some 20 bi-weeklies, weeklies and monthlies were available. The dailies included the Hong Kong backed Sing Tao Jih Pao and Australian Chinese Daily, the Australian backed Chinese Herald, and the newly established Taiwanese based Independence Daily (Signy 1994).

At the other end of the scale is The Philippines Community News which is published bi-monthly with a circulation of about 5000 copies. It is published in English with news about happenings within the community like talent shows, accomplishments of Filipino Australians, as well as alternative news reports from the Philippines, news about investment opportunities there and articles of cultural and historical significance. This publication is widely circulated among the Filipino migrant community who are comparatively well educated and speak good English. The Indian Down Under and Serendib are similar monthly publications for the Indian and Sri Lankan communities here.

Among the 12 main language groups identified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, four seem to have relatively few publications (Italian, Chinese, German and French) compared to their size and four (Arabic/Lebanese, Serbo-Croatian, Polish and Vietnamese) have a relatively large number.

## **Views of Media Practitioners and Gatekeepers**

Who are the Gatekeepers?

Australian mainstream media organisations are clearly distinguishable by the fact that their

Gatekeepers - the Editors, News Directors, Executive Producers - are almost exclusively Anglo-Celtic and very likely to be upper middle class males living in expensive suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne.

A survey of 1068 journalists found only two respondents of Aboriginal background (Henningham 1992). The lack of representation was not only confined to Aboriginal people. Out of that survey sample, 85 percent came from an Anglo-Celtic background, 70 percent were clearly middle class, while 13 percent were of European (non-Anglo) background and only 3 percent were not Caucasian. While Australia prides itself as a multicultural society - especially to the International Olympic Committee - these figures show that the media remains resolutely monocultural.

### **Reporting Ethnic Issues**

Peter Wilson, the Sydney Morning Herald's Training Editor, observed that Australian journalism has just made a major shift from being virtually an all male profession to that of a mixed gender one, where young journalists entering the profession are predominantly female. He saw the next challenge as that which will broaden the profession to include more non-Anglo-Celtic journalists.

The Herald, according to Wilson, had tried to diversify its ethnic base a few years ago by hiring cadet journalists of non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, but once they joined the organisation they have tried to be as Anglo as possible. "Some of our second generation (ethnic) Australian reporters sometimes are narrow because they are trying to get out of their Greek community or Italian community to be like their mates, their peers, their school friends and they tend to play down those ethnic matters" said Wilson.

The Herald has had an ethnic affairs roundsperson on their permanent staff for a number of years now, but Wilson acknowledged that it has been a problem for that journalist to get his or her stories on to the newspaper. "To

get a run, an ethnic story has to be very shrewdly covered, because there's a lot of pressure on space, it will need to have a human interest angle and not be confined to a narrow interest of a particular community. In other words, the story must have some glamour to convince an editor to run it."

"A lot of editing is done on gut feelings and your own knowledge of the subject. So if you have got a section editor who lives in an all white Australian community, has no ethnic friends, mixes in a particular circle, his scope to appreciate the breadth of the Herald's readership might be too narrow" observed Wilson, acknowledging the biggest problem facing ethnic reporting in the mainstream media.

In 1994 the Herald's ethnic affairs reporter was Helen Signy, a British-born journalist, who was trained in Hong Kong and worked there for four years before coming to Australia. Though there are no guidelines set for her reporting, she admitted that there are problems in getting a run for her stories in the newspaper.

She said that the major impediments to her work is the language barrier and also the fact that perhaps ethnic communities are more distrustful of the press than Anglo-Australians. For instance Signy found access to the large Vietnamese community very difficult. Most journalists do interviews over the phone, but she says if you are to gain the respect of a community it is important to visit them and meet the people in person. Thus a lot of people she tend to interview are academics and politicians.

Signy agreed that it was difficult to get ethnic stories into the mainstream media if they were not controversial, because the chief sub or the editor would not see them as newsworthy. "Good news stories seldom seem to be newsworthy unfortunately. I agree in most of the mainstream media, ethnic communities are only contacted if there are allegations of racial tension or crimes or something like that. There's a definite problem with ethnic reporting in Australia".

Jack Lunn argued that when you have a recession, a balance of payments problem or other economic difficulties these stories would take preference over ethnic community ones. Balance is a large part of putting out a newspaper, and if there's allegations of Italian Mafia activities or New Zealanders taking out a large chunk of Australian unemployment benefits, they will make certain to contact these community representatives to get their views.

As for the media playing a proactive role in promoting community relations, David Nason argues that it will open up a whole can of worms and some people may argue then the media should promote things like tourism, mining or development in the Gold Coast all of which may promote jobs and export revenue. He argued that the media should not take on an advocacy role - but accurately report the position of issue advocates.

## **Audience Perspectives**

### **Ethnic Community Members' Views**

Ethnic community responses to questions on the media tend to focus on television, rather than the print media. They were asked how they perceived Australia through their use of the media. The groups found it fairly easy to describe how the typical Australian was presented in the media. They also had no trouble in describing how they felt about this and how they saw themselves in relation to this typical Australian. However, responses to how real they felt the media picture of Australia was were much less clear. Generally it was thought to be not or only partly accurate with a division between those who thought it was a better or worse representation than the reality. Some groups said they were unable to compare as they didn't know any Anglo-Australians.

Questions on how the media should show Australian society, whether they liked the Australia seen in the media and how the media presentation of Australian society made them feel about themselves got strong responses. These largely related to the lack of

representation of non-Anglo people, values and families and how that resulted in the groups feeling different and excluded from Australian society. There was also some discussion of the nature of the representation of non-Anglos, which was generally considered to be negative, particularly in relation to news and current affairs.

The majority of groups also concluded that the way the media show Australian society did not make them feel like an Australian. Of the 61 groups, 5 were unable to respond or decide. A further 7, or 11 %, said that they identified as Australians. The minority who did were either Europeans who have lived in Australia for at least 20 years, younger people born in Australia or women who had married Australians. Of these, a further 3 groups contained individuals who said that while they felt part of Australian society, they still felt different to the Australians pictured in the media.

Television was undoubtedly the main referent for “the media”. The visual nature of this medium could have some influence on the way the groups responded in that they could describe what Australians in the media looked like and did, but found it harder to say directly what the values of Australians were.

When asked about what picture of an Australian they get from the media, the most common response, by 47 of the groups, was that Australians were ‘only white’, ‘Anglo-Saxon’, ‘blonde and blue eyed’ and ‘fair skinned’. This blonde, Anglo norm was seen as particularly pervasive in the representation of women, when males and females were described separately, although on the whole the ‘typical’ Australian was likely to be masculine.

This perception of a predominantly Anglo-Australia also stood for the media’s exclusive representation of Anglo values, morals, culture, family structures and religion. When groups were asked how the media should show Australia, almost all of the responses related to a desire not only for a greater range of ethnicity of presenters and actors, but also for the

presentation of a greater range of cultural and ethnic viewpoints. This resulted in the majority of groups concluding that the way the media show Australian society made them feel that they were different to or excluded from Australian society.

All the participants, with the exception of some young people, emphasised the importance of the news to them. This was also the one area where there was significant discussion of radio and the press as sources of information. Nine groups referred to radio news with three groups indicating it was their preferred source of news. Nine groups also referred to newspapers, with three groups being of the opinion that the press gave the most accurate and detailed coverage of events.

International news was of obvious importance to many groups and in this respect government funded broadcasters the SBS and the ABC were the most highly rated. News and current affairs programs on the commercial stations were most frequently criticised for sensationalism, although all programs came under attack for bias, parochialism and pushing negative news. Only thirteen groups found news and current affairs programs satisfactory overall; while 21 thought the media was biased in some way; 15 thought reporting to be too sensational and 17 complained of the emphasis on ‘bad’ news, that is reports of war, conflict, violence, disaster, unemployment, economic downturn and crime.

Despite a few cynical comments, it is obvious that news reports are stories that are expected to be an accurate representation of reality. The veracity of news programs is judged not only by their content but also on the style of reporting and the relative importance they are given in terms of their detail and frequency with which they are featured.

With regards to the general coverage of international news, the groups were unhappy with the lack of news, or the way in which news from particular areas were reported. Seventeen groups thought there was a general lack of international news and 14 thought that news

coverage was skewed towards some and away from other countries, regions or populations outside of Australia. The areas described were generally of particular interest to the participants by virtue of their language, culture and family relationships, or as places where individuals or their parents were born, that is their specific region of origin. When asked about the representation of their own group or area of origin 39, nearly two thirds of the groups, responded that there was no or insufficient coverage.

While most groups were mainly concerned with a lack of news from those parts of the world of particular importance to them, an overall pattern emerged. Those familiar with media concepts of 'news worthiness' or of the relative coverage of regions by Western news gathering networks would not be surprised with what was described. It was felt that local, Australian, British and North American stories dominated the news, even when the issues reported were of a trivial nature. In Europe, the UK and then Western Europe got the most coverage; 'first world nations' got more coverage than developing nations; news of Asian countries was not reported in the same proportion as that of Europe and the USA; in Asia, stories were usually about Japan and Hong Kong; most stories regarding the Middle East were about Israel and news of Africa was focussed on South Africa. In this sense Australian media can be said to be Anglo-centric, concentrating on news of English speaking countries and the ex-colonies of the British empire that remain dominated by an Anglo population (hence more news of Canada and South Africa than India).

Participants were also very 'angry' about the extent of media coverage given to the L.A. Riots (1992) compared to the civil war in Croatia. One participant commented that 'every radio, television news and current affairs program had continued hourly updates. What did we get? Nothing'. Another participant commented, 'they (the news) made such a big deal about the low Los Angeles fatalities and didn't bother to mention the hundreds that are tragically dying in Croatia to save their country'.

One participant vocalised the sentiments of the group saying that Australian newspapers have an important obligation to their readers to provide a consistent account of changes in the political, social and economic processes in South-East Asia. Others saw commonsense in the notion of more Asian Australian news. "The Australian people are changing - there is not much left for them with Britain."

Twenty nine (about half) of the groups felt that news of their region of origin was mainly negative. There were also some more general comments on the reporting of 'Third World' or 'developing' nations.

News of the 'Third World' countries are usually related to famine, natural disaster, violation of human rights, and domestic troubles which are greatly sensationalised. Reporting of such events was magnified and for extravagant effect to the viewing public, news tends to be dramatic, thus distorting the facts. Sometimes old footage is used to focus attention and create more emotion, with the result of humiliating the people who came from that country being reported. Seldom do the media televise or print beautiful or success happenings. There is a strong bias for reporting the good news from the Western world and bad news from Asian countries. Africa and Bangladesh are always shown where there is famine or flood and starving children are repeatedly portrayed rather than the event itself.

As the quotes above show there are a number of hypotheses for why these patterns exist in the media. These include a general Anglo-centrism, which could be deliberate or the result of ignorance, and a need to pander to a real or perceived audience demand for sensational stories. Another refers to political pressure from the Government:

The participants believed that as the Australian foreign policy is identical to those of the United States and most of European countries, in political matters, there is always a bias in the news in favour of those countries. The news about the Gulf War and events in the Middle

East are good examples of this bias. In the Arab and Israel issues favour is extended to Israel as a country supported by the United States. There is no equality in length and quality of coverage between the similar news of a European and an Asian country, for example the events in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. In regard to news of so-called 'Third World' countries some expressed concern about the negative way that most of these countries are shown which can be very misleading.

The lack of journalists from non-English speaking backgrounds who were sensitive to multicultural issues was seen to be a contributing factor. Once again the commercial stations came under attack for their exclusion of information which may be of interest to migrants ie. events in their homeland.

The groups thought that the media should present news from different regions equitably both in coverage and in the balance of 'bad' and 'good' news, that is positive stories of achievements. The lack of balance was found to be frustrating in that they found it difficult to assess the actual state of affairs in areas important to them. There was also considerable concern that, by presenting only the dark half of the picture, the media constructed an image that reflected poorly on these regions, and by extension, on migrants from that region.

Similar problems to those above were perceived in the reporting of news and current affairs of non-Anglo people and issues in Australia. From the point of view of the participants there was often substantial bias in reporting, with insufficient coverage of issues important to many Australians. Ethnic issues and populations were negatively associated, for example with violence, conflict and unemployment, and few positive stories, emphasising achievements and the contributions of ethnic groups to Australia, provided balance.

Three quarters (48) groups brought up examples of news stories that associated ethnic groups with bad news, conflict or social problems. Over half (35) groups specifically mentioned

unfair media treatment of Asian migrants. Interestingly this complaint was not always raised by the 'Asian' groups surveyed, that is of the seven south east Asian and Chinese groups surveyed only four mentioned this. The Vietnamese and Cambodian groups who would be expected to bear the brunt of prejudice did not. However it is difficult to assess the reasons for this in the light of the Cambodian group's comments which indicated they didn't want to voice dissent and risk being deported.

The 35 groups that asserted that Asians were discriminated against in terms of their representation in the media all referred to news reports about Asian immigration, usually in the context of the 'boat people'. The media representation was thought to be biased in a number of ways, such as, through misrepresenting the facts, giving information about the nationality or questioning how genuine individual claims for refugee status were before the facts were ascertained or by linking stories about Asian immigration with the issues of unemployment, illegal immigration and violence or by not reporting relevant information, for example the reasons for migration, the conditions in the countries migrants were coming from, the hardships endured by migrants, and direct quotes or stories of the individuals referred to in stories.

Many said that the way the media have handled the Asian immigration issue has 'encouraged racism'. The incident when four young Asian students were set upon by a group of mostly Anglo students around Chatswood (in 1991) was clearly "ignored" by the media as there was no follow-up to the report and even when police had arrested the victims rather than the attackers. This was despite one witness who wrote in to "report the facts" of what really took place.

Some respondents commented that the Australian media seldom described the lives and the problems of adjustment faced by the Asian immigrants in Australia. They were of the opinion that such programs might help the Australian public understand better the feelings

of the Asian immigrants living in Australia.

As regards to the general portrayal of migrants in the media, three quarters of groups thought that non-Anglo Australians were represented differently and less positively than Anglo Australians in news and current affairs programs. (Non-Anglo) migrants were thought to be used as scapegoats for the various economic and social ills of Australia. By highlighting negative stories and failing to cover positive stories the media gave an overall negative picture of non-Anglo Australians, that is ethnicity becomes a problem. The practice of speaking for non-Anglo groups or the choice of low-status individuals as representatives of ethnic groups exacerbated negative perceptions as well as presenting a limited and often incomplete story of important issues.

Some groups (10) also felt that certain ethnic groups were stereotyped, particularly as violent. This not only was a slur on the groups but made it less likely fearful Anglo-Australians would get to know and therefore dispel stereotypes about members of such a community.

The practice of identifying ethnic groups only in association with stories of violence, conflict, unemployment and so on was seen to be carried out exclusively in relation to non-Anglo/Celtic ethnic groups. Thus not only were Anglo-Australians presented as better than non-Anglo Australians, non-Anglo Australians weren't really Australian at all.

Another kind of representation that was not as overtly negative but could lead to bigoted attitudes was the presentation of non-Anglo customs and traditions as quaint, strange or backward. This can come about simply by defining anything non-Anglo as non-Australian (other) and also by not contextualising the customs and traditions.

The exception to this media rule was high profile non-Anglo Australians whose ethnicity was not always acknowledged, even when their appearance or accent was easily distinguishable

from those from Anglo backgrounds. Ethno-specifically, the group expressed their concern about the media's habit of being so prompt to identify criminals through their 'ethnic' appearance if still on the loose, and through their country of origin, if in custody, while refraining from giving kudos to 'the goodies' for being of a particular ethnic extraction.

Members expressed the view that when migrants had achieved positive things the media embraced them as "true blue Aussies", but when there were negative repercussions from migrants' actions, their ethnicity was thrown to the foreground. A minority of groups felt that these media practices were in decline or that they were already a thing of the past. However, improvements were still needed in the presentation of the history, both before and after the colonisation of Australia, of non-Anglo ethnic groups.

### ***Ethnic and Indigenous Journalists In The Mainstream Media***

There are a few but a slowly increasing number of ethnic and Aboriginal journalists now working for mainstream media organisations. Most of the Aboriginal journalists are employed by the public broadcasting organisations ABC and SBS - both in TV and Radio. Many of the ethnic journalists working in the mainstream media, especially the commercial organisations, are of European backgrounds, who have grown up in Australia and thus have a very Australian outlook and accent. Many of them resent being seen as ethnic journalists and evade the ethnic affairs rounds. In the three newspapers surveyed for the project, no Aboriginal or ethnic journalist was in any senior editorial position.

Following are some observations about the Australian mainstream media from some ethnic and Aboriginal journalists working within the mainstream media.

Emilia Bresciani, a journalist of Peruvian descent, who has worked for both SBS radio and television, says of her experience,

There is a general restriction from the western world towards anything else that does not reflect their way of thinking. They're so arrogant, and we all know about it and they can just blame SBS or Australia for that attitude. Australia is perhaps a bit more guilty in that having such a multicultural population it's still sort of playing the role of the British type lord here when it comes to the media format, or any communication package that is ever broadcast. I have been restricted culturally, by the mould that exists in this society of which many people are slaves - unconscious slaves I would say - and so one of the things that I want to do particularly when I say I'm a developmental journalist is to promote a different approach to news and current affairs and documentary making, that departs from everybody's own cultural understanding. But it can only happen when those people consider themselves strong enough and self-confident enough to bring out their own cultural understanding of the world around them. It must take a lot of people to convince mainstream approach to everything that another point of view, another way to look at life is also enriching, and therefore productive and attractive. And I suppose I try to do that with my approach, but again my approach may not appear very different, because of the very restrictions of time and style that we are subject to all the time.

Rhoda Roberts, an Aboriginal journalist who presents a weekly current affairs program on SBS television, reflected on her work with the media and the pressures that operate to fashion media product.

Most of the Aboriginal people who are now working in mainstream areas got their basic training skills from community stations. Now, because once we get those skills we still owe the community and we really believe in broadcasting in our community, what we tend to find is that our community is accessing us for our skills while we are still trying to keep a job working in the mainstream. And, when we work in the mainstream we do not just work as a journalist, we work as a consultant. When anyone is doing a news tape for the evening bulletin, they come to us first to check their script, to look at the story, if they are sensitive to the issues. So, between trying to get our story together, we are doing theirs as well. We do not get any extra money for that.

Other journalists bring different values from the mainstream in their political orientation to their work. The late Vassili Manikakis, an Australian born SBS-TV journalist of Greek descent, had broken a least one major ethnic story in the national arena, noted of his involvement,

It's true that I come from a Greek background. But, if you hear my voice, my accent, my ideas are very much Australian. I'm a product of this society. When we talk about access to ethnics, we are talking about access to minorities, minority viewpoints and unfortunately a minority viewpoint is a left-wing viewpoint in this country. My perspectives comes from both a minority viewpoint and commitment to put alternative viewpoints to air. That doesn't mean minority viewpoints in an ethnic way, but political viewpoints which many people don't get a chance to put across, but are very valid points. Often the establishment will see you as left-wing for trying to give access to minorities, but within the communities it will be a different ball game. You could even be a journalist from the right wing of the community trying to get this access.

Vladimir Lusic, a Croatian born journalist and ex-presenter of a weekly current affairs program on SBS-TV, was involved for many years with ethnic broadcasting.

The attitude of the average Anglo-Saxon is this: the Anglo-Saxon has a right to have a view on any issue, and you do too as long as that issue is not related to your original background. For example, if an Arab starts debating Iraq, the Gulf Conflict, then he is seen differently. Why? We cannot be trusted because, we are not equal, this society is a racist society. It discriminates against the people that it claims are equal. We are not equal.

Karim Barbara, a Lebanese born journalist, who has worked for ABC radio and SBS television:

During the Gulf War, I was called in on contract for five weeks, and my brief was "give us the Arabic point of view"; they were starving for someone to give the Arabic point of view which was extremely complex, and varied, and unless you know the background you weren't able to reflect it. And that was a good experience, because before I went in I

was looking at it as an outsider, as a recipient, and I was wondering why on earth didn't they think more about what they were saying because all we were fed was re-hashed American and British propaganda. Some stories were disgustingly unprofessional. Well when I went inside, I found that there was a lot of pressure, they were understaffed, the programs were run with whatever they could get their hands on because of the importance of the moment, and because of the thirst by the public to know, or the perceived thirst by the public to know. Not having the infrastructure of informed journalists to think what was going on, so they took anything that came up, and at the end what it turned to be, was to run with CNN and Channel 4 from London. Within there was lack of expertise, lack of thought, high volume of output expected, low volume of personnel, and that more than the perception influenced it. When I came in I started doing interviews with various Arab leaders and exponents and things like that. In the program I was working in, the perceptions started to change, because they started listening to a different voice and it became much more balanced.

Minority community media workers engaged with mainstream media can often be confronted with the tension between their own professionalism and desire to develop their work, the resistance by employers and superiors to minorities whose "difference" from the dominant culture may be equated with a lower level of professional competence, and the expectation that they are both expert on and compromised by any issue which draws on their community backgrounds.

## **Mainstream Media Reporting of Ethnic Affairs - Two Case Studies**

### **The "Arabic Riot"**

Every year in October for the last 10 years, Sydney's Arabic community has held an outdoor Arabic Carnivale - a day long festival of dance, music, food, socialising and so on. It has built up to become one of the biggest multicultural festivals in Sydney with large numbers of non-Arabic Australians attending the festival as well.

On October 17th, 1993, over 35,000 were estimated to have attended the festival. Towards the end of the day, as most people were already leaving or preparing to leave, an ugly battle took place between police and a group of youngsters.

On that evening's television and radio news and for the next few days this was the major news story in the mainstream media in Sydney. Since then, the Arabic community, many other ethnic community groups and even the New South Wales state government's own Ethnic Affairs Commission has criticised the media coverage of this event.

Thus we have chosen to take this as one of the case studies for our project, because it is a typical example of how a predominantly Anglo-Celtic media react to an ethnic community within their own society which looks distinctively different to themselves. In this content analysis, in addition to the [Sydney Morning Herald](#), [The Australian](#) and [Brisbane Courier Mail](#), we have also chosen an Arabic newspaper, [El-Telegraph](#) published in Sydney.

[The Sydney Morning Herald](#): On 18th October, it carried a front page story with the heading "Family brawl turns carnival into a riot". The article was accompanied by two photographs, one showing a police dog biting a man's leg and the other showing a family trying to protect an infant. "An argument between two teenage girls turned into a wild riot in which hundreds of people and police clashed for more than two hours at the annual Arabic Day Carnivale at Tempe yesterday. What had been a peaceful family day - and was shaping up as a highlight of the Sydney Arabic community's social calendar - turned into a disaster about 4.30 pm when police moved to quell what witnesses said was an isolated argument between two girls and one of their brothers." These two opening paragraphs to the story set the tone for the rest of the report which was a piece of responsible reporting describing the attacks on the police, as well as giving wide coverage to the Arabic community's point of view which was critical of the police behaviour which it described as "aggressive" and an "overreaction".

It even went as far as quoting an Arabic-Australian youth who said that the police provoked them by lining up behind them, when they were just watching two people arguing.

The next day, the Herald ran a story on page four titled “Griffiths backs his police at brawl”, which gave preference to the police minister Griffiths’ point of view defending his police force, while at the same time quoting Arabic community spokespersons who defended their community. In the same issue, an editorial was written on the subject titled “Brawl in a day’s police work?” which attacked the main Arabic community spokesperson, for suggesting that the incident has been blown out of all proportions. It welcomed the Police Minister’s announcement of a departmental inquiry arguing that “this inquiry should be able to determine whether police officers were ham-fisted in their approach to crowd control”, while at the same time it attacked the Chairman of the Ethnic Affairs Commission’s announcement that they would be setting up an independent inquiry suggesting that it “may simply become an exercise in police bashing”. The editorial’s arguments were based on a number of stereotypes, which suggested that one of the problems may be that the Arabic community finds it difficult to adjust to and accept the Australian lifestyle and another may be that they have divisions within the community itself. Though the editorial concluded by suggesting that both sides needed to take a long hard look at themselves with regard to the incident, the overall message was clear - an ethnic community should not blame the police: if you have a problem it’s because you can’t behave as other Australians do.

The Australian: On October 18th, a short six-paragraph article was carried on page one titled “Fight turns to riot at Arab festival” with a picture of a police dog and a policeman patrolling the area after the riot. It said that the confrontation occurred when the police tried to break up a fight between two women and they were attacked “by members of a 4000-strong crowd”. It quoted an unnamed person as saying that knives were used and broken bottles

thrown at the police. The report also quoted an Arabic community leader who said that it shouldn’t have ended this way if the police were not that harsh. “After all it was a fight between two girls” he said. The Australian carried another report on the incident next day, spread right across the top of page 2, which was about twice the length of the previous day’s article. Titled “Arab community criticises ‘heavy-handed’ police tactics at riot” the article gave wide coverage to views of the Arabic community and the Chairman of the Ethnic Affairs Commission (EAC) of New South Wales, along with that of the Police Minister. Arab community leader Ms Hind Kourouche said that the community was concerned at the way the police unleashed dogs on a crowd which included families with children, young men and women and elderly people. The Chairman of the EAC attacked media’s handling of the riot and he accused the commercial radio stations of being “irresponsible”. He said that this was not a dispute about multiculturalism or about the consequences of immigration.

Brisbane Courier Mail: On October 18th, the Mail carried a page 2 article under the heading “Hundreds in festival brawl”. The article of about 8 paragraphs started with: “Hundreds of people were involved in a wild brawl yesterday at Gough Whitlam park at Marrickville in Sydney’s inner west, police said. More than 60 police using dogs and batons were required to stop the brawl, which erupted between two gangs during an Arabic community festival, the police said”. Thus by the time the news reached Brisbane, the two women have become “two gangs” and the story seem to have been written through police media releases. They quoted an Arabic community spokesperson, who did not appear in any of the Sydney reports, who said that the fight started after water had been thrown at the police. Later the same person seemed to contradict himself by saying that from what other people had told him the fight was started by two people. The article was accompanied by a picture of police arresting a man.

El-Telegraph: This Arabic newspaper gave front

page coverage to the event on 20th October (as it is not a daily) carrying five articles with the following headings: "Inquiry into Carnivale incidents", "International media reactions", "Police Minister Defends Policemen", "Arab Australian Council blame all", "Kerkyasharian (chairman, EAC) criticises Australian media". The paper starts by asking who should bear responsibility for this cultural catastrophe. Both organisers and police are responsible, they say, because the incident left a great crack in the structure of multicultural society, which was subjected to the most vicious racist attack by those who stand against multiculturalism and the supporters of a white regime in Australia. The paper questioned the police use of dogs and helicopters at a family picnic and asked why police don't make use of liaison officers with the community and suggested that there should be courses for the police to help in awareness raising and understanding of various ethnic communities. It also accused the commercial TV stations of aggressive and hostile reporting, especially the use of "Arab Gangs". The paper also ran an editorial in the same issue under the heading "Media Hit" which argued that the Tempe incident represented a favourite item of a bias media. It said that the newspaper's telephone lines were busy receiving insulting calls from "ultra-white" people asking them to pack up and go home. It argued that the media reporting provided the racists in the society with an opportunity to exploit to provoke people against ethnic groups.

While The Australian and the Sydney Morning Herald reported the incident with a fair degree of responsibility, most of the more provocative reporting was done by commercial television and talkback radio, especially the stations which claim to be broadcasting to the "Average Australian". Analysis of this is beyond the scope of this research project, but the following comment from John Laws, Australia's highest paid radio talkback host, will illustrate how this incident was exploited by many commercial broadcasters to provoke Anglo-Celtic audiences against both ethnic groups and more specifically - multiculturalism. This comment was made on his radio program on October 27th, that is ten

days after the incident:

Remember last Friday, ...we were talking about multiculturalism, and the question came up how many ethnic groups and associations are there in Australia. We said we'd find out. Gosh! From the Ethnic Affairs library, we got hold of a book called 'The Directory of Ethnic Community Organisations in Australia'. It's put out by the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, I suppose at our cost. 367 pages of it, average 8 organisations per page, so approximately 2,936 organisations in Australia, ethnic organisations. Sounds a lot. Pretty diverse groups, everything from the Goulburn Valley Irish/Australia Club to the Albanian Saki-Islamic Society of Dandenong; the Victorian Elderly Chinese Welfare Association. I suppose if an Australian went overseas we could join the Australian Ex-Patriot Polo Club of Hong Kong or the Australian Carlton Cold Drinkers Club of Earl's Court in London, I don't know. Human nature, I suppose, to congregate with your own kind, birds of a feather as they say in the classics. As long as those who are welcomed into Australia are willing to participate in the community, pay taxes, live peacefully, speak English, then there shouldn't be any worry about it. But, I'm afraid it doesn't seem to work that way as far as I can see.

### **Police Racism and the Ombudsman's Report**

In recent years there have been persistent complaints from ethnic community groups, particularly Asian, of police harassment and racism. In one instant, in 1991, a group of Asian high school students were arrested and charged by the police, in a northern suburb of Sydney, when they appeared to be victims of a gang bash-up.

In October 1993, the New South Wales State Ombudsman David Landa released a damning report on police and ethnic relations, which prompted the state's Police Minister Allan Griffiths to order a major inquiry into the NSW police force.

The Sydney Morning Herald did a major report on these findings on page 4 of their issue of 28th October 1993 under the headline,

“Minister orders police to face inquiry on racism”. In that article, Mr Griffiths was quoted as saying: “several aspects... of race relationships which the police should be utterly ashamed of”. He pledged to recruit people of ethnic backgrounds to the police force. The next day, the Herald carried a front page lead article headed “Police cover-up on racist bashing”. It was based on allegations made in the State Parliament by an opposition MP about how the police bashed and made derogatory remarks at a Vietnamese man in the streets of western Sydney, and how a police internal investigation had covered up the incident.

The next day - a Saturday, the Herald published an editorial titled “Copping It sweet, again”, which was obviously a reference to an ABC-TV documentary a few years ago under the same name which exposed similar police attitudes towards Aboriginal people in the Streets of Redfern - an inner Sydney suburb. It was a critical assessment of police attitudes towards ethnic and Aboriginal people, especially the use of offensive language. Towards the end of the editorial it tended to defend the police force by arguing that “up to a point, police are only reflecting views that, sadly, do have some currency in the wider society and to condemn them for that may do more harm than good”. This last comment is a typical example of how Australia’s mainstream media assumes that they are talking exclusively to an Anglo-Celtic audience, who are insular in regard to perceptions of the world and cultural differences, and perhaps racist in their attitudes or in other words think and act in similar fashion to those who are working for these media outlets. On page 5 of the same issue, there was a large feature article headed “Pick of the Cops”. It argued that the face of the police force is changing with more women, and ethnic background recruits and higher educational standards of these recruits. The article was a sympathetic look at how the police force is trying to change itself by trying to recruit more ethnically diverse trainee officers.

Meanwhile The Australian carried one report on 29th October 1993 headed “Police accused of

‘rampant racism’ ”. It referred to allegations in the NSW state parliament about the police bashing up and abusing a Vietnamese man. The article also referred to the Ombudsman’s report to be tabled in Parliament that day and allegations of a death threat against the former police minister by a police officer. A boxed article within the main article was headed “Officer was shot after stealing cannabis, secret report claims”. It dealt with allegation of police involvement in drug dealing and in-fighting.

The Herald obviously gave more coverage to the issue than The Australian because the latter is a national newspaper. The Herald did show some understanding about and recognition of the problem of police racism. What was lacking in the reporting was a feature article focusing on the Asian community’s views on the issue. The “Pick of the Cops” article focused on the police force’s viewpoint on the issue and another article in similar style talking to the Asian community may have put the issue in perspective. In this regard, a mainstream media organisation like the Herald has two disadvantages. One is that, because of the Anglo-centric nature of their news values and staff they lack expertise and contacts in the Asian community. This is reflected in the second problem, which is, that many members of the Asian community would not trust the journalists and thus they would not speak to them - especially about police racism.

## **Conclusions**

The media present a picture of being “reactive” rather than “proactive” in relation to ethnic and racial conflict. For the most part, they seem unwilling or unable to recognise the implications of their construction of news and other stories, and broader entertainment offering, on race and ethnic relations. Despite recommendations of bodies such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission through its 1991 report on Racist Violence, the media have done little to change their fundamental practices, particularly in relation to news. The Press in particular, continues to resist any action which it perceives might be

construed as an infringement on its freedom to continue to behave as it has in the past. The media continue to depend in large part on the flow of media releases from powerful organisations as their primary sources, using these as points of departure to seek comment etc. Thus the control of the flow of news becomes crucial.

At points of direct confrontation, for instance between police and “rioters” (be they Aboriginal or Arab) police media relations units are actively involved in presenting the police version of events. Even where there have been flagrant attacks by police on minority communities and these have been condemned by government inquiries, police media management practices have not been modified to ensure more accurate accounts reach the media.

The reporting of ethnic and Indigenous Australia still appears to follow the patterns documented by Bell (1993) in his study of *Multicultural Australia in the Media*. Bell has argued that the ethnic (in this case Anglo-Australian) elites who control the media are engaged in a process of cultural reproduction. Where the media deal with issues of Aboriginality and ethnic diversity, they do so almost solely from a perspective of the problems they represent for the majority culture or to the dominant economic interests in the society. Bell had noted that the “exclusion of (non-stereotyped) diversity is almost total in all the media studied... the general exclusion of all non-Anglo-Australian interests from both the information and entertainment media” (Bell 1993:79). The major items of interest were debates about immigration numbers and costs, and around Aborigines in relation to land rights.

The focus on the centre ground, and the assumed commonality of interest that is confined there, continues to typify media involvement in ethnic conflict. Where there is “heat”, that is violence or conflict or heightened emotions, the media responses tend to be in terms of the news values associated with the event, rather than the social consequences of particular reportage. Good pictures, an

opportunity to write morally indignant editorials, and a sense that the story will “sell” (more copies, bring in bigger audiences) is important. Stories which report collaboration and harmonious progress between groups are perceived by media decision makers as dull and less valuable as product. Thus where they appear, Aborigines and ethnic minorities are structured as riotous, uncontrolled, dangerous, and volatile. The very concept of “ethnicity” is used to shorthand these other characteristics (e.g. de Blas, Gibbes and Gunn, 1994; Cronau, 1994; Eggerking and Plater, 1993; Plater, 1994; Bacon and Mason, 1995).

Our research supports the conclusions of previous studies. The media agenda setting role is compromised by control in key areas - such as the metropolitan daily press - lying with a small group of self-reproducing members of the elite. Despite one-off strategies to increase the diversity of reporters, the news agenda process rewards conformity (through publication) and punishes innovation which might threaten the centre ground (e.g. through non-publication of offending stories).

Young minority journalists repeatedly expressed the view that their editors were not interested in stories from points of view which moved away from that of the editorial group. Given the desire to develop as professionals, many of these younger media workers found it more effective to follow the centre line, and try to occasionally slip in a different perspective. Few felt they had the time or energy to fight on every story, when their superiors were really not interested in change. Indeed evidence suggests that only where the law provided an equalisation in the power relationships involved (e.g. under racial vilification legislation) were media managers willing to invest time and energy in modifying practices (and then this seemed to be a short term thing).

Another clearly problematic area is the recruitment, training and professional development of media workers. Most come through an educational system where issues of appropriate professional practice in relation to

race and ethnicity are not part of the curriculum. Cadet training rarely deals with these issues in any depth, while other in-house professional development focuses on technical and managerial skills rather than social responsibility. Guidelines are still very limited, and reflect the concerns with the prohibition of forbidden behaviour rather than encouragement of best practice.