Fair Go for Fair Reporting

by Stephen Stockwell & Paul Scott

The day after the first story (about the deportation of an alleged Arab terrorist), the Preston Mosque was broken into; there were threatening phone calls; people in the street were accosted, and it's that kind of reaction to local people who look Muslim, or who look Arab, that we get constantly, when some kind of vilification or some kind of story like this breaks. (Australian Arabic Council Vice Chairman, Dr Ray Jureidini quoted in ABC Radio National's *The Media Report*, 14 November 1996) <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/mediarpt/mstories/mr141196.htm>

Introduction

Under the auspices of the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, the authors were awarded a project grant from the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs *Living in Harmony* program. The grant provided funding for the authors to write, produce and distribute *The All Media Guide to Fair and Cross-Cultural Reporting* (henceforth *The Guide*). To ensure that *The Guide* is a useful resource on reporting across cultures for all Australian media workers and students, there were broad consultations with academics and practitioners and a reference group was formed.

The project is a direct response to the findings of both the 1991 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *National Inquiry into Racist Violence* (NIRV) and the 1991 *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (RCIADIC) <http://www.naa.gov.au/publications/research%5Fguides/guides/rciadic/frames/chapt1.htm>. Both of these reports found that the media in Australia play an unintended but significant role in creating prejudice and maintaining intolerance based on race, culture and religion.

While the mainstream Australian media is now generally aware of their legal responsibilities as prescribed in the 1995 *Racial Hatred Act* <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/rha1995109/index.html> and regulated by a variety of codes, there is much in the way that the media does their work that continues to entrench division within Australian society. While *The Guide* clarifies the legal and quasi-legal responsibilities of media workers reporting race issues, it also seeks to play an active part in extending their professional purview to incorporate a cross-cultural competence that assists in reporting difficult matters fairly by capturing their full cultural complexity and thus limiting the unintended racist use of their work.

There is much debate regarding the concept of race, and some researchers (see for example, Mac an Ghaill, 1999) have turned their attention away from the ontological question of whether race and racism "really exists", and towards developing a framework which acknowledges the discursive power of 'regimes of truth'

in issues of race. According to Foucault (1980:131), these regimes of truth exist in each society: "Each society has its regimes of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true". These regimes of truth, like ideologies, are not cemented into social structures for all time, but are subject to various contestations and resultant transformations due to political struggle. But it is through these regimes of truth and associated discourses of 'common sense' that people make sense of the world and explain it to others.

This paper seeks to explore how *The Guide* attempts to break down the "regime of truth" which constrains the reporting by Australian journalists of cross-cultural issues while proposing an "open" method of reporting these issues that is firmly based in the traditional goals of accuracy, balance and ethical awareness.

Recent literature on the relationship between the media, race and racism

In the past few years, Australians have experienced the most recent incarnation of the race debate. The debate was spurred by the electoral successes of Pauline Hanson in the 1996 Australian federal elections and of her One Nation Party in various elections since. Many explanations of One Nation's success have been advanced besides race: opposition to political correctness, cultural elitism, economic rationalism and globalisation (see Stockwell 2000 for a summary of arguments about the media's contribution to the Hanson phenomenon). However recent analysis of a major survey immediately after the 1998 federal election establishes quite clearly that One Nation's "support was motivated more by race and ethnic concerns than by economic discontent." (McAllister and Bean 2000:383, 396-7) Hanson breathed new life into the old "regime of truth" around the notion of White Australia and in 2001 Prime Minister Howard used the Tampa incident to take control of that regime to win the Federal election.

This version of the race debate has largely been concerned with three issues relating to the continual formation of Australian identity and its future:

- immigration (how many? where from? why? employment and environmental impact),
- refugees (questions of legitimacy and 'genuine' need), and
- indigenous Australians (native title and access to "unequal" social benefits).

While the "regime of truth" relating to race arose from the manner in which Australia has developed both economically and culturally (see for example, Love 1997), it is only in recent times (particularly the past thirty years) that there has been an increasing awareness of the role of individual media workers in setting the race agenda in their general reporting, particularly through narrative representations of controversial issues. Free reporting and open debate are essential attributes of a democracy, but effective and productive democracy requires that reporting and debate should be reliant upon evidence and reason, rather than myths and prejudice.

The intimate but intricate, complex and subtle relationship between the media and racism has been more readily apparent since the work of Hall et al (1978). There are now a number of academic studies on the relationship between the media and race. A small publishing boom appears under way. In 1998, Arnold published Gandy's *Communication and Race* and Ferguson's *Representing Race*. Both texts argue that an understanding of the interaction between race and the media depends on utilising critical discourse analysis and diverse other contemporary theoretical perspectives and methodologies to examine media systems and institutions, symbolic representations and social constructions.

Textbooks commonly used in Australian media courses largely treat issues of race in brief and peremptory

ways. Conley (1997:118) for example, takes six lines to alert students to the existence of racial vilification and anti-discrimination legislation. He briefly outlines two case studies and then proceeds to recount statistics, opinion and advice about the media's relationship with Pauline Hanson (Conley 1997:273-5). This depth of treatment may be expected in an introductory journalism textbook that covers such a broad area so comprehensively, and it is certainly more instructive than some international examples that merely raise the issue of race in a general way, with little guidance to effective reporting of these complex matters (see Wilson 1996:252-3).

Academic publications in Australia that examine relationships between race, racism and the media include those by Meadows (1987, 1988 and 1994); Jacubowicz et al (1990, 1994 and 1996); Bell (1992); Eggerking and Plater (1992); Goodall (1993); James (1993); Trigger (1995); Hippocrates et al (1996); Jacubowicz and Seneviratne (1996); Hartley and McKee (1996), Ewart (1997), and Mickler (1998). While extremely useful for the provision of theoretical frameworks and methodologies to both understand and further explore the ideological dimensions pertinent to racism and the media, these publications are not written to attract the attention of media workers or students.

Boreland et al (1996) and Eggerking et al (1998) have produced curriculum projects for distribution to tertiary journalism students. These projects specifically attempt to assist students to understand the manner in which racism can become naturalised within the everyday practice of media work. Boreland's project was particularly useful because it was the first interactive project to combine the experiences of media workers and community representatives. It makes some general recommendations for journalists, media organisations and training bodies in an attempt to form a skeleton for the development of policy.

Both these contributions to curriculum efforts are useful for generating discussion and assigning tasks in the classroom, but the packages are not particularly useful in the day-to-day work of media workers when less complex materials are required to assist in the quick decision making processes required by their work. Nor have these curricula been enthusiastically adopted by all Australian media educators. Suggestions as to why these materials remain under-utilised include:

♦   there is not time to explore these issues in a detailed manner in an already crowded curriculum;
♦   the complexity of the materials makes them confusing;
♦   the materials consist of politically correct rhetoric rather than the 'real concerns' of media work; and
♦   the materials do not provide general principles that can be broadly applied.

Other materials developed to help assist media workers and media students understand issues relevant to racism and the media include the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (1996) publication *The Racial Hatred Act: A Guide for People Working in the Media* <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/racial_discrimination/act/content.html#anchor5775408>, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's (1996) videotape, *Making the Grade: News Media and Indigenous Australia*, and McKee's (1998) unpublished report, *Suggestions and advice for reporting on Indigenous issues*. Bostock's (1997) *The Greater Perspective*, whilst directed at film makers rather than media workers generally, contains some excellent advice for understanding the cultural differences that might be experienced between a film production team and indigenous people, and how to work fairly and productively with these differences. At this point, the general observation may be made that while there are numerous examples of guides to reporting about indigenous people and issues, there is relatively less material on reporting about ethnic people and issues.

There are also a plethora of protocols, standards and codes of ethics, codes of conduct and codes of practice

that contain guidance on reporting cross-cultural issues. These codes are produced by government authorities such as the Australian Broadcasting Authority <http://www.aba.gov.au/what/program/codes/index.htm#>, self-regulatory bodies such as the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations <http://www.aba.gov.au/what/program/codes/facts_index.htm>, the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters <http://www.aba.gov.au/what/program/codes/farb_code.htm>, the Australian Press Council <http://www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/gprguide.html> and the Australian Association of National Advertisers <http://www.metropolis.com.au/afa/html/body_ethics.html>, the industrial union representing media workers, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance <http://www.alliance.org.au/hot/ethicscode.htm>. From this review of relevant literature, it is apparent that there is no general and readily accessible work that covers the breadth of issues raised for the media by the need for cultural sensitivity. While the material discussed above makes a useful contribution to explaining how racism can be entrenched by the media and methods to avoid perpetuating it, there is no readily accessible guide dedicated to the issue of cross-cultural reporting in the context of the Australian ethos and its commitment to a fair go. In seeking exemplars of effective communication with media workers, *The ABC All Media Court Reporting Handbook* (Kafcaloudes 1991) and *ABC All Media Law Handbook* (ABC Legal Dept 1994) are seen as particularly relevant. *The All Media Guide to Fair and Cross-Cultural Reporting* seeks to emulate the accessibility of their format while addressing new subject matter. *The Guide* covers both best practice in reporting issues of cultural sensitivity and the related legal obligations of media workers. Consultation with key industry and community stakeholders has ensured that the material contained in the guide is both timely and relevant, and that the final product has been effectively distributed and utilised.

What is Fairness

A general notion of fairness... a fair go... remains a most potent idea which draws general allegiance from the Australian community. While this particular "regime of truth" is rooted in the egalitarian mythos of Australia, the phrase was popularised by Roy 'Mo Macachie' Rene with his catch phrase 'Fair go, mob' *(Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) 22 November 1954). It is interesting to note in the context of this discussion that Roy Rene's real name was Harry van der Sluys, and his personal background as well as his stage persona were distinctly outside the Anglo-Celtic norms of the period. In short, the notion of a fair go was the product of cross-cultural communication.

While ostensibly a positive aspect of the Australian psyche, the fair go is a loose, highly subjective notion capable of distortion under pressure. In recent years fairness has been used by economic rationalists to argue for a level playing field, by Hanson and other populists to argue against affirmative action and positive discrimination and by opponents of Hanson to argue for these things. Thus the notion of fairness has a certain universal appeal that means it is constantly under contestation which makes it useful for this project.

The fair go sits comfortably in the discussion of social issues by the general Australian population. It offers a way of discussing cultural sensitivity without reverting to formularised language that can be too quickly characterised and dismissed as political correctness. The fluidity of the concept of fairness makes it an ideal platform to confront deeply entrenched racist attitudes and practices in a non-threatening and hopefully productive way.

Communicators of all stripes strive for a fair style that effectively interacts with the audience. A fair style suggests that a narrative should not only be clear, easy to read and with a cadence that pleases the eye and ear, but also that it has a civil, courteous and considered tone that engages the interest and empathy of the audience.

While Kieran (1998) may be right to argue that fairness is ultimately a matter of truthfulness, the busy media worker with a looming deadline does not have the time to engage in philosophical speculation. With this consideration underpinning the project, the approach of the authors has been to see the pursuit of fairness as a useful way for the media worker to avoid interminable, fruitless debates about the existence of truth, objectivity and facts.

Anticipating Resistance to *The Guide*

The authors understand the resistance *the Guide* will encounter if it is widely perceived as being just another ideological island in a sea of political correctness. The authors are aware of the dangers of the project being dismissed as the kind of work carried out by the pompous, self righteous and self indulgent thought police, to paraphrase some of the descriptive terminology drawn upon in Paul Sheehan's best selling 1997 work, *Among the Barbarians*. Sheehan was particularly critical of the 1996 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission publication *The Racial Hatred Act: A Guide for People Working in the Media* <*http://www.hreoc.gov.au/racial_discrimination/act/content.html#anchor5775408*>.

Sheehan believes there exists in Australian society an over abundance of laws that "give power to control or sanction what people say by legal action, legal threat or professional rebuke" (1997: 312). He warns readers that attempts to stultify, marginalise and ultimately silence particular statements regarding issues like multiculturalism, immigration, ethnicity and indigenous people are a significant threat to individual freedom. He writes that "of all the political problems facing Australia, the growing power to suppress and constrain freedom of expression is the most sinister" (1997: 317). The authors believe that *The Guide* is committed to maintaining freedom of expression and, in fact, extending that right to those outside the cultural mainstream. We also see a need for media workers to recognise and understand the balance between the rights to free expression and the rights of those experiencing racial vilification from the media, whether intentionally or inadvertently.

In anticipating resistance to the project, the authors have sought to address current practitioners, and to this end chose to recruit an industry-based reference group that includes representation from all levels of the media from national opinion leaders to suburban freelancers, as well as relevant training officers, union officials, community representatives and even a few journalism academics. The success of this project relies on the ability of the authors to establish a "regime of truth" that provides media workers with the perspectives to pursue the cultural sensitivity implied by a positive reading of political correctness while eschewing language and attitudes that may be construed as politically correct.

By relying on work practices that exhibit a high degree of accuracy, balance, ethical awareness and cultural competence, the media worker can get on with the job of assuring that their work is fair because it is free from dishonesty, bias, injustice and ignorance. This is the "regime of truth" proposed by the authors of *The Guide* with full awareness that it invites further contestation.

Accuracy, Balance, Ethics and Cultural Competence

Within a multicultural society such as Australia, it is often difficult to report on transformation in society when topics relating to sex, race and religion "are personal and value laden" (Hurst and White 1994:55), and it is precisely this difficulty that *The All Media Guide to Fair and Cross-Cultural Reporting* seeks to address. It has attempted to achieve this by suggesting work practices that emphasise accuracy, balance, ethical awareness and, to achieve these things in a multi-cultural society, a high level of cultural competency.

To begin to define the professional approach required of media workers, it is important to study notions of

public interest. In many stories relating to politics and policy, it is "easy to define the public interest" (Hurst and White 1994:57). Political and policy issues covered by the media are in the interest of the public as these decisions affect all individuals, as citizens, alike. However the question can be raised as to whose interest is served when media stories on ethnicity and religion are broadcast and printed. Is it the interest of the public generally or the Anglo-Celtic public that is numerically dominant or the publics who are reported about - whether they be indigenous, Islamic, Asian or Greek? Or is it the interest of the media corporation seeking to stimulate controversy to maximise sales? Hurst and White ask "who determines the composition of the public: the media, the regulators, the citizens whose lives are not touched by the issue discussed, or the group directly affected?" (1994:57). This provides a useful starting point for media workers when any particular story might be about race. Questioning *why* they are doing a particular story will impact on *how* they do the story. Once media workers become engaged on a story with a race element, to be fair, it is then incumbent upon them to ensure that they approach the story with the same professionalism, the same accuracy, balance and so on, that they would use to investigate, report and produce any other story.

Accuracy calls for care and precision to produce material that reflects the actual state of affairs. "Accuracy ought not be an editorial issue" according to Wilson (1996:52), because "it is a fundamental value, deserving to be unquestioned and always applied as rigorously as reporters and editors can apply it." Unfortunately, the commitment to accuracy is sometimes waved aside with the admonition that the facts should not be allowed to get in the way of a good story.

Rather, a culture of precision is required where accuracy is attained by close observation, detailed note taking, filing of material for easy reference, the use of public records to check details and the confirmation of all points with other sources. It is practical commitment to the minutiae rather than claiming allegiance to an ideal truth that produces accuracy. Commitment to accuracy in a cross-cultural story required extra effort to understand the complexity of the cultural exchange. Of course, if it is a duty to present actuality, there must be a mechanism whereby errors can be quickly and freely corrected. (see Hurst and White 1994:41)

Balance is produced by the assiduous weighing of actions or opinions. Fair representation of actuality requires the media worker to find out the full breadth of facts, to check them against a range of sources and to present them in an even-handed way that discloses whose interests are served by various statements. This is a high standard because it requires media workers to actively combat their own ignorance or insensitivity by constantly challenging themselves to tell the full story.

The attempt to get to the bottom of the story requires interviewing all interested parties and observing carefully their words and actions, while leaving aside all prejudice and preconceptions that get in the way of understanding the story from the interviewee's point of view. Balance is more than just equal space for different sides of the story. More importantly, it is about equal representation of points of view that can only be ascertained with a high degree of empathy from the media worker, particularly in a cross-cultural setting. It is this empathy with all points of view that prevents events and people being sensationalised, trivialised or stereotyped in ways that can perpetuate racist attitudes.

Ethical awareness requires more than a passing knowledge of the rules of engagement. Too often discussions of media ethics get side-tracked into the search for a set of legislation that prohibits the excesses of media practice. While there needs to be a code of practice that ensures media workers do not invade anyone's privacy or grief, do not endanger anyone's physical or mental well-being, do not use their positions for personal gain and so on, there also needs to be a greater awareness of the media worker's own ethical formation as a professional person who strives to do the best they can in all situations. This position accepts that the media worker is always growing and learning, and that they have a responsibility to their audience

and themselves to develop their understanding and judgement in positive ways.

The Poynter Institute <http://www.poynter.org/dj/tips/index.htm> posits that the attainment of fairness in the coverage of issues involving those from other cultures is dependent on media workers understanding that they need to attain a level of cultural competence. Coverage that springs from ignorance or is inhibited by fear of the unfamiliar falls short of the basic tenets of ethical media work: that is to be complete, balanced, clear and, above all, fair. A media worker who wants to be culturally competent leaves the familiar behind and approaches the unfamiliar with curiosity, sensitivity and respect. Cultural competence creates opportunities to pursue excellence in media work. It encourages explanations; enhances understanding; provides greater access to individuals; develops more knowledgeable sources; reflects a more accurate, complete and authentic picture of communities; builds bridges between different groups; and captures the whole of the story as well as it does the sum of its parts. Cultural competence is the cornerstone of best practise in media work, because it draws together the need for accuracy, balance and ethical awareness in a practical context that gives the whole enterprise a purpose.

Conclusion

The question of how media workers gain cultural competence remains a confronting problem. How can producers and journalists from predominantly privileged socio-economic backgrounds develop the moral imagination to appreciate the positions, passions and points-of-view of those from other cultural backgrounds when there are large sets of life-experiences, often including language skills, that the two groups do not share?

A useful insight to this question was offered by Queensland journalist, Tony Koch as he accepted the 1999 Walkley Award for most outstanding contribution to journalism for, in part, his coverage of indigenous issues. Koch argued that the media could not conceive of the realities of life in remote indigenous settlements while they limited their exposure to such places to the time they spent in the company of government ministers on flying visits. His point is well-made. It is impossible to develop the cultural competence required to report in an accurate, balanced and ethical fashion without taking the time to talk with people, to observe the minutiae of their lives and to give people the opportunity to represent themselves to the 'blow-ins' of the dominant culture. Thus we see that the "regime of truth" proposed by *The Guide* can only be approached as individual media workers ground their practice in their interpersonal contacts within the community.

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