Indigenous Violence as a ‘Mediated Public Crisis’

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Abstract

The association between Indigenous Australians and violence remains a persistent backdrop to public discussion of issues of race in Australia. This paper reports on initial analysis of a survey of newspaper reporting of ‘Indigenous violence’ in seven Australian newspapers from January 2000 to June 2006. From a ‘high point’ in the reporting of Indigenous affairs in the year 2000, reporting of Indigenous Australia has increasingly focused on news of violence, conflict and corruption in remote, rural and urban settings. Over the six-year period, stories relating to Indigenous violence featured at regular intervals on the news landscape through stories of substance abuse, domestic violence and child abuse in remote communities.

Significantly, such news stories were not treated consistently across all newspapers or time periods, with substantial variation in the extent of coverage in different newspaper locations and genres. In addition, a series of ‘moral panics’ periodically confronted Australian media audiences - moments of intense scrutiny of alarming events resulting in calls for government action to remedy the perceived ‘problem’ (Critcher 2003; Cohen 1973; 2002). Reporting of such crises was typically juxtaposed against political news stories of corruption and the ultimate demise of representative Indigenous government. Most striking was the reporting by the Australian and the Fairfax press of the issue of violence and child sex abuse in remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory in May and June 2006. The paper argues that Indigenous Australia continues to be mediated as an underlying societal risk, and that parts of the Australian media have sought to actively drive political agendas in Indigenous affairs through the construction of mediated public crises (Cottle 2004, p. 2).
Introduction: Mediated public crises and public opinion

In May 2006 Australian media audiences were confronted with the shocking news that ‘paedophile rings’ were operating in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory (NT). This revelation, first aired on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) *Lateline* current affairs program, was quickly adopted by Australia’s major metropolitan media and broadened to include reporting of gang violence in Wadeye, another remote NT community. The issue generated political controversy both federally and in the Northern Territory and within weeks, a national summit on Indigenous violence and a NT Government inquiry had been announced. The Mutitjulu/Wadeye crisis had developed into a mediated ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 1973; Critcher 2003).

The 2006 ‘paedophile rings’ news story was one of several similar crises played out in the Australian media between the year 2000 and mid-2006 - each of which has contributed to a discourse of risk and crisis dominating public discussion of Indigenous issues. Issues concerning Indigenous Australians and violence, whether perpetrated by Indigenous people or to them, are a routine feature of Australian newspaper reporting. But why do Australian journalists choose to play out such issues as public crises and what role do they play in mediating Indigenous issues for Australian news audiences? How has news reporting of Indigenous issues shifted over time and what impacts does this have on government policy-making and wider public opinion? This paper seeks to address these issues through a longitudinal survey and qualitative analysis of newspaper reporting.

The paper is based on a wider research project developed to better understand the shifting public discourses surrounding the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This paper’s aim is limited to mapping the volume and patterns of reporting of Indigenous issues in relation to issues of violence in seven Australian newspapers from 2000-2006, and to providing some initial analysis of that reporting. It is underpinned by theories of news framing and public opinion to analyse how the Mutitjulu/Wadeye story of 2006 unfolded for media audiences through newspaper coverage, and how such reporting provided the discursive conditions for radical policy changes to the governance of Indigenous Australia.

While the paper examines media content, it does not take the position that the media is representative of the public sphere (c. f. Hartley and McKee 2000; Critcher 2003). It argues that studying media texts is one valuable way of ‘knowing’ public opinion about complex social issues that can assist in understanding the interplay between local talk (McCallum 2005; 2007), mediated representations and government policy about complex social issues (Gamson 1992). Rather than locating the media as the ‘locus’ of the public sphere, media discourse, public policy and local-level conversation are understood as ‘parallel systems of constructing meaning’ (Gamson & Modigliani 1989, p. 1). Analysis of media framing of these issues builds on existing literature about the systematic portrayal of Indigenous people and issues in the Australian media that, along with elite political discourses, contribute to the representation of Indigenous Australians as an underlying societal risk. Mediated images, particularly when they are played out systematically as
moral crises, map the contours of public debate about issues that are central to Australians’ understanding of complex racial, historical, social and cultural issues (Bell 1997; Meadows 2001a).

News reporting of Indigenous issues

Media reporting of Indigenous issues has been the subject of public debate and the source of substantial academic inquiry. Much of this research has examined media content as a form of racist discourse, depicting Indigenous Australians as an ethnic minority. According to Cottle (2000, p. 5) racialized and racist meanings are embedded within and reproduced through media representations. In their major study of reporting of ethnic and Indigenous issues in the Australian media during the 1980s – the Racism and the Media Project – Jakubowicz et al. (1994) identified that news reporting of Indigenous people and issues was systemically racist. Furthermore, they found that at least one major Australian newspaper ‘denied structural racism existed in Australia’ (Jakubowicz et al. 1994, p. 111-112). Meadows (2001a) examined depictions of Indigenous people and issues in the national news media, particularly television, concluding that media portrayals reinforced the dominant ideology of racial superiority (see also Hall 1995).

Using news framing analysis to examine portrayals of Indigenous issues builds on assessments of media content based on analyses of race and ideology (Miller & Reichert 2003; Altheide 1997, 2002; Gamson 1992, 1996). News frame analyses provided a useful methodology for identifying the dominant and contested frames inherent in media discourse (Gamson & Modigliani 1989; Reese 2003, 2007; McCallum & Blood 2006). Drawing on Reese’s (2003, p. 11) definition, frames are understood to be the ‘organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world’. News frame analysis emphasises how social issues are contested in public discourse, enabling journalists to draw on several competing frames in their discussion of an issue. Several studies of media content in the Australian context have examined how journalists report on Indigenous issues in routine and predictable ways – such findings can be understood through the theoretical prism of news framing. Based on the work of Jakubowicz et al. (1994), Bell (1997), Meadows (2001a), Mickler (1998) and Brough (1999), this paper finds that Australian journalists have represented Indigenous Australians in using the following news frames:

- threat to the existing order; a source of conflict and problematic;
- authentic Australians; available for cultural appropriation and a source of pride for all Australians;
- privileged compared with ‘mainstream’ Australians;
- Indigenous health as an individual failure;
- Australia’s shame;
- victims of the failure of the Australian welfare state;
- non-Indigenous Australians as simultaneously racist and tolerant.
Indigenous violence as a ‘mediated public crisis’

While news frame analyses emphasise the contested (or contestable) nature of reporting, the dominant and enduring news frame relating to Indigenous Australians is as an underlying societal risk. As part of the Racism and the Media Project Goodall (1993) and Cuneen (1992) examined media portrayals of incidents that reinforced the relationship between Indigenous Australians and crime and violence, concluding that such issues construct Indigenous Australians as sources of ongoing threat (see also Altheide 2002; 1997).

Stanley Cohen’s (1973; 2002) ‘moral panic’ framework remains a powerful tool for analysing how particular issues are played out in the media, and the impacts of such reporting. While Cohen first proposed his sociology of deviance in 1972, the concept that journalists play up the social significance of some deviant events and some minority groups remains highly relevant for the study of Indigenous reporting (Critcher 2003, p. 173; Hall et al. 1981). Critcher (2003) identifies that moral panics usually emerge suddenly on the media’s agenda, and are played out in routine and familiar ways. Firstly, the source and nature of the threat are identified. The media highlights innocent victims of the threat, and campaigners against the threat emerge. As the news story progresses, a remedy is articulated, and there are calls for action from those identified as responsible for protecting the innocent from the threat. The panic is usually resolved with some policy or legal solution, and the media shifts its gaze to another crisis. Cottle (2004, p. 32) extends the ‘mediatized ritual’ of the moral panic to examine the way journalists not only routinely frame and sensationalise racial issues, but at times actively perform what he terms ‘mediated public crises’. He argues that under certain circumstances, public crises can have significantly transformative effects on society. Cottle’s (2004) and Cohen’s (2002) theories emphasise the important role that journalists play in their reporting of public crises, particularly those involving key national issues such as those involving Indigenous peoples.

Within the field of journalism studies, researchers have addressed the role and practice of journalists in reporting on Indigenous issues. As part of the Racism and Media Project, Plater (1992) developed a series of ‘Guidelines to reporting Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and ethnic affairs’, bringing together local and international perspectives on the reporting of racial issues. The Australian Press Council (APC) has produced guidelines for the ‘Reporting of ‘race’’, but these do not specifically mention the reporting of Indigenous Issues (APC 2001). Ewart (1997) interviewed regional journalists to find that they were largely uninterested and unreflective about the impact of their journalistic practices on local race relations. She said that ‘addressing the conflicts between ideologies and practices in the newsroom is an issue that needs to be taken up by journalism educators’ (Ewart 1997, p. 115). More recently, a report commissioned by the Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales (ADBNSW) was highly critical of media reporting of racial issues, finding that Australian racism was perpetuated through the media. It recommended further education of journalists about the impact of racialized reporting on ethnic minorities (ADBNSW 2003, p. 118). This report was rejected by the then Premier of NSW and its recommendations largely ignored (Jakubowicz 2003).
These periodic recommendations by scholars of Indigenous media representation, and the ongoing resistance to them by media practitioners, suggests that the reporting of Indigenous issues in Australia remains problematic. Given that there has been little systematic analysis of the reporting of Indigenous people as a source of violence in recent years, a study was needed to map contemporary reporting of this aspect of Indigenous affairs in the Australian media, and its relationship with elite discourses and a changing policy environment.

**Method**

The paper draws on data collected as part of a project to map the frames and discourses inherent in journalist’s portrayals of Indigenous violence in Australian newspapers, and their relationships with Indigenous policy. The study analyses how Indigenous issues are played out in Australian newspaper reporting and how this reporting contributes to a discourse of risk and crisis surrounding Indigenous Australia, and investigates the implications of such reporting on public opinion and government policy. The first stage of the project, reported in this paper, was to analyse the amount of coverage given to stories using the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘violence’ since the year 2000, to analyse trends in that reporting, and to present an exemplar of such news coverage.

A six-year timeframe from January 2000 to June 2006 was chosen to coincide with the end of the government-sponsored policy of Aboriginal reconciliation (McCallum 2003). The Factiva database was used to collect all articles mentioning ‘Indigenous or Aboriginal’ and ‘violence’ in the following Australian newspapers: *Australian, Sydney Morning Herald, Canberra Times, West Australian, Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), and the Melbourne *Herald Sun* and *Age*. These newspapers were selected based on their wide circulation and broad geographic coverage, but the study has not addressed reporting in regional newspapers, or in the Northern Territory or Queensland which both have large Indigenous populations. Search terms were chosen after piloting coverage of a number of issues, but the term ‘violence’ was found to incorporate a wide range of stories pertaining to the study’s research questions. Once all irrelevant items were culled, stories were coded for newspaper, date, topic, page and length, and included in a database of articles reporting ‘Indigenous’ and ‘violence’. Quantitative profiles of newspaper content were developed to map the changing nature of topics and debates. This mapping exercise was followed by narrative and news frame analyses to identify the dominant frames and story devices used to portray issues concerning Indigenous violence. This paper then reports on one exemplar – the May 2006 ‘pedophile rings’ story – which was played out in Australian newspapers as a moral panic, and which had significant impacts on shifting news frames and discourses and, ultimately, on Indigenous governance.
A snapshot of reporting of ‘Indigenous and violence’ in Australian newspapers 2000-2006

Overall, 1706 items were recorded that mentioned ‘Indigenous’ and ‘violence’ between January 2000 and June 2006 (See Table 1). News stories were not treated consistently across all newspapers or time periods, with substantial variation in the extent of coverage in different newspaper locations and genres. The Australian, News Limited’s ‘flagship’ national newspaper, focused most heavily on the topic of remote Indigenous crime and violence. The Australian reported 748 stories referring to Indigenous violence, more than three times the amount of coverage of its nearest rivals. The two Fairfax metropolitan broadsheets, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age, each reported similar numbers of stories referring to ‘Indigenous’ and ‘violence’ - 239 and 190 respectively. At face value, the Canberra Times, Sydney Daily Telegraph and Melbourne Herald reported on Indigenous violence relatively rarely, but further analysis revealed that these papers reported the issues in different ways.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Total number of articles</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canberra Times</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Australian</td>
<td>229</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 maps the trends in reporting of Indigenous and violence across all newspapers, illustrating the variation in reporting across time and genre. It shows that the tabloids, Daily Telegraph and Herald Sun, did not discuss issues of Indigeneity and violence unless these issues were locally relevant. In particular, the Daily Telegraph extensively and sensationaly covered the ‘Redfern Riots’ of February 2004. In contrast to the other News Limited metropolitan tabloid newspapers, the West Australian’s extensive coverage of Indigenous issues reflected local concerns and news agendas. The West Australian, despite its location as a tabloid newspaper in the News Limited stable, treated issues of Indigenous violence as very local and significant news stories. Not only was reporting of ‘Indigenous’ and ‘violence’ in the West Australian treated as routine news, a number of issues, ignored by the other newspapers, received extensive reporting across the six-year period. The
*Canberra Times*’ coverage was also atypical, with its small number of items concerning violence in remote Indigenous communities framed as serious but routine issues of health and social disadvantage. While *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* published a significant number of stories, they were more likely to frame their news in the context of national policy debates or concerning Indigenous leadership and governance.

Overall, reporting of ‘Indigenous violence’ was a routine but not regular source of news during the study period. Stories reported in relation to this topic related to Aboriginal health, welfare, substance abuse, crime, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, youth gang conflict, legal punishment and sentencing. Despite the representation of these issues as occasional but routine news, a few issues received substantial interest, with some becoming major news events in the *Australian*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* between 2000 and mid-2006. Significantly, there was a pattern of sharp ‘spikes’ in reporting, followed by very limited interest in Indigenous issues. The following analysis concentrates on the *Australian*’s reporting, as the two major metropolitan daily newspapers followed closely the Australian’s news agenda. (See Table 3 and 4)

During 2001 the *Australian* conducted a campaign to raise the issue of substance abuse, violence, sexual misconduct in Indigenous communities, arguing that media and governments had abrogated their responsibility for addressing them (Neill 2002). These issues were reported, albeit less extensively, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* newspapers. Reporting of violence in remote Indigenous communities was juxtaposed against the major political news story of the allegations of rape brought against the Chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Commission (ATSIC), Geoff Clark (Rule, A. 2001, ‘Geoff Clark: Power and Rape’, *Age*, 14 June, p. 1). Clark’s trial became a catalyst for media emphasis on issues of violence in Indigenous communities that had been a preoccupying problem for those working in Indigenous health for many years*vi*.

Reporting, particularly by the *Australian*, was also embedded within a context of disunity within ATSIC (2001, ‘Myth of Aboriginal unity exposed’, *Australian*, 21 June, p. 1).

There was relatively little coverage of Indigenous violence for the next two years. Then between May and August 2003, the topic once again became a major story on the *Australian*’s news agenda. A powerful speech by Aboriginal leader Mick Dodson, decrying the domestic violence crisis in Indigenous communities and calling on the Federal Government to pay some attention to the issue, once again focused the media’s gaze on the Indigenous violence crisis, and precipitated the Prime Minister’s 2003 summit on Indigenous family violence (Dodson, 2003).
Table 2

Sum of articles in all newspapers

search term: "violence and (Aboriginal or Indigenous)"

Number of articles

Quarterly timeline
(January 2000 to June 2006)

Table 2
While this story warranted no more than a single news item for the majority of newspapers, the *Australian’s* coverage was extensive, with journalist Paul Toohey projecting violent behaviour onto all Indigenous men when he reported the issue in the following way:

‘She is the urban face of the sexual abuse and violence meted out by Aboriginal men on their women’. (Toohey, P. 2003, ‘Indigenous culture’s black and blue history’, *Australian*, 14 June, p. 9)

This time, the story of Indigenous disadvantage and family violence was set against the backdrop of political demise of Indigenous self-determination in the form of the abolition of ATSIC. The Australian had waged a war of words against this model of Indigenous representation, referring to it as ‘autonomy without responsibility’ (e.g. Albrechtsen, J. 2003, ‘The decade of squalor’, *Australian*, 18 June, p. 11). Commentator Janet Albrechtsen directly blamed ASTIC for poor standards of remote Indigenous health and housing. By late 2003, newspaper reporting of Indigenous issues was consistently viewed through a news frame of individual responsibility – particularly the failure to take responsibility by individual Indigenous men and their leaders. Discourses of reconciliation, social justice or Indigenous rights were rarely conveyed through newspaper reporting.

**Sum of articles in *The Australian***

*search term: “violence and (Aboriginal or indigenous)”*

<table>
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<th>Quarter</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>2000 Q1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 Q2</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>2006 Q3</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006 Q4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Sum of articles in broadsheet newspapers

search term: "violence and (Aboriginal or indigenous)"

Number of articles

Quarterly timeline
(January 2000 to June 2006)

Table 4
The 2006 crisis of violence and abuse in remote Indigenous communities

Rarely has the reporting of the ‘Indigenous violence crisis’ been so clearly articulated and so sensationaly reported as in May and June 2006. In early May the Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, had visited town camps around Alice Springs, Wadeye near Darwin and the Tiwi Islands in the Torres Straits. Newspaper reporting was minimal and included a balance of stories reporting on despair in the town camps outside Alice Springs, gang violence in Wadeye and ‘functioning communities’ in the Tiwi Islands. Brough also proposed changes to the payment of welfare benefits that would allow government agencies to direct parts of welfare payments to other organizations like schools. These changes would affect a large number of Indigenous people. On 10 May the Federal Government handed down its annual budget, with little increase in funding for Indigenous affairs and very little mainstream news coverage.

Against this backdrop of Ministerial focus on Indigenous welfare reform, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Lateline program screened an exclusive report in which they revealed a private briefing paper regarding cases of the NT Crown Prosecutor, Nanette Rogers (Lateline, 2006 ‘Paper reveals sexual abuse, violence in NT communities’, ABC, 15 May). The views of the Crown Prosecutor received extensive coverage in the daily broadsheets, the Australian, Sydney Morning Herald, Age and the Canberra Times, with each of these newspapers making editorial comment about the issue. Minister Brough quickly entered the debate claiming that ‘everybody in those communities [Mutitjulu, NT] knows who runs the paedophile rings’ (Lateline, 2006, ‘Paedophile rings operating in remote communities: Brough’, 16 May). Brough’s controversial statement and his accusations of inadequate policing in the Northern Territory (NT) immediately escalated the issue into a political dispute between the federal government and both the federal Opposition and the NT Government. Just two days after the Lateline program was aired, Minister Brough announced that a summit of federal and state Indigenous Affairs ministers would be held on 26 June (Kavelas, P. 2006, ‘Summit to force solution on Indigenous violence’, Australian, 8 June 2006, p. 4). The Australian’s coverage was extensive and a campaign slogan – STOP THE ABUSE – was attached to each article about the issue.

In addition to the Mutitjulu event, reporting of ‘gang violence’ and lawlessness in the northern NT community of Wadeye fed into the growing panic, with these two communities becoming representative of widespread violent behaviour in Indigenous communities. By late May, the issue of violence and sexual abuse in remote NT Indigenous communities had become a full-blown ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 2002), with extensive and sensationalist reporting across all metropolitan newspapers, comments sought from the Prime Minister, Indigenous leaders, opinion columnists and letters to the editor. The Federal Government withheld funding to the Northern Territory community of Mutitjulu and appointed an administrator (King, D. 2006, ‘Brough ‘crusade against’ township’, Australian, 21 July, p. 5). So while the issues of paedophilia and gang violence were projected to encompass all remote NT communities (and arguable all Indigenous men), the consequences of using just two townships to exemplify the issue had significant and lasting ramifications for the residents of those communities. A counter-frame to the story was provided by the National Indigenous Times newspaper, challenging the factual and ethical basis of the reporting of the Mutitjulu story (National Indigenous Times, 2006, ‘Mutitjulu ups the Aunty’, 7 September, p. 5), but this received minimal coverage in mainstream newspapers and by that stage the panic had subsided and the Australian media had once more shifted its gaze.
The Mutitjulu/Wadeye ‘crisis’ of violence in remote Indigenous communities is illustrative of the way that Indigenous issues are periodically played out as a mediated ritual known as a ‘moral panic’ (Cottle 2004; Cohen 2002). To label media reporting as a moral panic does not suggest that the issue itself is not important or does not exist. On the contrary, in the case of violence and social dysfunction in Indigenous communities, there had been numerous reports and calls from Indigenous leaders for financial and administrative assistance to resolve what was a well-known health and social crisis. Labelling the media’s reporting of the issue as a moral panic, however, suggest that the news story is constructed in particular ways that heighten its immediacy and its intensity. In the case of the ‘paedophile rings’ story, no single event precipitated the eruption of the story, but revelations of the threat were revealed in the form of allegations of child sexual abuse in remote Indigenous communities. The perpetrators of the threat were invariably identified as Indigenous men (despite evidence that in many cases, non-Indigenous men were the perpetrators), and innocent victims were identified as Indigenous women or children. The media itself – particularly the Australian newspaper – emerged as moral campaigners against the threat, while responsibility for resolving the crisis was placed firmly with State and Federal Governments. In the ‘paedophile rings’ crisis, the issues remained unresolved but the media nevertheless shifted its attention and ignored the plight of Indigenous people living with community dysfunction, sexual abuse and violence - until the next ‘panic’ was constructed in June 2007.

Conclusions

This paper concludes that Indigenous issues, including their most serious dimensions such as violence and disadvantage, have not been treated as ongoing, newsworthy issues in the Australian press over the past six-and-a-half years. Importantly, reporting has increasingly been structured around intense ‘spikes’ of episodic, sensationalist crises that focus on the failure of individuals or individual communities to meet their responsibilities. Most journalists remain content to talk-up, rather than really talk about the many problems facing remote Indigenous communities. In this way, Australian journalists are failing to realise James Carey’s conceptualisation of journalism as a public conversation (in Meadows, 2001b; Carey 1993). They appear unable, or unwilling to engage with communities with whom they write for or about, when they try to address complex but important social issues.

Journalists have available to them a range of news frames for presenting news about Indigenous people and communities. It would appear from this analysis of reporting that journalists’ framing of Indigenous issues has narrowed from 2000-2006. There has been a shutting down of public discussion of Indigenous reconciliation, of Indigenous disadvantage, social justice or non-Indigenous racism. Journalists continue to choose the route of sensationalist reporting, drawing on the news value of conflict, framing ongoing issues of social dislocation and dysfunction as ‘crises’ and narrating Indigenous people and issues as problematic. Indigenous men are framed as dangerous others, reinforcing conceptions of them as a societal risk and a threat to the existing order. Over the course of decade, framing of Indigenous issues through a prism of individual responsibility became more dominant.

Such narrow and stigmatising portrayals of Indigenous Australians allows for the perpetuation of socio-cultural values that further alienate Indigenous populations. The ‘talking-up’ and breaking of taboos about the issues facing remote Indigenous communities does not appear to have assisted in the local understanding of these issues by Australians not
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directly engaged with them; who know these only as mediated issues (McCallum 2007). It
has certainly not had a positive impact on the health and living outcomes of those people
living in remote Indigenous communities (Measey et al. 2006).

Mediated crises about Indigenous issues are played out in Australian newspapers against
a backdrop of significant policy changes in the realm of Indigenous governance. The
Australian was the only newspaper that really focused on issues of ‘crisis’ in Indigenous
Australia, and its’ reporting can be seen to have played an important role in shifting public
discussion of Indigenous issues. Journalists used a number of devices in their reporting,
including the framing of Indigenous violence as a combination of failure of Government
policy and individual responsibility of those involved. Many of the public crises reported on,
particularly by the Australian, can be understood as orchestrated political campaigns with
clearly articulated arguments for legislative change in the Indigenous political sphere. Cottle
(2004) argued that such reporting goes to the heart of current debate about the media’s
relationship to wider structures and processes of power. Further analysis and research is
required to fully appreciate the interwoven or conflated nature of advocacy reporting and
shifting government policy in an Australian context.
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Endnotes

1 In August 2006 the Northern Territory Government commissioned a Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Child Abuse. Its report, delivered to the NT Government on 1 April 2007 and publicly released on 25 June 2007, precipitated radical intervention into the governance of Indigenous Australian Australians living in remote NT communities by the Federal Government. This paper does not deal with the Prime Minister’s policy announcements, but examines the discursive conditions that enabled such drastic policy shifts to be widely accepted within the Australian public sphere.
ii I am sincerely grateful to Georgie Benecke and Stephanie Lyons for their patient, thorough and meticulous research assistance on this project.
iii This paper does not examine in detail the coverage of Indigenous violence in the West Australian.
iv Since the release of the report by the Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Women’s Taskforce on Violence in 1999 there have been as many as 40 official inquiries into domestic violence and sexual abuse in Indigenous communities, including the Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce’s Breaking the Silence report, 2006 (See also NACCHO 2003; Webb-Pullman, Nethercote & Vorrath 2007)

References

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