

Reporting Diversity Case Study

Mediating the 'uneasy conversation': Reporting and engaging with Indigenous and multicultural issues in Australia.

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Introduction: Reporting the Indigenous and the Multicultural

The Reporting Diversity project seeks to raise the media industries' awareness about the challenges of reporting on multicultural affairs and to provide materials for skills-building to help raise the quality of reportage and enhance community harmony. This research case study aims to explore, in some detail, one particularly problematic aspect for journalists reporting diversity in an Australian context – the reporting and representation of *both* Indigenous and minority ethnic communities.

Since Australia's introduction of a formal policy of multiculturalism in the 1970s, the term 'diversity' has come to encompass both Indigenous and multicultural populations. But as Ann Curthoys (2000) has pointed out, this conflation of the Indigenous and the multicultural has been an 'uneasy conversation' that has been the subject of different understandings in Australian policy and political landscapes. Academics have identified this as a theoretical and policy inconsistency, but there has been little resolution on a policy front (Levey, 2008). Rather, we have seen the establishment and operation of parallel but discrete policy discourses about Indigenous issues on the one hand, and 'migrant', 'new settler' or 'multicultural' issues on the other.

We argue that Curthoys' 'uneasy conversation' exists for both those who develop policy, and those who report on news about those policies, but that there has been very little critical examination of the role that journalists play in engaging with and representing such issues in an Australian context. The inconsistencies and implications of the parallel discussions about Indigenous and multicultural issues are most apparent at certain discourse moments, particularly when journalists report on issues of inter-cultural conflict between Indigenous and other minorities, or when they report on stories that mark out 'white' or 'mainstream' Australians. We argue that such reporting presents news audiences with complex stories about Indigenous Australians and ethnic minorities, and the policies that govern them. This must inevitably contribute to providing audiences with a particular way of understanding these 'others' in Australian society, with implications for the promotion and acceptance of policies of cultural diversity. To address this problem, our study asked the following research questions:

1. How do Australian journalists report news concerning both Indigenous and ethnic minority communities?
2. How do journalists report on issues of conflict between Indigenous and ethnic minority communities?
3. To what extent does the reporting and portrayal of issues involving Indigenous and ethnic minority communities comply with official guidelines and policies?
4. How do Australians 'talk back' to journalists about the portrayal of issues involving Indigenous and ethnic minority communities?
5. What are the impacts of media reporting of 'Indigenous' and 'ethnic' issues on the representation of minority communities in Australia, and on the representation of non-Indigenous, 'mainstream' Australians?

To address these questions, we have identified two exemplars of recent news stories that demonstrate our case.

The first exemplar is a detailed examination of the way the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in March 2008 on the findings of a 'confidential' survey by the NSW Secondary Principals Council

regarding the decreasing enrolment of 'white' students in NSW public schools. We analyse the extensive and at times inflammatory coverage of the 'White Flight' report, arguing that the notion of Australia's dominant 'whiteness' was taken for granted and privileged in the reporting. 'Non-whiteness' was localised to refer to different populations in different regions of Australia – 'Asian', 'Lebanese' or 'Muslim' in Sydney, and Indigenous in rural NSW. Indigenous people in particular were named and blamed for driving 'white' families from the State school system, indicating the ongoing tension in discourses about diversity in Australia. Interestingly, our analysis of community responses to the 'White Flight' story demonstrated that online blogs while reacting predictably to the *Sydney Morning Herald's* dominant framing of the issue, also demonstrated local resistance to the news media's playing up of the racialised nature of the story.

Our second exemplar traces the reporting of local inter-cultural tension between Indigenous and Samoan communities following a 'bashing death' in Brisbane in 2008. We analyse the way local journalists, particularly in *The Courier Mail*, carefully negotiated their responsibilities to report the story, drawing on a wide range of local and official sources in their reports. We observe that the story developed from news of a violent death to become a 'flashpoint' of conflict between two violent and dangerous 'outsider' groups. Using news frame analysis we examine how 'race conflict' came to dominate the reporting of the issue at the expense of an 'Indigenous rights' perspective. Journalists both privileged the rights of Indigenous Australians as the original settlers, and blamed them as the underlying cause of the conflict by highlighting their unwillingness to reconcile with the Samoan community.

This paper locates these exemplars within the policy developments that have governed both Indigenous and migrant Australian communities. We present a range of theoretical perspectives that can inform an analysis of media reporting: colonialism; racism and whiteness studies; and studies of intercultural conflict. We examine the professional practices, guidelines and interventions that guide journalists in their reporting on race issues more generally. The paper then outlines the methodology for selecting and analysing news media content. From our analysis we draw a range of conclusions and make recommendations to assist in the training and awareness of journalists to expand their intercultural competence.

Research context

Historical and political context

There is a tendency for histories of race relations in Australia to be presented as a series of policy progressions beginning with Federation in 1901. These 'consensus histories' characterise the period 1901-1945 as 'bad White Australia policy'; 1945-1965 as 'not quite as bad assimilationist policy'; 1965-1972 as 'even-less-bad integrationist policy'; 1972-1996 as 'trying to be good multiculturalism policy' and 1997-present as 'bad new regressive policy' (Hodge & O'Carroll, 2006, pp. 16-17). Some have called for these histories to be challenged on several grounds, including that they ignore the complex connections people have always made in Australia and the similarities between features of 'pre multicultural' era policy and present immigration policy (Hodge & O'Carroll, 2006). An outline of some of the key shifts in the emphasis of policies concerning race and ethnicity in Australia confirms the view that a progressivist reading may be too simplistic.

Indigenous Australians were deliberately excluded in the establishment of the Australian nation in 1901. In official policy they were assumed to be a 'dying race' that needed to be protected and distanced from the rest of the population. The official policy of assimilation was introduced in 1937, with the explicit intention of eventually ridding Australia of a discrete Indigenous 'race'. State and Federal governments actively promoted the assimilation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians until the 1960s.

The migration of populations to Australia has been a permanent feature of Australian settlement, with English, Irish, Chinese, Pacific Islander, Middle-Eastern and African populations arriving at different times. But official immigration policies were activated following World War II, with waves of migrants arriving from European countries. A Department of Immigration was established in 1945. These new settler populations were also governed by assimilationist policies, along with the White Australia policy (*Immigration Restriction Act 1901*), that actively prohibited the immigration of certain racial and ethnic groups for settlement in Australia (DIAC, 2008b; see also Lopez, 2000).

It was not until the 1970s that the White Australia policy was finally abolished and race removed as a factor in immigration policy. The Whitlam government introduced a policy of multiculturalism, coinciding with a non-discriminatory immigration policy and the consequent influx of migrants from Asian countries. From the outset, multiculturalism was a contested discourse open to multiple interpretations and political uses (Putnis, 1989). It has been suggested that multiculturalism became the new national cultural policy against which 'Aboriginal affairs' was pitted (Anderson, 2000).

Simultaneously with government policy changes, a grass-roots, anti-racist discourse emerged (Clark 2008) and it reflected on the relationship between 'White' Australia and both Indigenous and migrant populations (Castles et al, 1988; Adams, 1997). There was a growing awareness of Indigenous land and other rights, alongside awareness of discrimination against various minority groups. Growing awareness of racism led to an emphasis on racial tolerance – of both migrant and Indigenous communities. While the discourse of 'tolerance' has been criticised as reflecting Australia's unwillingness to confront its own 'invader' status (Hage, 1998) and justifying 'white' privilege, it has nevertheless played an important role in the development of multicultural policy.

According to Curthoys (2000)

In the 1980s, as multicultural discourse became ever more powerful, parallels between indigenous and multicultural issues *were* at last drawn together in official, intellectual and public arenas. (p. 28, original italics)

This trend was opposed by many Indigenous people, however, with one Indigenous activist saying: 'the Aboriginal nation...has little or no enthusiasm for the so-called multicultural society of Australia...the Aboriginal people still find themselves at the bottom of the Australian socio-economic scale with regard to multiculturalism' (Oodgeroo 1988, quoted in Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2008, p. 47). Banerjee & Osuri (2000) have suggested that 'colonial dispossession and domination are forgotten as Aboriginal peoples are positioned as another of Australia's 'minority' groups within the current programme of cultural pluralism' (p. 276). Aboriginal critics, such as Mick Dodson, have suggested that the inclusion of Aboriginal issues under a multicultural agenda 'disavows ... the priority of Australian Aboriginal communities as owners of this continent but also the specificity of historical relations between Indigenous and settler communities' (Banerjee & Osuri, 2000, p. 267).

In Australia, 'multicultural' is a term that represents the cultural and linguistic diversity of Australian society. Indigenous Australians are incorporated as one of those diverse cultures (DIAC, 2008a; Anderson, 2000). But, as Curthoys has observed, our colonial history has established two quite distinct discourses – a multicultural discourse that pertains to both established migrant communities and the settlement of new waves of migrants to Australia, and an Indigenous discourse emphasising the rights and unique status of the original inhabitants, and issues of land, dispossession and disadvantage.

Multiculturalism during the early 1990s' Keating Labor government provided the impetus for a conservative backlash from those who argued that it neglected 'mainstream' Australians (Forrest & Dunn, 2006). The election to Federal Parliament of the reactionary politician Pauline Hanson in 1996 fractured discourses of tolerance and highlighted community resentment and discord about *both* Indigenous Australians and Asian communities in a trope of 'special privileges' (Mickler, 1998). During the eleven-year tenure of the Howard government, race remained a key issue in public and media discourse, despite an increased emphasis in official policy on harmony and community cohesion. The Howard Government's formulation of 'Australian multiculturalism' had the effect of according a privileged status to Anglo-Australians within multicultural history and identity and, it has been suggested, led to a return to an assimilationist perspective (Forrest & Dunn, 2006). Krongold (2006, p. 9) has argued that multicultural discourse was most vitiated during the years of the Howard government and that: 'The neo-conservative legacy of 'tolerant' multiculturalism has been a metaphor for subaltern relegation of migrant groups'.

The most significant policy shift came with the 1999 *New Agenda for Multicultural Australia*, and the absorption of responsibilities for Indigenous affairs into the Immigration Department in 2001. Again, this move was resisted by many Indigenous people who resented the implication that Indigenous and ethnic minorities could be placed together as Australia's 'others'. Morrissey (2006) said: 'Yet it is still possible to see the abolition of ATSIC as a symbolically crystallizing moment: the point at which one colonizing narrative supersedes another' (p. 350). Responsibility for Indigenous issues was once again removed from the portfolio in 2007, and the Department was renamed Immigration and Citizenship.

The year 2007 saw the election of the Rudd Labor Government. While the new Government did not re-instate the word 'multicultural' into the portfolio title, it did appoint a Parliamentary

Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services, the Hon, Laurie Ferguson, MP, who reiterated the Government sponsorship of multiculturalism (Topsfield & Smith, 2008a, pp. 1&2; Topsfield & Smith, 2008b, pp. 1&2). The new portfolio arrangements signalled a further separation in official discourse and portfolio responsibility between multicultural and Indigenous issues. Nevertheless, the current statement on multicultural policy - *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* (DIMA, 2003, p. 2) - explicitly conflates Indigenous Australians with non-Indigenous settlers.

Curthoys (2000) has argued that from its colonial origins, Australia has failed to come to terms with the parallels between immigration and Indigenous policy despite the parallels in discourse, policy and practice. A 'keeping out' and 'othering' of both groups clearly existed from earliest times, but at different times media and policy interest have focussed on either migrant issues or Indigenous issues. Curthoys has suggested that

the two cases continued to be rarely spoken together. White Australia did not address its racial others in a united or coherent discourse, but rather in separate registers at different times. (2000 p. 25)

Theoretical context

Race and Racism

Several theoretical perspectives can inform attempts to understand Indigenous and multicultural policies, and the role of the media in negotiating and reporting these issues. Race and racism have been powerful explanatory tools for understanding media reporting. In tracing the history of race and racism in Australia Hollinsworth (1998) concluded that Aboriginal and non-European migrants have been excluded from the development of an Australian identity, and have been the subject of both interpersonal and systemic racism. Jayasuriya (2002) has noted that the political justification for the White Australia policy was motivated less by a sense of racial inferiority than by the perceived incompatibility of non-white settlers with the imagined community of Australia as an 'unmixed nation', which was seen as indispensable to social cohesion and national unity.

Theorists have identified a distinction between different types of racism: 'old racism' and 'new racism' (Sniderman et al, 1991). In Australia it is suggested that the former prevailed during the period 1901 until the early 1970s and the end of the White Australia policy. The 'new racism' is less overt in that rather than viewing ethnic minorities as inferior, they are differentiated as threats to 'social cohesion' and 'national unity' of the dominant (Anglo-Celtic) 'host' society (Dunn et al, 2004). Nonetheless, because one of the things that is new about the 'new racism' thesis is its alliance with traditional values, it can be difficult to prove with any great certainty that attitudes are based on race alone rather than ideological values (Sniderman et al., 1991). The two kinds of racism can be seen to co-exist but the new racism has become more dominant.

Whiteness

Whiteness and critical whiteness studies offer the most recent contribution to theorisation in relation to race and ethnicity. Whiteness studies emphasise the importance of understanding whiteness as a construction just like other racial categories. It directs analysts to examine the contexts in and through which 'white' is 'produced simultaneously as a non-racial, 'empty' and yet normative and dominant social location and category of belonging' (Lewis, 2007, p. 882). By problematising 'white' and 'whiteness' we can begin to see how they are increasingly cultural, rather than racial concepts (Forrest & Dunn, 2006) within and through which other identity markers are mobilised. Nayak (2007) suggests whiteness studies offer an important corrective to sociology of race relations and he identified three overlapping paradigms on whiteness: abolishing, deconstructing, and rethinking. Without going into any detail about work in this area,

a number of insights are particularly noteworthy. These include: that whiteness is a cultural achievement that extends beyond material privilege to a discernible and broader cultural attitude and is constituted by many shades of difference (Nayak, 2007); that whiteness is not natural or inevitable, that racialised identities are not fixed, and that dominant groups must work to maintain their whiteness (Perera, 1999).

It is important to recognise that whiteness is discursive as well as embodied (Osuri & Banerjee, 2004). In response to the perceived limitations of whiteness studies, such as the notion that whiteness is a free-floating text, Kaufmann (2006) has suggested that 'we need to return to a bit of critical reality: people's racial distinctions are real, even if there is little genetic basis to them' (p. 237). This, he said, constitutes the social 'reality' of race.

In relation to the Australian political scene, Perera (1999) has argued that Hansonism revealed the fractured, fragile and changing nature of whiteness. According to Perera, group identities shift and some groups who were historically identified as outsiders (for example Irish or Italian) 'become white' over time. She calls this 'a hierarchy of whiteness' (1999, p. 185), which leaves 'at the bottom end the seemingly intractably unassimilable categories of 'Asians' and 'Aborigines' (Perera 1999, p. 186). This echoes Kaufmann's (2006) observation that a distinction is often made between those physically 'in-between' and the definite 'other' racial group. Perera (1999) stated that:

historically the threat of 'Asia' defines the external boundaries as well as the psychological, social and cultural limits of the Australian nation, while Aboriginal Australians function as its constitutive *internal* other. (p. 187, original italics)

Curthoys (2000) has suggested that Pauline Hanson played an important role in melding discontent about both Indigenous and multicultural communities in that she articulated a view of both 'Asians' and 'Aborigines' who were responsible for making things so difficult for 'white' Australians – and who were ultimately responsible for racial conflict and racism.

Inter-cultural conflict

Studies of inter-cultural and inter-racial conflict can also inform our study (Pettigrew, 1998). Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2008) presented a case study of inter-racial rivalry between Indigenous Australians and newly settled Sudanese migrant communities in Perth. Their study concluded that both race and class work together to result in local-level inter-cultural conflict. Each of these communities is highly visible and suffers racial discrimination and both groups compete for scarce resources of work and space. They noted that 'the blackness and socio-economic disadvantage of both groups, which sets them apart from the majority population, has not produced a shared sense of identity and solidarity...but instead created antipathy, competition and conflict' (p. 52). In accordance with Aboriginal resistance to having their rights and interests conflated with other groups under the banner of multiculturalism, Indigenous Australians are resentful that their cultural identity is not valued. Colic-Peisker & Tilbury suggested that frustrated entitlement may be one explanation for some Aboriginal people reacting adversely to the arrival of black Africans. These authors suggested Indigenous Australians may feel threatened by new arrivals whose socio-economic circumstances mean that they compete for scarce resources, such as public housing. Positive media coverage of African arrivals and social and material support given to them may feed this sense of frustrated entitlement, they suggested. They argued that the dominant public discourse of the Africans is one of gratitude, which implies the acceptance of an unequal position, and that this is pleasing to the white population because it presents them in a positive light.

Colic-Peisker & Tilbury's case study '... points to unresolved issues in the racially/ethnically based structure of social opportunity and disadvantage in Australia, which are generally swept under the carpet of multicultural harmony' (p. 52). They concluded that 'Australia's migration policies ignore the interests of Aboriginal communities, producing an almost automatic situation of competition and tension between Indigenous people and migrants' (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2008, p.47; see also Hage 2003).

Media representation and framing

In the political and theoretical context outlined above, how then do we understand and approach the role of the media in reporting on Indigenous and new settler communities and multiculturalism more broadly?

Due (2008) has suggested that attitudes towards, and the treatment of, Indigenous people and refugees is 'intimately bound together with the 'imagining' of Australia as normatively home to white people' (p. 2). Her analysis of newspaper coverage following the murder of a Sudanese refugee and the subsequent restriction of Australia's African refugee intake found that the technique of denying racism was frequently used to present Australia as tolerant and generous. This makes it difficult, she argues, for non-white minority groups to have their claims of racism heard and listened to and for any acknowledgement of the existence of white privilege. By constructing Australia as normatively white she says the mainstream media 'overlooked the needs of refugees and denied Australia's Indigenous heritage and the rights of Indigenous people to their land' (p. 12).

The use of news framing theory to analyse the portrayal of Indigenous issues builds on work done by others who have looked at the way the media depict issues around race and ideology (Miller & Riechert, 2003; Altheide, 1997; Gamson, 1992). According to Reese (2003, p. 11), news frames are defined as the 'organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world'. Importantly, news frame analysis can demonstrate how social issues are contested in public discourse. The landmark 'Racism and the Media' study (Jakubowicz et al., 1994) viewed media reporting through a theoretical lens of racism, identifying the key features of reporting and representation of both Indigenous and ethnic issues. But their study, and a number of other Australian studies that followed, also highlighted a range of dominant news frames drawn upon by journalists in their reporting of Indigenous and multicultural issues.

Jakubowicz et al. (1994) found that journalists overwhelmingly portrayed Indigenous Australians as a *threat to the existing order*, almost always reporting on Aboriginal people as a *source of conflict*. They also found that Indigenous people were framed as *authentic Australians*; available for *cultural appropriation* and a *source of pride* for all Australians. Bell (1997, p. 38) found that journalists tended to frame non-Indigenous Australians as simultaneously *racist* and *tolerant*, an ideological binary that denied a place for structural racism represented through the media. Meadows (2001) found that Aboriginal people were routinely portrayed as *problematic* for mainstream society. Mickler (1998) explored the role of the talkback radio in manufacturing and perpetuating the 'myth of *Aboriginal privilege*'. He found that Indigenous Australians had been portrayed as having unfair advantages based on their race, which were not available to other Australians. Brough (1999) concluded that Indigenous health was portrayed as an *individual failure* of Indigenous people to take responsibility for managing their own health. Simultaneously, Indigenous substance abuse was portrayed as *Australia's shame*, and Indigenous people as *victims* of the failure of the Australian welfare state.

Within the field of journalism studies, researchers have addressed the role and practice of

journalists in reporting on Indigenous issues. Ewart (1997) interviewed regional journalists to find that they were largely uninterested and unreflexive 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; see also Meadows & Ewart, 2001). The controversial report by the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board, 'Race for the Headlines' (ADBNSW, 2003) also examined media reporting as racist discourse and, unsurprisingly, 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 racialised reporting on ethnic minorities (ADBNSW 2003, p. 118).

These periodic recommendations by scholars of ways to improve Indigenous media representation, and the ongoing resistance to them by media practitioners in the face of the dominant news value of conflict, suggests that the reporting of Indigenous and multicultural issues in Australia remains problematic. The following section outlines some of the formal interventions developed by media industries and regulators to address these issues.

Regulating media reporting: guidelines and resources

At the most basic level journalists are subject to journalism and media industry codes of ethics and codes of practice (Richards, 2005) and laws of racial vilification. In addition to these, recommendations and guidelines for media reporting have been developed with the aim of encouraging the media to produce more accurate and sensitive representations of Indigenous people and ethnic minorities. For our purposes we reviewed some of these resources in order to see if there were any similarities and differences in guidelines for the reporting of Indigenous Australians compared to those for ethnic minorities.

It has been suggested that compared with Indigenous people and issues, there is relatively less material on reporting about ethnic people and issues in Australia (Stockwell & Scott, 2000; 2001). Internationally, though, a number of organisations and industry bodies have produced resources for the media's reporting of race and ethnicity (see European Centre for War, Peace and the News Media, 1999; National Union of Journalists, n.d.; Society of Editors and Media Trust, n.d.; Society of Professional Journalists, 2001). In Australia, resources for the media's reporting of Indigenous Australians, in particular, have been developed, some of which also include specific guidelines for reporting ethnicity.

In response to a recommendation of the 1992 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the Media and Indigenous Australians Project was started. One component of the project was the production of *Signposts*, a resource offered as a 'very basic survival guide' for journalists reporting on Aboriginal and ethnic affairs (Eggerking & Plater, 1992). Although it is over 15 years old, the issues this resource addresses prevail. Also following the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody the National Media Forum was established, bringing together journalists, Indigenous community members and media researchers to discuss the representation of Indigenous people in the Australian media. The 1998 forum, 'Reporting Indigenous Issues' aimed to move away from the polarised debate about reporting characterised by sweeping Indigenous accusations of racism and defensive accounts of 'standard journalistic practice' (Eggerking et al. 1998).

The 1998 forum identified issues for journalists and editors to consider when choosing stories and provided advice such as recognising that stories do not always have to be about conflict and learning to spot which stories are not 'about' Aboriginality. In terms of accessing information for stories, advice included: familiarise yourself with protocols of local Indigenous communities; never question the Aboriginality of a speaker; do not take refusal to speak as hostility; be aware that in some Indigenous cultures staring is rude; seek advice about how to describe an Indigenous speaker; ask about cultural differences when reporting grief; and be especially careful when presenting unfolding stories (Sheridan Burns & McKee, 1999).

These resources laid the groundwork for future resources, such as perhaps the most comprehensive Australian resource, Stockwell & Scott's (2000) *All Media Guide to Fair and Cross-Cultural Reporting*. This was funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Living in Harmony program and developed in consultation with a reference group comprising academics and practitioners. The Guide is positioned as extending the professional purview of media professionals

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. (p. 1)

Media workers, they suggest, require cultural competence to be able to fairly and accurately report on issues involving people from other cultures.

The Guide devotes separate sections to 'Covering Ethnic Communities' and 'Covering Indigenous Australia', which in itself suggests that there are important differences to take into account. The section on covering ethnicity urges media workers to: avoid stereotypical images and misleading associations between ethnicity and events; seek advice from the community about appropriate spokespeople; be aware of possible repercussions of referring to a person's ethnicity; recognise that some members of ethnic communities may be reluctant to speak to the media, avoid linking criminality with ethnicity; avoid using racial tags when describing wanted persons or suspects; pay attention to language used to report on immigrants and refugees and their situations; and think carefully about the use of file footage.

A section on Aboriginality warns against references to 'the Aborigines' or 'blacks' because it suggests a single dimension to a broad diversity of people. *The Guide* identifies the diversity within Australia's Indigenous culture. With regard to covering Indigenous Australia, *The Guide* says that the information to follow is particularly relevant to remote communities but also has some application to work in settled areas. It includes information on cultural protocols in relation to such things as eye contact, greeting and pointing, sacred or significant sites and naming and showing deceased persons. Strong emphasis is given to observing cultural protocols in these resources.

The section of *The Guide* on ethnicity is more about cautioning journalists about reporting style relating to balance and accuracy of language, whereas the section on Indigenous Australia is strongly directed at highlighting cultural protocols with regard to engaging with Indigenous people and communities and respecting their culture.

The Australian Press Council (2001) also has a set of guidelines, 'Reporting Race', which conflate Indigenous and ethnic minorities. It is intended to advise the print media about the ways in which matters related to race, nationality and ethnicity should be reported. It states that the tone and contexts of reports are crucial elements the Council takes into account when deciding if the principles have been breached. It also outlines certain exceptions to the principle of not emphasising a person's race, religion, nationality, country of origin, such as part of police descriptions of wanted suspects or evidence tendered in court. It says the Council is mainly concerned with references that promote negative stereotypes. Unless relevant and deemed in the public interest, the Council's principles state that gratuitous emphasis should not be placed on race, religion, nationality, colour and country of origin amongst others.

ABC Message Stick has also produced a resource, *Cultural Protocols for Indigenous Reporting in the Media*, the aim of which is to 'bridge the gap between the needs of television and film makers and the Indigenous people and their customs' (p. 1). The practical resource identifies 'racist' terminology to avoid, gives guidance with regard to grammar and conduct when communicating with Indigenous people, and lists questions to ask when researching a story.

These are just some of the resources that are available to assist and improve the media's reporting of Indigenous Australians and ethnic minorities. We noted differences in emphasis between resources, with some conflating Indigenous and 'ethnic' minorities under the banner of reporting 'race' or 'diversity', while others reflected public discourse that spoke of the two groups separately. Overall, the resources suggest that issues of concern with regard to media reporting of Indigenous Australians and ethnic minorities are similar. We are not aware of any research

on the extent to which such guidelines and resources are used by media workers. It is also important to note that journalism educators have been at the forefront of discussions about how media reporting in this area can be improved as well as in identifying the constraints faced by journalists reporting in this area (see, for example, Meadows, 1995; O'Donnell, 2003; Richards, 2005; Starck, 1994).

It is clear, however, that problematic reporting continues, which highlights the fact that there are many factors at play in the media's reporting of these issues. In our approach we recognise that judgements about accuracy and sensitivity of media portrayals are by no means straightforward and are in many ways subjective. For the same reasons we accept the limitations of media reporting guidelines and acknowledge the complex factors that contribute to the media's reporting of conflicts and controversies when race and ethnicity are salient issues.

Reporting of Indigenous and multicultural issues in Australia: the research

Exploring news media reporting of the relationships between Indigenous and multicultural discourses in Australia has proven a rather difficult and complex task. Like Curthoys' earlier study (2000), a broad sweep of newspaper databases and other online journalism and discussion forums revealed that there is very little discussion of ethnic minority and Indigenous issues together. As with policy and academic discourses, journalists tend to report in separate registers about issues concerning Indigenous communities and people, and issues concerning refugee, immigration, new-settler or migrant groups.

Occasionally, stories of the intersection of Indigenous and ethnic minority groups arise. These might be stories of inter-group conflict, or they might be stories predominantly about the 'white' mainstream majority – but what is left out (often unacknowledged by the journalists) is a story about both Indigenous Australians and specific ethnic minorities, particularly recent settlers to Australia. This must inevitably contribute to providing audiences with a particular way of understanding Indigenous and new settler groups which in turn perpetuates cultural stereotyping and division. It is these stories that form the basis of our study.

Our study asked the following research questions:

1. How do Australian journalists report news concerning both Indigenous and ethnic minority communities?
2. How do journalists report on issues of conflict between Indigenous and ethnic minority communities?
3. To what extent does the reporting and portrayal of issues involving Indigenous and ethnic minority communities comply with official guidelines and policies?
4. How do Australians 'talk back' to journalists about the portrayal of issues involving Indigenous and ethnic minority communities?
5. What are the impacts of media reporting of 'Indigenous' and 'ethnic' issues on the representation of minority communities in Australia, and on the representation of non-Indigenous, 'mainstream' Australians?

Method

We first conducted a review of literature concerning the political and historical context of multicultural policy and its intersection with Indigenous policy, academic research into Australian news media reporting of race, racism and whiteness studies, and reviewed media guidelines as they pertain to 'race' issues. This literature review led us to appreciate that we must examine issues that represented not only Indigenous and minority ethnic communities, but non-Indigenous 'White' or 'mainstream' Australians as well.

We drew on a wide selection of media sites for our initial survey of news pertaining to the issue. We examined newspaper records via the *Factiva* database, television reporting via the *TVNews* database compiled for the television news component of the current Reporting Diversity study (Phillips & Tapsall, 2007), online news sites, community group sites, local blogs, and source material from Ministerial and Departmental sites and archives.

We first conducted a systematic search of a range of terms including 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal', and 'migrant', 'ethnic', 'immigration', 'immigrant', 'refugee', 'Samoan', 'Lebanese', 'Muslim',

'African', 'Islander' and 'Somalian'.

From this initial search we identified two news stories that exemplified the complexity of news media reporting of Indigenous and multicultural issues. Our choice was based on the amount of coverage and the degree to which the stories were suitable to answer the study's research questions.

Our first exemplar is based on a story which broke in March 2008 concerning a 2007 Report about the withdrawal of students of Anglo-European descent from NSW government schools. This local Sydney media-generated crisis, or 'moral panic', adopted and promoted the report's term 'White Flight'. The 'White Flight' case study importantly addressed many of the issues concerning public discourse around who is not considered 'white'. It enabled us to draw a range of conclusions about the newsworthiness of racial disharmony in Australia, and about journalists' presumptions about 'whiteness', and also about drawing the boundaries of 'whiteness' through framing of Indigenous, Muslim and various Asian communities in New South Wales.

Our second exemplar provides a sharp contrast with the 'White Flight' story. The story of racial conflict between Indigenous and Samoan communities in Brisbane in 2008 was another major news story, this time located in Brisbane. Stories of conflict between Indigenous and ethnic minorities provide a routine and enduring news frame for these groups as problematic for mainstream Australia. Unlike 'White Flight', this is a story of inter-cultural conflict, and the two groups in question are clearly identified by ethnicity. This case study extends earlier research by Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2008) about conflict between Indigenous and Sudanese communities in Perth, and its meaning in relation to understanding of cultural borders within Australia. We also analyse how this story demonstrates changing journalism practices in reporting Indigenous and multicultural issues.

For each exemplar we gathered an extensive range of media texts. We purposively sampled newspaper records via the *Factiva* database, television reporting via the *TVNews* database, online news sites, community group sites, local blogs, and source material from Ministerial and Departmental sites and archives, to gather all reporting of the issue in the months surrounding the report. We examined the case studies from a range of perspectives – the reporting of the incident in mainstream journalism (newspapers); the reporting of the incident in specialist or local online news outlets; discussion of the incident on online forums and social networking sites.

For each exemplar we also conducted a detailed analysis of news stories and audience responses. Informed by framing theory, we analysed the dominant lens through which journalists told the story Reese (2003). Qualitative thematic analysis enabled us to identify the dominant news frames in each of our exemplars. We also identify counter and oppositional frames as they occur both within mainstream reporting, and within wider public discussion of each issue.

We assess the reporting of each story against the standards laid out in the media codes of practice or guidelines relating to the reporting of race. In our approach we recognise that judgements about accuracy and sensitivity of media portrayals are by no means straightforward and are in many ways subjective. For the same reasons we accept the limitations of media reporting guidelines. Our concern is not to impose accusations of racism on individual journalists, but rather to examine media content in order to shed light on the complexity of reporting race in a multicultural society.

Exemplar 1: 'White Flight' from New South Wales Schools

Introduction

The first of our exemplars relates to the reporting in March 2008 of the findings of a 'confidential' survey by the NSW Secondary Principals' Council, which said that 'white students' were leaving public schools. A report on the survey had been presented to the New South Wales government in February 2006 but had not been released at that time. We gathered press and television coverage about the issue in the month of March, 2008. Our paper reports on 12 articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, two articles from the *Melbourne Age* and one SBS television report. The dominance of *Sydney Morning Herald* reporting reflects the highly localised nature of the reporting of this story. The SBS and *Age* stories were chosen to demonstrate the range of frames available to journalists reporting this issue, contrasting with the SMH's narrow framing of the story.

In addition to this we identified themes around which participants in online discussions constructed their comments on the issue. Suggestions of a racial and ethnic divide were privileged in the newspaper's framing of the story – tagged as 'Racial Divide' - which was to set the tone for subsequent coverage. Comments to online discussion forums in response to the reporting and the issues it raised revealed a considerable degree of resistance to the newspaper's racialised framing of the story, with some interpreting it as a media-driven panic. Our analysis shows that members of the public saw the issue in more complex terms, relating it to their own experiences with the education system, class divides and to broader issues surrounding 'multiculturalism'. While the policy of multiculturalism was not a central aspect of the news reporting of 'White Flight' many contributors to the *Sydney Morning Herald's* online forum took the opportunity to blame multiculturalism for problems in the education system. We conclude that the marking out of different racial and ethnic groups, including 'white', implied that segregation in schools is a function of racial and ethnic conflicts, rather than social and systemic factors.

News reporting

The issue first appeared on the media agenda in a front-page story in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Patty, 2008a, p. 1; Patty, 2008b, p. 5) labelled 'A Herald Investigation', which carried the following headlines:

CHILDREN'S RACIAL DIVIDE

White flight from schools (Patty, 2008a, p. 1)

White flight leaves system segregated by race (Patty, 2008b, p. 5)

The headline clearly signalled what was at issue in the story to follow, at least on the surface: a division between 'whites' and the rest who, by implication, are grouped in the 'non-white' category. We learned that the battleground and site of the 'racial segregation' referenced is the education system:

White students are fleeing public schools, leaving behind those of Aboriginal and Middle Eastern origin, a secret report by high school principals reveals.

The story reported that the Principals' Council is concerned that 'white flight' is 'undermining the public education system and threatening social cohesion' with some describing it as 'de facto apartheid'. Significantly, the story reported that the survey's findings are 'backed' by academic

research 'which has identified evidence of racial conflict in schools in the wake of the Cronulla riots' (Patty 2008a, p. 1, para. 3).

The story reported that the findings also suggest 'students of Anglo-European descent are avoiding some schools with students of mainly Asian background' (para. 3). It reported:

Not only have some public schools lost enrolments; they have become racially segregated. In pockets of rural and remote NSW, Aboriginal students fill public schools and white students attend Catholic and other private schools in the same town. (Patty 2008a, p. 1, para. 4)

Parents of 'Anglo-European' students in Sydney are reported to be 'avoiding what they perceive as predominantly Lebanese, Muslim and Asian schools' (para. 5). In relation to the situation in some rural and regional areas of NSW the story quoted the report as saying 'This is almost certainly white flight from towns in which public school's enrolment consists increasingly of indigenous students' (para. 8). It reported that the pattern is repeated in the Sydney region and quoted the report as saying: 'Based on comments from principals, this most likely consists of flight to avoid Islamic students and communities' (Patty 2008a, p. 1, para. 8).

The story included comments principals made to the survey, and quoted earlier research by Dr Carol Reid, the Associate Head of the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney, which had examined racial conflict in Sydney schools in the wake of the Cronulla riots. Dr Reid was quoted as saying:

What I have discovered is principals are losing the last of their white kids to Catholic schools across the road. A principal in the Middle Eastern part of the city was saying that he had no white kids in his school. (Patty 2008a, p. 1, para. 16)

I've been involved in education for 30 years and I've never seen this polarisation around class, but also around ethnicity and race. (Patty 2008a, p. 1)

This initial SMH story explicitly invoked an image of 'busloads of white students' (Patty 2008a, p. 1, para. 21) crossing borders to attend schools occupied predominantly by other 'white' students.

Later in the story an alternative way of framing the issues became apparent. Owen Hasler from the NSW Teachers Federation was quoted as saying: 'Public schools are becoming de facto Aboriginal schools. ... It appears to be a result of the last 10 to 15 years of funding'. Dr Reid was reported as saying that the Howard and Liberal state governments have contributed to 'white flight' by assisting families to send their children to the school of their choice. A NSW Greens MP was quoted as saying that government incentives have created a 'recipe for educational segregation' (Patty 2008a, p. 1, para. 31). Could this have been an alternative way of framing the story?

Thus, it can be seen that the story included a range of perspectives and situated the latest findings in the broader context of the impact of government policies, which raises questions about the decision to racialise the story and frame it as evidence of racial and ethnic conflict. Did it, of necessity, warrant being framed in racialised terms? How did the category of 'white' function in the story? What was it being used to signify?

Perhaps the short answer to the first question is that conflict in general, and racial and ethnic conflict in particular, have considerable news value. Situating the survey's findings in relation to evidence of racial conflict following the Cronulla riots implied that the same kind of racial conflict that characterised the latter event also explains the phenomenon of 'white flight'. The Cronulla riots function as a media template, which provides a shorthand way of making sense of fresh news and guides public discussion about the past, present and the future (Kitzinger, 2000). By coupling these two sets of research, a story that could have been framed around parents choosing to send their children to private schools because of government policies or underfunding of the public system was instead framed as evidence of underlying racial/ethnic conflict between 'whites' and those 'outgroups' long recognised as key 'others' in Australia: Asians, Muslims and Indigenous (Dunn et al, 2004).

In regard to the question of how 'white' is used in the story and what it signified, the first point is that 'white' was used to refer to people of Anglo-European background, the dominant ethnic group in Australia. The meaning of 'white' was constituted by its differentiation from other named groups, in particular Aboriginal, Asian and Lebanese people. There were a number of binary oppositions constructed throughout the story: Aboriginal and Middle-Eastern versus 'white' students; Anglo-European versus Asian background; public versus private schools; 'white' versus Indigenous students; 'white' versus Islamic students; 'white' versus Asia; Asia versus Lebanese; and Muslim versus non-Muslim.

In many of these oppositions 'white' was defined by what it is not; it is an absent presence in the story (Perera, 1999). By implication, none of the categories against which it is pitted are included in the 'white' category even though, in terms of skin colour at least, they may well have light coloured skin. These designations are positioned as the 'others' against which 'white' is being defined in the context of the story. This illustrates that 'white' was being used to signify something much more than the colour of a person's skin. In fact, later details in this story and in subsequent coverage and public responses suggested that the phenomenon could just as easily have been framed as a class, rather than a race, issue. On this view it could be suggested that 'white' was being used to designate class-based values (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2008).

By framing the issue as one of racial divide, the suggestion was that 'white' parents are opting not to send their children to public schools because they do not want their 'white' children to be educated alongside 'non-white' others. But this was not supported by some of the captions of photographs included with the story. For example, one photograph on page one of a Caucasian girl boarding a bus in a rural setting carried the following caption:

Long ride... Isabella Carrigan, 5, boards the bus that will take her to school across the border. The location of her parent's farm and the bus route rule out the local school but some other children take the journey because their parents prefer the opportunities in Goondiwindi, where there are also fewer Aboriginal students. (Patty, 2008c, p. 1)

Another caption on a page four photograph quoted her parents as saying that their choice of school has nothing to do with race. Perspectives from Aboriginal people or people from the other named racial/ethnic groups about their choices or lack of choices were not included in the story, the implication being that they have colonised the public school system and that they lack the capacity to choose otherwise. Thus, they are being 'left behind' in the public system while the 'whites' are moving ahead.

Notwithstanding the fact that concerns about a racially segregated education system may be warranted, the story could have emphasised that lack of government funding and support for the public school system is responsible for declining enrolments. It could have emphasised that public schools attended predominantly by Aboriginal students are being disadvantaged because parents lack the resources of more well off parents to be able to choose to send their children to a private school. The question of whether the neglect of the public education system constituted a form of subtle discrimination against Aboriginal students could have been investigated.

What was also significant about the story was the underlying assumption it made about the value of mixed schools for social cohesion. The emphasis was not that 'white' or 'non-white' students were being educationally advantaged or disadvantaged but, rather, that social cohesion was being put in jeopardy: 'white flight' is 'undermining the public education system and threatening social cohesion' (Patty, 2008c, p. 1, para. 2). Some bloggers and participants in online forums picked up on this point and the perception that 'white' people were being blamed for exercising choice about where to send their children to school.

An adjacent front page story (Patty, 2008c, p. 1; Patty, 2008d, p. 4) initially focused on 'white' students not attending schools because they are deemed to be for Indigenous children and it quoted a student as saying one such school is 'too scary', which is why he does not go there. The person who takes the children to school was quoted as lamenting a time 'when the black and white kids used to mix' (para. 4). Drawing on the common trope of Indigenous 'special privilege', a mother was reported to have defied the 'white tide' from one school by sending her son there because it has smaller classes and more programs.

But Aboriginal children were not the only group positioned as driving 'whites' away by colonising certain schools in regional centres:

White students also seem to be avoiding other schools on the North Shore, and some selective schools, because they are predominantly Asian. A glance at the yearbooks of one Sydney selective high school shows that virtually all the children are of Asian background. (Patty, 2008c, p. 1, para. 11)

The suggestion is that Aboriginal people are filling public schools, which poses a potential threat to the system, while Asian people are taking over some of the more selective schools, thereby also posing a threat. It is in this context that 'white' students were positioned as victims and the 'others' blamed for making them travel such long distances to school. The story reported:

Some [parents] say they do not have a problem with their children going to school with Aboriginal students, but privately admit they are concerned about disruptive behaviour. (Patty, 2008c, p. 1, para. 13)

The implication is that it is not racism but the disruptive behaviour of Aboriginal students that is the reason parents are reluctant to send their children to school with them. This can be seen as a form of positive self-presentation and negative 'other'-representation in that parents are positioned as acting in the best interests of their children's education in response to disruptive 'others'. This is one aspect of what has been referred to as 'new racism'.

The story included further comments from Dr Carol Reid and the parents of 'white' children about why parents are not sending their children to local public schools. These included quality of the education, facilities near the school and attachments to particular schools in different areas. The perspectives of Indigenous people or those of the other named groups were not

included. Again, this story identified a range of factors that could explain what the Principals described as 'white flight' as well as delving into some of the factors that impact on parents' decisions about where to send their children to school. Nonetheless, it was race and ethnicity that provided the dominant explanatory framework.

Both front page stories were continued on page four or five where a further three related stories were published with the following headlines:

Overtuning disadvantage: The No. 1 priority being tackled from the top (Noonan, 2008a, p. 4)

Principal takes the heat off a tiny school (Patty, 2008e, p. 5)

Shades of bad old days in the US (Noonan, 2008b, p. 5)

The first of these stories focused on the need to improve the quality of education at public schools. It quoted statistics showing disparities between the learning and completion rates of Aboriginal students at different ages compared to other students in the same class.

The second story used the case of one school to illustrate the changing proportion of 'white' and Aboriginal students, but focused mainly on the principal's efforts to improve the school, which is attended in the main by Aboriginal students. On one level this story could be read as a 'good news' story, but there were also hints of racial overtones, as in the following comment from another principal who was sourced in the story as praising the principal's efforts: 'She has done a remarkable job in turning things around here...There are now some white children returning to the school' ((Patty, 2008e, p. 5, para. 8). The clear implication is that it was something to do with the Aboriginal students and their behaviour that led 'white' students to leave the school in the first instance. The suggestion is that 'white' students do not also get suspended or have poor attendance rates.

The third story provided slightly more detail about the identity of the racial and ethnic groups at issue in the survey's findings: 'white flight' is said to refer to '(predominantly) Anglo-Celtic parents' leaving schools 'where there is a perceived growth in student numbers from either an Aboriginal or ethnic (usually Lebanese) or religious (usually Muslim) background' ((Noonan, 2008b, p. 5, para. 6). This movement was likened to the officially sanctioned segregation of US schools in the 1950s and 60s. The journalist suggested that it is difficult not to see the 'officially sanctioned abandonment' (of the public school system) as 'old fashioned racism at work' (Noonan, 2008b, p. 5, para. 15).

Included on page five was a table headlined 'Class Divide'. It showed statistics from the Principals' survey on the percentage of principals who say the proportion of students of Anglo-European background is decreasing and the percentage of principals who say kids are leaving to attend nearby Catholic or other private schools.

Coverage of the 'White Flight' story was largely localised to a Sydney audience, as demonstrated by the extensive reporting from the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Analysis of other media and markets reveals that alternative frames were made available to the Sydney journalists. *SBS World News* (SBS, 2008) was the only television news program to report on the findings of the survey. It reported that the survey found that parents of Anglo-European students are increasingly pulling them out of schools that have a 'racially diverse population'. In

particular, the story referred to public schools dominated by students of 'Aboriginal, Asian and Middle Eastern origin'.

The sources it used included: Jim McAlpine, from the NSW Secondary Principals' Council and co-author of the report; Dr Carol Reed from the University of Western Sydney; and Julia Gillard, the Federal Education Minister. McAlpine expressed concern that if something isn't done we could end up with 'ghetto schools representing different ethnic backgrounds'. Julia Gillard was quoted as saying:

I would have thought that parents would value as part of the education experience their child being in multicultural Australia, learning about different cultures, learning about diversity because that's the nation that they're going to live in. (SBS, 2008)

The journalist reported that the survey's findings were backed by research by the University of Sydney showing that Australia is not alone in the shift, with the increasing marketisation of education leading to racial segregation in schools. The Cronulla riots were not referenced as they were in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Dr Carol Reed was reported to have said that Howard Government policies, such as dezoning, have contributed to the so-called 'white flight'. She identified a polarisation between the 'haves', who are able to make the choice on the basis of their capital, and the 'have nots' who cannot. The story also reported that some principals were describing the situation as 'de facto apartheid'. Significantly, it reported that the research findings had been handed over to the Howard Government two years ago but that no action was taken. This information was not provided in initial *Sydney Morning Herald* stories, which chose to ignore the frame that wider government policies might be to blame.

Other stories and letters to the editor in the coming days picked up on some of the broader aspects of the issue and some reflected a degree of resistance to the newspaper's framing of it as evidence of racial segregation. Coverage in the *Sydney Morning Herald* continued on March 11, including another front page story tagged as 'Analysis':

Racial divide: Caught out by urban time bomb (Skelton, 2008, p. 1&6)

It reported in the lead that the NSW government should not be surprised that 'white students are fleeing state schools' or that some regional towns 'are being overwhelmed by the social demands of dispossessed, impoverished aboriginal communities'. It discussed the increase in the Indigenous population and the apparent failure of policy-makers to address its consequences. It described certain rural towns as 'urban time bombs' and said that their 'fast growing indigenous communities' represented the biggest challenge to policymakers. (Skelton, 2008, p. 1, para. 2). The 'influx of Aborigines into rural towns' was reported to have been 'matched by an exodus of non-Indigenous Australians' (Skelton, 2008, p. 1, para. 7). One source, a senior policy adviser to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, was reported as saying the increasing Indigenous population presented the government with a crisis much larger than that identified by the Howard government's emergency intervention. Thus, a story that was originally about 'white flight' away from Aborigines and people from other ethnic backgrounds, provided the opportunity for Indigenous people to be singled out as a problem facing Australia.

Another story headlined 'State ministers warned of flight from schools' (Patty, 2008f, p. 6) focused on the political and policy dimensions of the issue. It reported on claims by the President of the NSW Teachers Federation that consecutive state governments have ignored concerns that have been raised about 'white flight'. It focused on the way in which government

policy has contributed to the trend and reported that both the state and federal education ministers supported parental choice in education. Significantly, the NSW Education Minister, John Della Bosca was reported to have said that the term 'white flight' is offensive, inflammatory and inaccurate when applied to NSW schools. He was quoted as saying: 'It's borrowed from America, and that's where it should stay' (Patty, 2008f, p. 6, para. 11). He was the only source to present this view in newspaper coverage where the notion of 'white flight' was taken for granted and naturalised. A photo of Julia Gillard carried the caption: 'committed to parental choice'.

Quotes from parents said they would not be sacrificing their child's education and future for social cohesion. Adjacent to this story was a box headlined 'What you said', which included a cross-section of comments made to *smh.com.au*.

Tagged as 'Opinion', another story headlined 'Inclusiveness requires commitment' (Bonnor, 2008, p. 11) was tinged with a sense of nostalgia for a past when the author suggested there was nothing unusual about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children going to school together. The author sought to bring some balance to what to date had been rather alarmist imagery of 'whites' fleeing schools on a grand scale:

In fairness, such flight is not endemic, and it is hardly the only reason why students change schools. Most of our schools accommodate a mix of students. But the Herald has revealed race as a worrying element of the divide that exists among our schools. It is the ugly side of 'choice', providing yet more evidence that the schooling systems we have created are unsustainable. (Bonnor, 2008, p. 11, para. 4)

The author referred to the tendency of private schools not to enrol a representative cross section of students, with those Indigenous students who are enrolled coming mainly from wealthy families. The author argued that government policy was worsening the divide in the education system and that governments should support inclusive schools.

Australians' responses to media portrayals

The following section looks at the ways in which various audiences responded to the *Sydney Morning Herald's* coverage of the so called 'white flight', the issues it raised for them and the different meanings that they took from it in the context of their own lives and localised experiences. A brief review of letters to the editor followed by a discussion of some of the themes to emerge in comment to the SMH news blog is provided.

Letters to the editor

In recognition of the extent to which the story had struck a nerve with newspaper readers seven letters to the editor were published under the headline 'Fund education properly and children will come' (SMH 2008, p. 10). While a diverse range of opinions was represented, as the headline suggests a common response was to question or reject the newspaper's 'white flight' interpretation of the situation in schools. Letter-writers put forward alternative explanations. For example, one writer rejected the assumption that parents are taking their children out of the public system due to 'the presence of others of different ethnicity or religion'. They argued that rather than being an issue of race or religion, it was about student behaviour, and they called for better resources for public schools (SMH, 2008a, p. 10). Another described 'white flight' as 'poison propaganda', arguing that parents choose to send their children to schools that are further away because the local schools don't meet their needs, and they called for improvement of schools ((SMH, 2008b , p. 10). On a more general level another letter-writer lamented that the situation shows that the dream for inclusiveness in state education seems long gone ((SMH,

2008c, p. 10), while another questioned one columnist's nostalgia about happy multicultural mixing at schools in the 1960s, posing the question of whether Aboriginal students would have the same memories (SMH, 2008d, p.10).

A similar focus on failures of government education policies was evident in seven more letters published in the newspaper on March 12 under the headline: 'Don't blame parents for divisive policies on schools' (SMH, 2008e, p. 10). One writer identified divisive government education policies and the inadequate resourcing of the public school system (SMH, 2008f, p. 10). Another said that the number of Aboriginal students attending Catholic schools is increasing and that it's misleading to suggest that students from Anglo-European backgrounds are flocking to Catholic schools to avoid being educated with Aboriginal students (SMH, 2008g, p. 10). Two letter-writers responded to the claims made by a letter-writer the previous day about 'white exclusion' from selective schools. One suggested: 'Apparently it is unacceptable for an Asian student to achieve more than an Anglo-Saxon...One day I hope Australians can look at an Asian name and recognise it as part of Australia' (SMH, 2008h, p. 10). Another suggested that those who don't work hard may exclude themselves from certain schools: 'If they happen to be white, too bad' (SMH, 2008i, p. 10).

News blogs revealed a similar range of themes. The *Sydney Morning Herald* News blog posed the following questions under the heading of 'Kids, schools and race' (SMH, 2008j), which set the framework within which the issues were to be discussed:

Should sending children to the nearest school be compulsory? Or should parents have a right to choose. What issues would make you send your child to a distant school? Is race an issue? Is it safety? Is it a desire to have better learning standards?

A comment by Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard on ABC Radio was included:

Part of growing up and part of being an adult today is you have to have the ability to mix in multicultural Australia. I would have thought that parents would value as part of the education experience, their child being in multicultural Australia, learning about different cultures, learning about diversity because that is the nation they are going to live in. (SMH 2008j)

There were 106 posts to the blog with comments covering each of the areas indicated by the questions posed and more. People drew on and referred to their own experiences and/or the experiences of their children at school. After reading through all of the comments we identified the following overlapping themes:

- It's a media beat-up;
- Why the focus on 'white' flight?;
- It's not about race, the problem is with public schools;
- It's a backlash against multiculturalism; and
- It's a reflection of racial and class divides.

The following quotes are used to illustrate these themes and their various dimensions. It is important to acknowledge that these comments are not representative of public opinion as a whole. But they do provide a valuable and publicly accessible insight into the range of meanings that members of the public made of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* reporting of the Principals' survey and the broader issues it raised.

It's a media beat-up: why the focus on 'white' flight?

A number of contributors¹ questioned the newspaper's framing of the story as a race issue, but for a variety of conflicting reasons. Commenting on the newspaper's framing of the issue one person said:

Of course it's a lot less shocking a headline to say 'Poor people stuck in the public system, rich kids go to private schools' – a bit banal when you put it that way. A beat up worthy of *Today Tonight SMH*. (SMH, 2008j, [2:44, post 40])

Other comments critical of the newspaper's framing and its motives included:

SMH – you are the problem as far as I'm concerned – this is all about selling newspapers by spreading fear and hate. As for this blog, thank God the kids belonging to most of your correspondents DO go to private schools. I wouldn't want to be on a P&C with this lot of bigots and racists! (SMH, 2008j, [post by Laura, 11:35, post 22])

What do you mean 'is race an issue?' That's the button you intended to press with this topic. (SMH, 2008j [postby Earle Qaeda, March 10, 9:38am, Post 11])

The first two comments reveal that for some people at least the newspaper was being deliberately emotive in its reporting. The final comment reflects a view held by several contributors to the forum, and in the wider community, that there is no place for 'whites' in multicultural Australia; that the two are mutually exclusive.

Several criticisms of the newspaper's coverage centred on the focus on certain ethnic and cultural backgrounds and not others, and emphasised that it was about the quality of the education on offer and the experience of children at school:

Why does this report look at just Anglos versus Aboriginal or middle-eastern kids? What about other ethnicities or mixed ethnicities? This report was meant to be inflammatory. (SMH 2008j [post by Sarah, March 11, 6:32am, Post 54])

It's not just white children taking flight from public schools. Many Australian and migrant muslims are choosing to send their kids to Islamic schools bcos we are sick of the stereotypes and verbal abuse our kids have through at public schools thanks to kids of bogan parents. (SMH, 2008j [post by shaukat March 11, 2:11am, Post 49])

Other participants reacted defensively to what they interpreted as suggestions of racism on the part of white people, as is variously illustrated in the following comments:

It's pretty amusing that many cultural groups can choose to send their children to a culturally specialised school without incurring the ire of the SMH, yet when white people do the same it suddenly becomes an issue of murkey racism. SMH you are by far the most ideologically skewed paper in Australia. Just report the facts and we'll all be much better off. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by n Jones, March 11, 12:43am, Post 44])

¹ Letters to the editor and contributions to blogs have been reproduced in their original form, with original italics, grammar and spelling

If this was being done to a race other than the white race it would be seen as extremely intolerant by the government, but unfortunately this is the world we live in, only whites are racist. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Joshua, March 11, 2:52am, Post 51])

'White flight' is just a racist term labelling Caucasian Australians for exercising their right to choose. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Ben, March 11, 8:12 am, Post 63])

While many of these comments are united in the view that choices about schools are more complex than the 'white flight' explanation suggested, it is interesting to note the different reasons for which they were critical of the newspaper's reporting of the issue in race terms.

It's not about race, the problem is with the public schools

A common theme in responses to the blog was that the issue is not about race but about the quality of the public education system. Posts reflecting this theme emphasised the importance of the quality and level of discipline at the school and downplayed the relevance of race. The following comments elaborate this theme in different ways:

This 'news' is not news to the parents of school age children. It's not racism to want your children to attend a school where they feel safe and where the staff spend most of their time on teaching rather than trying to control anti-social behaviour. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Mark, March 10, 1:38pm, Post 34])

Choice of public/private school should not be denied to anyone, but quit painting these artificial 'colour lines'; instead, draw lines between trouble-makers and co-operative students. Deal swiftly with the trouble-makers, and the schools will be a much better place for everyone. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Jim, March 11, 9:09 am, Post 79])

Maybe if some of the schools in south western Sydney had not been such a mess with poor discipline among its students, they can attract other groups of students. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Gregh, March 10, 1:18, post 30])

The 'left wing agenda of teaching unions', which is seen to overtly promote multiculturalism and Indigenous reconciliation was also put forward as a reason that children are leaving public schools (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Kieran, March 10, 9:21am, Post 5]). One person said:

I doubt that the flight of children from public to private has anything to do with racism and more to do with poor syllabus and overt political education provided by the socialist teachers federation. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by allan, March 10, 1:24pm, Post 31])

A backlash against multicultural policies

Online discussion forums demonstrated a considerable degree of resistance to the concepts of multiculturalism and diversity, with some suggesting that multiculturalism and 'Australian' are mutually exclusive. Posts reflecting this theme confirm the view that there are different and contested definitions of multiculturalism at play in the Australian community (see Putnis, 1989). Some of this resistance was subtle and informed by the view that multiculturalism is a politically loaded concept:

I would not have a problem sending my kids to a racially diverse school if it was a good school, with high educational standards and very importantly had a strong and positive

Australian history curriculum. I would balk if it promoted itself as multicultural though because to me that is a politically motivated term and I don't believe kids should be exposed to that and at the end of the day I want my kids growing up as Australian. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Johny, March 10, 2:39pm, Post 39])

When will the polities stop living in denial and tell the elitists of the progressive left where to shove their multiculturalism and give us back our Australia. I don't care where people come from but if they come here then they must accept that we are and they are Australian. (SMH, 2008j, [geoff. March 10, 2:52pm, Post 42])

The first comment is interesting in the distinction it makes between 'racially diverse' and 'multicultural' schools, which reflects the way in which multicultural is perceived by many as associated with one political ideology, and in direct opposition to 'Australian'. These comments are constructed in anticipation of accusations of racism in that they are prefaced by claims that race or where people come from is not the issue. Several other criticisms of multiculturalism revealed a sense of resentment toward having such a policy forced upon the population. Many such comments echoed the populist resentment that was one reason for the success of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party at the 1996 federal election. The following comment is one example:

Also, who asked the Australian people whether they wanted to live in a 'diverse' country in the first place? When did we ever get to vote on 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism'? Of course we didn't, and this was imposed on us from on high whether we like it or not. And many of us don't, as this story about 'white flight' in the school system proves. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Adrian, March 11, 8:03 am, Post 61])

This person also commented that they doubted that Julia Gillard, if she had children, would send them to a school with a 'large population of middle eastern/aboriginal/asian students' Another contributor who said that 'diversity is divisive' also said:

Just another example of the failure of multiculturalism. It's astonishing that the idiots who support this multicultural ideology label their opponents as being ignorant, when multiculturalism has never been successful throughout history. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Greg, March 10, 2:10p, Post 37])

Some people resisted the suggestion that their child's education ought to be dictated by or evaluated against the agenda of multiculturalism:

Yep, 100%. In a democracy we have the right to reject policies and values that are detrimental to the growth of their children. To me this survey is not surprising. I see the disastrous results of multi-cult-urism (sic) on day to day basis. This should tell the people involved in social engineering that 'parents' like me have defeated their 'dysfunctional and divisive' multicultural policies. (SMH, 2008j, [posted by Zac, March 10, 11:09, Post 20])

As discussed earlier, there was also resistance to the perception that 'white' people were being blamed for exercising choice, when the problem is multiculturalism. One person explicitly linked race and safety in the broader context of the failure of 'integration policies'. They argued:

Absolutely race and safety are issues! White kids are being moved out of those schools because they don't want to be bullied or attacked ... Let white kids go to white schools,

and if segregation occurs naturally. So be it. The fault is with multiculturalism, not with whites moving their kids out of the region. (SMH, 2008j, [post by Michael Freeman, March 10, 9:26am, Post 7])

This reflects the perception that there is no place for 'White Australians' in multiculturalism and that as an assumed counter to the notion of integration, multiculturalism is responsible for segregation.

Several contributors directed blame to certain ethnic groups for not mixing and linked multiculturalism to declining education standards:

Its the same condition all over the white world, the cultures are not mixing because there are too many ethnics who do not want to mix, even with other cultures let alone Australian. (SMH, 2008j, post Sean, March 11, 9:42am, Post 88])

Government and police neglect in the name of the divisive and discredited 'multiculturalism' over the last 10-15 years has led to unprecedented nastiness and brutality in public places. I have friends who (attempt to) teach in south-west Sydney schools and who get no respect from their pupils who come from M.E. backgrounds due to the fact that they are female. (SMH, 2008j, [post by Blondie, March 10, 10:43am, post 17])

Furthermore we perceive that the parents from a Middle Eastern background that outnumber the Anglo Australian in our area, don't encourage their children to high scholastic achievement. Consequently a culture of mediocrity results and holds back the high achievers. (SMH, 2008j, [post by Ben, March 10, 11:24, Post 21])

For others it was a question of not wanting their children to be disadvantaged by being in the minority at school:

My 8th generation Australian children are not going to be a minority in a school in their own country. Their education won't be compromised for political window dressing either. (SMH, 2008j, [post by Rex Mossop, March 11, 8:46am, Post 74])

With all the multicultural policies of the government, it is hard to believe the 'birds of a feather' would NOT flock together. All said and done, at the end of the day, parents will send kids to schools with similar background students. (SMH, 2008j, [post by aroop shukla, March 10, 2:28pm, Post 38])

Several of these comments reflect resentment toward multiculturalism as government policy (Christopher, 2004). They can be understood in the context of the shrinkage of the term 'multiculturalism' whereby it has become a code word for government policies favouring minority immigrant groups. On this view the majority 'Anglo-Celts' are seen as having no ethnicity, no need for 'culture' and, hence, no vital stake in multiculturalism. It is a reflection of the way in which the adjective 'multiculture' has been taken over by multiculturalism in a restricted policy sense (Hodge & O'Carroll, 2006). The *Sydney Morning Herald's* reporting of this story, which framed the issue as a 'racial divide', can be seen to have directly inflamed such a backlash from its readers.

It's a reflection of racial and class divides

Rather than being a backlash against multiculturalism, others saw the issue as evidence of the reality that, in spite of changes in government policy, race and class are issues in the community and, in turn, the education system. As noted earlier, this is the frame the SMH chose not to promote in their reporting of the 'White Flight' issue. Comments from readers reflected a view that schools were microcosms of society and that socio-economic status, racial or ethnic background and educational choices are inevitably correlated. The following comments are illustrative of this theme:

Like it or not the majority of white Australians deep down subscribe to the now defunct 'White Australia Policy' of yesteryear, and turn away from our social issues regarding our indigenous and ethnic groups ... Parents moving their children to predominantly white schools is probably a way of expressing what they really think. (SMH, 2008j, [post by Brian Gardner, March 11, 9:57am, Post 91])

I'm white and my kids are going private, the majority of Aboriginals aren't well off and they'll be stuck in the public system. The cause of why my kid will go private has nothing to do with what people of other colours are doing, however the colour of our skins will correlate to the outcome because our incomes correlate to the colour of our skins. (SMH, 2008j, [JL, March 10, 2:44, post 40])

On a similarly pragmatic level and in anticipation of the issue prompting criticisms of multiculturalism, one said:

The problem is not multiculturalism despite the predictable braying of closet racists. It is the practice of all governments, no matter what their political colour, of dumping social problems onto public schools and expecting the school communities to deal with them with no resources. (SMH, 2008j, [post by Retired Parent, March 11, 9:04 am, Post 78])

As we have noted, the 'white flight' issue was localised to the New South Wales area and coverage largely limited to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Exceptions included the SBS news story (SBS, 2008), one story in the *Courier Mail* and one in the *Canberra Times*. Bloggers in other states also discussed the issue. In his blog on March 10 headlined 'Not just whites, not just their fault' reactionary *Herald Sun* columnist Andrew Bolt argued that the issue is not as simple as 'white racism' (Bolt, 2008). In contrast with our own analyses that saw the SMH coverage as ultimately blaming the 'non-White' minority for 'White Flight', Bolt clearly interpreted the coverage as blaming 'white' people. A total of 82 comments were made to the blog, many of which correlated with contributions to the SMH blog. One contributor suggested that there was a double standard at work with regard to accusations of racism:

It's fascinating to note that, when white students leave schools due to legitimate fears and concerns, they are dubbed racists, and yet if the situation was reversed, and it was Aboriginal or Lebanese students fleeing from predominantly white schools, the word 'racism' would never even appear in the dialogue. In fact, if Lebanese students were fleeing from white schools, a lot of people in this country would feel sorry for them – they *certainly* wouldn't be called racists. The headline in the Age would be **Lebanese Flee From Fears of White Abuse**, or something to that effect. (Bolt, 2008, [post by Scott of Melbourne, March 10, 1:05pm, Post 11, original bold])

The Brisbane Times also devoted an online blog to the issue on March 11 which posed the question 'Are whiter schools better schools?' (Brisbane Times 2008). There were ten comments

posted to the blog. Despite the inflammatory nature of the blog question, most rejected the race frame, instead identifying the problem as lack of funding for the public education system and the subsequent decisions of parents to send their children to better-resourced schools if they are in a financial position to do so. Contributors recognised that money and class are bigger factors than race or culture. One poster encapsulated this sentiment:

While I'm sure cultural intolerance is a factor in the 'white flight' theory, the important word here is class, not race and ethnicity. Almost all parents who can afford it, or even those that can't and exist in a precarious economic position because of it, will enrol their children in a private school because of the perceived and/or real academic and social benefits, no matter their race, ethnicity or cultural background. (Brisbane Times, 2008 [post by Gus, March 11, 6:52am, Post 3])

In contrast to the newspapers' racialisation of the story, and some comments that were overtly racist, most comments dealt pragmatically and realistically with the complexities of government schooling in a multicultural society.

Discussion and conclusions

The idea of 'white flight' was to become a label that could be applied to other issues facing 'multicultural Australia'. Shortly after initial reports of 'white flight' in the NSW education system the concept was again in the headlines in *The Age* in Melbourne and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. This time reports were based on comments made by Federal Government MP Laurie Ferguson, who is also the parliamentary secretary for multicultural affairs. In a story headlined 'Segregation in the suburbs: White flight' *The Age* reported in the lead:

Refugees should be housed across a wider spread of suburbs to halt the so-called 'white flight' from some government schools, according to a senior Federal Government MP. (Topsfield & Smith, 2008a, March 21-22, p. 1&2)

Labelled 'Exclusive' it referred to the US origins of the term 'white flight' as it was applied to schools after desegregation began in the 1960s. Mr Ferguson was quoted as saying the 'concept of white flight from the government school system' posed a big challenge in Australia. The NSW Secondary Principals' Council survey was referred to. The focus had shifted, though, to new settler groups, such as African refugees and the need for 'deliberate policy decisions' to ensure that they are not heavily concentrated in some areas and schools. It reported that the Rudd Government, unlike the Howard government, is committed to 'making multiculturalism work' but that the issue of 'white flight' 'had become a major challenge for multicultural Australia'. In contrast to the explanation provided by the NSW Principals, the president of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Brian Burgess, said the situation in Victoria was 'more like a middle-class flight' than a 'white flight'. His interpretation was clearly not adopted by the newspaper which, perhaps unsurprisingly, privileged the view of the Government Minister. The story also reported that teachers at 'racially diverse schools' in Melbourne told the newspaper that 'white flight' was occurring.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* (Patty, 2008f, p. 6) in a story headlined 'Education of refugees key to white flight: MP' invoked imagery of contagion to describe 'white flight', reporting that:

The NSW Department of Education needs to take more of a leading role in where it educates refugee children to contain the spread of 'white flight' from schools across Sydney, a senior Federal Government MP says.

It reported that both state and federal government policies were exacerbating class, religious and ethnic divides in the state system.

It is interesting to note the way in which the focus had shifted from people of Aboriginal, Asian and Middle-Eastern origin to refugees more specifically as the cause of 'white flight'. It is also significant that the Rudd Government adopted, or at least failed to challenge, the language of 'white flight' to describe the phenomenon, unlike the president of the Victorian Principals' Association, who emphasised the class aspect. One letter to the editor in response to *The Age* (*Age*, 2008, p. 12) story echoed this view:

Common sense would dictate that this is a 'middle-class flight', rather than 'white flight', as your headline suggested.

Perera (1999) has noted that the category of 'whiteness' is taken to be so self evident that it is rarely directly invoked. What was interesting about the media's reporting of 'white flight' was the way in which the category was directly invoked, thereby marking out those who are not 'white'. In addition, 'Aboriginal' and 'white' are terms that reflect essentialist thinking and elide the spaces in between and the enormous diversity within these identity markers. There is no space, for example, in this racial dichotomy of 'black' and 'white' for 'white-skinned Indigenes' (Paradies, 2006).

It is clear where the *Sydney Morning Herald* sourced its racialised framing of the issue: the New South Wales Secondary Principals' Association, which used the term 'white flight' to describe the findings of its survey. But the newspaper also had the power to reframe these claims in recognition of the broader issues involved and the potentially harmful impact of marking out and generalising groups on the basis of racial or ethnic background. Suggestions of racial and ethnic conflict are clearly newsworthy and the newspaper emphasised this aspect of the story by relating the findings about 'white flight' to research identifying ethnic conflict among students since the Cronulla riots. As a media template the Cronulla riots provided a shorthand way of making sense of the findings of the Principals' survey.

Newspaper reports about what the NSW Secondary Principals' Council described as 'white flight' provided the catalyst for public discussion about real, and many would say longstanding, problems in the public education system, with familiar dichotomies of 'white' versus 'non-white' and public versus private identifiable. It also facilitated discussion about the role and responsibility of the media in reporting stories when race and ethnicity are an obvious component.

As we have identified, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* coverage, over a period of days, did canvass a range of views and delve into some of the non-race or ethnicity based factors that contribute to parents' decisions about schools for their children. Only parents of 'white' children were asked to comment, however, which meant that only one side of the story was presented. This left the impression that the decision to send children to particular schools because of the predominance of certain racial and ethnic groups is unique to 'white' people and that other groups do not also make decisions on similar grounds. The newspaper's use of the term 'white' marked out borders between the majority group and the others who were positioned as posing a threat; as responsible for making young 'white' kids leave the local public school system. Paradoxically, 'whites' were simultaneously depicted as a source of racial segregation in schools and a threat to social cohesion, as well as the victims of racial and ethnic minorities who constitute the majority in some schools.

What was also significant about the issue is the amount of response it generated from the community in the form of letters to the editor and on the *Sydney Morning Herald's* online News Blog. The issue clearly resonated with people, whether they agreed with the newspaper's framing or not. A number of contributors challenged what they perceived as the suggestion that 'white racism' was the reason that parents choose to send their children to private schools, arguing that it is far more complex than the simple 'racial divide' frame presented by the *Herald*. In the talking back to SMH journalists they revived news frames such as government funding, policies of 'choice' and class divides that had been largely abandoned in news reports.

One of the most striking themes to emerge in the online discussion was the level of resistance to multiculturalism and the ease with which newspapers can bring this into relief and potentially amplify resentment towards the idea. Some contributors saw the issue as an inevitable and unsurprising outcome of multicultural and immigration policies and programmes, although there were variations in the way people perceived these issues. Some linked 'white flight' from public schools and problems with public schools in general to the policy of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism became a canvas onto which people projected their concerns about the education system, despite the fact the policy of multiculturalism was not directly mentioned in the news coverage. It is likely that Julia Gillard's response to the issue, lauding the benefits of learning how to live in 'multicultural Australia', may have generated some of the backlash against multiculturalism expressed by participants.

There are no reporting guidelines targeted specifically at the media's reporting of 'white' Australians largely because as the dominant ethnicity in Australia 'white' is rarely directly invoked and, thus, problematic reporting has not been an issue. It may be that as they were themselves part of the dominant ethnic group journalists and editors did not deem there to be a problem with how 'white' was portrayed'. But guidelines for covering ethnicity and reporting race can be just as easily applied to 'white' people. *The Guide*, for example, says that references to 'blacks' suggest a single dimension to a broad diversity of people (Stockwell & Scott, 2000) and the same could be said of references to 'white people' and 'white students'. In relation to the Australian Press Council's guidelines on reporting race, which urge against references that promote negative stereotypes, there was evidence to suggest that at least some readers felt that the newspaper was falling back on stereotypes of 'white racism'.

Had the headline been 'Black flight from schools' or 'Asian flight leaves system segregated by race', for example, questions could be raised about whether this constituted a misleading association between ethnicity and events. In regard to our case study of the reporting of 'White flight leaves system segregated by race' it could be argued that this did present a misleading association between 'whiteness' and racial segregation in schools. This is not to say that the issues are not real, but that framing the issue in such a way arguably failed to appreciate and convey the complexity of the issues involved

Exemplar 2: Indigenous and Islander conflict in Brisbane

Introduction

The second of our exemplars relates to the reporting of the death of a man in Brisbane in October 2008. This story was told in local and national press through a frame of inter-cultural conflict between Indigenous and Pacific Island groups in the Brisbane community of Logan. We examine the routine reporting of Indigenous and Islander conflict and violence as a source of threat to 'mainstream' Australia. We observe the ways that media representations perpetuate a portrayal of both communities as problematic and a source of community conflict, and discuss to what extent such 'othering' of both Indigenous and particular 'new-settler' communities in routine news reporting works to mark the boundaries of mainstream Australia. Our case study examines how journalists negotiated their responsibilities to accurately and responsibly report issues of race, in light of published media guidelines. We also explore the ways that community members 'talked back' to the reporting of this issue as one of inter-cultural conflict, through an examination of mainstream media and interest group blogs, concluding that they provide a mouthpiece for racist opinion, a vehicle for the expression of cultural identity and a source of conversation that explores the boundaries of reporting news about complex and sensitive issues of race.

The following thematic analysis draws on 37 news stories, opinion columns and online blogs over the period 26 October 2008 to 27 January 2009. We first sourced all coverage of the incident in Brisbane and community newspapers, national news, online community news sites, and localised community discussion forums, and then narrowed our analyses down to those that enabled us to best answer our research questions.

News reporting

Reporting the 'bashing death' of a sporting hero's uncle

The initial story about Indigenous and 'Islander' conflict appeared in Brisbane's *The Sunday Mail* on October 26, 2008 (Doneman & Davis, 2008, p. 5). The bashing death of a man in a southern Brisbane park in October 2008 was immediately newsworthy when it was revealed that he was the uncle of a popular Rugby League star. *The Sunday Mail's* article was headlined:

Thurston rocked by brawl tragedy: cup anguish after uncle's death. (Doneman & Davis, 2008, p. 5)

The initial story did not focus on race, but provided a straightforward account of the death and focused specifically on how it has affected the deceased man's nephew, prominent rugby league player, Johnathan Thurston. But the suggestion of race was made by sourcing a police superintendent as saying that there was nothing to suggest the attack was race related. While the deceased man, Richard Saunders, was not identified as Indigenous, Brisbane readers would have been able to make the connection. The race of Saunders or his attackers was not, however, presented as a cause or contributing factor to the 'vicious' brawl that was reported to have led to the man's death. The story included photographs of police at the murder scene, Johnathan Thurston and another of Thurston's mother, the sister of the deceased man.

The sporting hero's tragedy angle provided a parallel frame as the story was played out in Brisbane and national news over the next few weeks. Stories such as

‘JT’s long, sad year (Doneman & Davis, 2008, p. 5)

‘Thurston’s pain – courageous half leads Roos to cup romp (Ricketts, 2008, p. 6)
and
Thurston plays on for family (deKroo, 2008, p. 23)

emphasised Jonathon Thurston’s commitment to Rugby League and his status as an Aboriginal sporting hero, but also highlighted the additional burden placed on him by his Aboriginality (See McCallum 2007).

Race conflict in Brisbane’s South

The following day’s *Courier Mail* headline (Caldwell, 2008, p. 12) signalled a new development in the story: ‘Pair charged over park bash death’. It reported that two males had been charged and focused on the family that the man has left behind. It also provided more information about the deceased man and his family. Again, he was not directly identified as Indigenous but other features of the story signalled this, including photographs of the man’s former partner and mother of four of his children and reference to ‘a family elder’. It reported that the elder, Auntie Alice, told a crowd of family and friends that: ‘We have to put an end to this. We want justice but we don’t want any more brothers to die at the hands of violence’. This comment was the first real indication that the violence leading up to the man’s death was not an isolated incident.

Underlying this initial routine reporting of the death were a number of signals to Brisbane readers about race and place. Along with the prominent public profile of Johnathon Thurston, the allusion to a racially motivated attack was not far from the surface. Mention of the Woodridge location is likely to send particular signals to Brisbane readers. Woodridge is part of the Logan area of Brisbane, which is home to 250,000 people from more than 160 cultures. Logan has been the site of many waves of newly arrived immigrants, and is home to a significant Indigenous population. It has long been represented in media and local discourse as a site of Indigenous disadvantage and racial conflict. News media chose not to frame this as an issue of social disadvantage, but emphasised racial conflict. These undercurrents were brought to the surface in the following day’s story (Keim, 2008a, p. 3), which placed race firmly on the agenda with the headline:

Race hate rears over bash death

Prominently positioned on page three evidencing the news value of race related violence and conflict, it reported that ‘Racial tensions reached boiling point outside court yesterday as nine males appeared over the bashing death’. It reported that ‘A group of Pacific Island youth yelled abuse and threats at family and friends’ of the deceased man. This is the first time we learn of the background of the men charged with the Richard Saunders’ murder.

No longer was this a routine news story but part of much larger story of inter-cultural conflict in Brisbane’s suburbs. Importantly, it was a story about conflict between the Indigenous and ‘Pacific Islander’ communities. The dominant frame of the story was set in a series of quotes by the murdered man’s uncle, Wayne Saunders:

The Aboriginal people here are being bashed and killed (by Pacific Islanders) all the time. (Keim, 2008a, p. 3, para. 4)

It has got to the stage we are too afraid to leave our houses at night. (Keim, 2008a, p. 3, para. 5)

This early reporting can be seen to have set the dominant frame for the story around racial conflict in the Logan community. Several devices were used in reporting the issue. The bracketing of Pacific Islanders creates some ambiguity as to whether Saunders actually referred to this group or whether the journalist inserted it to emphasise the inter-cultural tension frame, although it could be argued that the reference to 'race hate' in the headline was an exaggeration.

While journalists had initially taken care not to situate the story as one of racial conflict, almost immediately the story became a 'war' between two rival groups. The language describing the events drew on repeated metaphors of war, such as 'broker a truce', 'brinkmanship', 'outflanked and outnumbered in their own backyards', 'peace treaty', emphasising conflict between two rival 'communities'. Labels were given to the local 'Aboriginal people' and 'Pacific Islanders'. The descriptor of 'Pacific Island youths' incorporates and potentially taints a large diversity of people from different nations within the Pacific Islands with the behaviours of a few.

Court proceedings provided the scene for the following day's news story in the *Courier Mail* (Keim, 2008b, p. 7) headlined 'Threat of revenge for death'. It reported that:

Up to 150 protesters vowed to avenge the death of rugby league star Johnathan Thurston's uncle during a heated, menacing protest outside a court south of Brisbane yesterday.

While largely localised to Brisbane, the story received prominent state and national coverage. For example, in Sydney the *Daily Telegraph* (2008, October 28, p. 2) reported on the case in a story headlined 'Tension as murder accused in court'. The *Telegraph* drew on the relevance of the story to Rugby League, but also highlighted the racial conflict frame when it reported in the lead that:

Queensland police are working to quell tensions between Aboriginal and Pacific Islander communities following the bashing murder of the uncle of rugby league star Jonathan Thurston. (*Daily Telegraph* 2008, p. 2, para. 1)

Nine males, all believed to be of Pacific Islander descent, are charged with 38-year-old Aborigine Richard Saunders' murder. (*Daily Telegraph* 2008, p. 2, para. 2)

The story reported on the allegations against the men and quoted the uncle of the deceased man who said that Aborigines in the area were 'frightened of rising gang violence'. The story also generated significant coverage in Brisbane's local newspapers, print and online. The *Albert & Logan News* (Helbig & Flack, 2008, p. 1) the local area newspaper, in a story headlined 'Call for calm' reported in the lead that:

Logan Aboriginal and Pacific Islander elders have called for calm in the face of growing racial tension following the bashing death of Woodbridge man Richard Saunders.

Further developments in the story were signalled by the headline of the following day's news story in the *Courier Mail* (Wray, 2008a, p. 10):

Park killing blamed on earlier fight

This item focused the story on ongoing racial tension in the area, rather than Saunders as a victim of an unprovoked attack. It reported on claims from 'the Samoan community' that the brawl which resulted in the death of an 'Aboriginal man' 'was sparked by a bashing' earlier in the night. The claims of the Samoan community were reported as being 'their first public defence of the violence that has thrust the two minority groups into open conflict'. The story reported that supporters of the accused men 'faced a hostile reception from Aborigines massed in front of the court'. Several quotes from a woman from the Samoan community were included in the story including her comment that:

There was never anything between the Samoans and the Aborigines. (Wray, 2008a, p. 10, para. 14)

This view is clearly in sharp contrast to comments from Wayne Saunders in earlier news stories about violence and abuse being committed by Pacific Islanders against Aboriginal people. The story was accompanied by two photographs with the caption 'Tensions running high...groups of Samoans and Aborigines gather outside Beenleigh court earlier this week when nine Samoans faced charges'.

The use of sources from each community from the outset is one significant feature of the way the story of Richard Saunders' death unfolded. Rather than merely quoting police and other experts, journalists drew heavily on comments from both the Indigenous and Samoan communities. While this gave a voice to each group, it also accentuated the conflict frame.

The following day the *Courier Mail* (Wray, 2008b, pp. 22-23) dedicated a feature length story to the issue headlined:

Tension simmers after death: Logan has been torn by community fear and violence.

The lead paragraph reported that:

An uneasy truce hung over Brisbane's southern suburbs yesterday as the Logan Aboriginal community prepared to bury one of its sons.(Wray, 2008b, pp. 22-23)

The death is reported to have 'pitted Australia's traditional owners against one of its newest communities'. The inter-cultural conflict frame was most clearly expressed through the *Courier Mail's* use of cultural identifiers in the accompanying photographs. Indigenous elder Wayne Saunders was pictured standing in front of an Indigenous flag, while placed over this image was a stereotypical image representing an 'Islander' - a person wearing long shorts and socks, with a red bandana hanging from his back pocket. Closer examination of the photo reveals that the bandana may have been digitally added to the photo. The sharp edges of the bandana, inconsistent colouring, and a 'halo' effect around the bandana are consistent with an image that has been digitally 'doctored' using an image processing program such as 'Photoshop'. This manipulation of images, whilst commonplace in today's digital media environment, leaves *Courier Mail* readers with an unambiguous picture of two racially identified groups, both 'outsiders' to mainstream Australia.

Indigenous rights versus welcoming new settlers

While the conflict frame may have dominated reporting of the Richard Saunders' death, early reporting established an alternative way of understanding the issue. On 28 October the *Courier Mail* (Keim, 2008a, p. 3) reported a comment by Saunders' brother Wayne:

This is our country and we are no longer safe because of these people. We should send them home. (Keim, 2008a, p. 3, para. 6)

The story was accompanied by a photograph of family and friends of the murdered man outside the Beenleigh Magistrate's court, embracing and holding the Aboriginal flag, the murdered man himself, and a picture (taken from behind) of those described as 'supporters of the nine males charged'. It quoted Aboriginal academic and protest organiser, Sam Watson as saying:

The courts have failed us and Parliament has failed us.

But we will fight to hold our place in this community and this society. (Keim, 2008a, p. 3)

These comments from local Indigenous spokespeople provide a counter-framing of Indigenous people as victims of discrimination, and centred on the sovereign rights of Indigenous people as Australia's first settlers. Two days later the story was strategically placed against an article headlined: 'Aborigines protest over Palm Island verdict'. This related story reported that the guilty verdict of the 'Palm Island rioter' Lex Wotton, 'coupled with the Saturday night murder of Richard Saunders, the young uncle of rugby league star Johnathan Thurston, had "incensed" the indigenous community' (Wenham 2008, p. 10). They related back to the death at the hands of Queensland police of a man on Palm Island, and the long-term effects of colonisation, discrimination and violence towards Indigenous Australians. They foreground the *unique* claims to sovereignty by Indigenous Australians that are not accorded to immigrant minorities. Through their publicity of these claims, local Brisbane journalists highlighted the tension in wider public discourse about the discord between the governance of immigration and multiculturalism and the governance and rights of indigenous Australians.

The Rights frame resonated throughout the ongoing reporting of this issue. *The Courier Mail* (Wray, 2008b, pp. 22-23) reported that the death had 'pitted Australia's traditional owners against one of its newest communities'. It said that a friend of the deceased man 'called for the Samoans to be deported'. Interestingly, journalists distinguished between 'Australia's traditional owners' and 'one of its newest communities' which is an identity that may not have been bestowed upon them had the conflict been with Anglo-European groups, as opposed to the Pacific Islander community. This suggested a shifting hierarchy of Australian identities, whereby Indigenous peoples can be appropriated as representing 'us', by way of marking out the boundaries of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' migrant communities. In the *Albert & Logan News* report of 29 October, Saunders, once again identified as a 'local Aboriginal elder', is reported to have said:

Until they (elders) can teach their people cultural respect, they are visitors here to our country, and if they're going to bring violence from their country we say it's not good enough. (Albert & Logan News, 2008, p. 8, para. 7)

The heavy quoting of this one source, and adoption of phrases such as 'our country' and 'these people', implies that some Indigenous people, at least, reject policies of immigration, while the bald descriptor of 'Pacific Islander youths' incorporates and potentially taints a large diversity of people from different nations of the Pacific Islands with the behaviours of a few.

The story remained high on Queensland's news agenda in the coming days and generated widespread comment. The *Gold Coast Bulletin* published an opinion piece on the issue by columnist Robyn Wuth, providing the strongest rejection of the Indigenous rights frame (Wuth,

2008, p. 49). The headline of the story, 'This is no time to play the race card' and the first four paragraphs set the tone:

Now I've heard everything.

This week, in the wake of the savage and violent death of Richard Saunders in Logan City Park, the Aboriginal community has accused the Islander community of failing to assimilate.

'These Pacific Islanders are not congregating with the rest of Australia. They just go by their own laws,' said Frank Saunders, the dead man's nephew.

Talk about pot calling the proverbial kettle black, pardon the pun. (Wuth, 2008, p. 49)

The columnist suggested that Aboriginal people have not assimilated in that they 'live by their own rules, demand the right to punish their own tribal law and refuse to live by 'white man law''. She said 'the vast majority of their people haven't exactly blended seamlessly into society, or shown any intention of doing so'. The article implies that Indigenous people's demands for respect for their culture and recognition of their sovereignty negated any rights they might have to protection from conflict or violence. In a thinly veiled racist attack on local Aboriginal people, the columnist then shifted her focus to other alcohol-related violence, essentially accusing Indigenous people of bringing violent attacks upon themselves. The publicising of such comments demonstrates the fragility of the Indigenous Rights frame in discourse around inter-cultural conflict.

The will to make amends

A final theme running through the reporting of the death of Richard Saunders was framed around the will of the local community to find a resolution to the conflict and to promote harmony. In stark contrast with the dominant framing of both Indigenous and Samoan communities as a source of conflict, the 'Islanders', police and other officials are quoted as desiring and working towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Initial reporting of the story in the *Courier Mail* (Caldwell, 2008, p. 12) had quoted Indigenous elder, Aunty Alice telling a crowd of family and friends that:

We have to put an end to this. We want justice but we don't want any more brothers to die at the hands of violence.

However, later reports focused on the more inflammatory remarks of Richard Saunders. Police and Samoan leaders, by contrast, were frequently quoted as calling for peace. The *Courier Mail* (Keim, 2008b, p. 7) reported that

A 'large contingent' of 'Pacific Islanders' are reported to have stopped for a silent prayer before entering the court and to have said that they did not want any trouble.

The story also reported that police are planning to 'meet with cultural leaders in a bid to help resolve tensions between the groups'. The story included a photograph of police talking to a group of men described as 'Aboriginal protesters'. The *Albert & Logan News* (2008, p. 1) the local area newspaper, in a story headlined 'Call for calm' reported that:

Logan Aboriginal and Pacific Islander elders have called for calm in the face of growing racial tension following the bashing death of Woodbridge man Richard Saunders.

It reported that the police superintendent was meeting with 'cultural leaders in a bid to resolve tensions between the groups'. A Samoan elder and local community church reverend is reported to be calling for the two communities to come together and reconcile to help prevent retaliatory violence, but Mr Saunders said such a meeting should not go ahead until after his nephew is buried and 'other ethnic groups' have disbanded the 'gangs'.

The *Courier Mail* (Wray, 2008b, pp. 22-23) reported that the 'Polynesian community of Logan has rallied to apologise for the tragedy amid accusations its migrants have brought fear and violence to the streets of Logan'. By contrast with earlier reporting, official opinion was sourced. A police superintendent is reported as denying that racial tensions had been growing in Logan and that the police were taking a 'low key approach' to controlling the situation. He said they have been talking to 'the elders'. Queensland's Communities Minister is reported to understand the tensions and quoted as saying:

This area is home to many people from many different communities and we want to work with people to live together in harmony.

The *Queensland Times* (2008, p. 5) also emphasised the positive role played by local police with its headline 'Ipswich police pro-active in preventing racial violence'.

Media reporting of the funeral of Richard Saunders also highlighted the desire for racial harmony. The *Courier Mail* (Wray, 2008c, p. 4.) headlined its report:

Funeral call to end racial violence.

The following day's story (Barbeler, 2008, p. 13) headlined 'Grieving delays peace talks' reported that talks of reconciliation had been postponed 'until a family finishes its traditional 'sorry business''. Such reporting, and the constant quoting of Saunders, suggests that despite being the victims of violence in this case, Aboriginal people were nevertheless portrayed as an underlying cause of inter-cultural conflict. They were portrayed as thwarting the best efforts of Queensland authorities and the Samoan community. This inability to reconcile can be seen to undermine the Indigenous rights frame evident in much of the reporting of the Saunders case.

Online discussion

News blogs as a mouthpiece for racist sentiment

The case study of inter-cultural conflict between Samoan and Indigenous Australians in Brisbane provides a useful window through which to analyse news media reporting of Indigenous and multicultural discourses. Increasing use of news blogs, discussion forums and social networking sites extends this reporting, and enables community members to engage with, and at times influence, journalists' reporting. The use of news blogs is a routine practice in most online news services, and can be used by journalists as way of obtaining community responses to a story, and as a source of news.

The *Brisbane Times* website (Moore, 2008) asked for comments on the question of 'What is the state of race relations in South-East Queensland?' and received 15 comments. These comments reflected a range of views, but most drew overtly on the Racial Conflict frame. Some blamed Indigenous Australians for the conflict:

Aborigines like to crap on about 'their culture, their way'. What culture? What way? What's a 38-year-old father of 9 doing drinking in the park at 1 am doing anyway? (*Brisbane Times*, 2008 [post])

Some contributors interpreted the story as another example of 'Aborigines' playing up their victimhood:

Ask anyone, any race and/or gender and they'll have a bad story about Aborigines. All they're about is want, want, want. Every crime committed towards them is 'racial'. (*Brisbane Times*, 2008, [post by 'Dude'])

The blog also provided a mouthpiece for negative opinion towards Pacific Islander communities. 'Mont' suggested that fighting and violence had always been part of the islander culture and that 'they don't integrate into our society, they create their enclaves and gang culture, it's a western Sydney in the making'. Another wrote:

Samoans are generally nice people but like ANY other race, there are always the bad seeds who ruin life for all others. (*Brisbane Times*, 2008, [post by 'Whatever'])

Another person related a personal experience to demonstrate an unwillingness of the Pacific Islander community to 'change customs to fit with the new country'. They said that a representative of the community had visited their workplace to 'educate' the employees. They said:

We were also told that it was a 'warrior culture' so we should expect fighting/ Too bad we're so weak and soft was the implication. Actually he didn't think much of us whiteys at all. It was an interesting experience for some people, who naively believed that only middle-class white people could actually be racists. (*Brisbane Times*, 2008, [post by 'StayingHome'])

By contrast, some respondents interpreted the issue through the alternative Indigenous Rights lens:

Technically we are ALL migrants to this country but at least half of us haven't brought our violent cultures with us. This is THEIR home and we are on THEIR land so a little bit of respect would not go astray. How would you like somebody to come into your home and treat you with disrespect? (*Brisbane Times*, 2008, [post by 'Disgusted'])

Another person challenged the racialisation of the issue, asking whether the events would have received the same response if the group responsible for the attack was 'Anglo Australians':

I was threatened by a group of Anglo-Australians walking down from Queens Street a few Friday nights ago. Should I now be afraid of all members of the 'white' race? (*Brisbane Times*, 2008, [post by 'Markus'])

Online discussion forums for talking back to mainstream reporting

In contrast with the 'mainstream' *Brisbane Times* blog, the publication on the *SamoAlive Newsline* website on 1 November (Mail Courier 2008) of a story headlined 'Samoan community in racial tensions after killing', provided a forum for discussion of the issue among members of the Samoan community. Overall, the ten comments posted highlighted the damage caused to

the whole community through the reporting of the incident, and the labelling of the gang members as 'Islanders'.

The first comment was headlined 'Why are we being punished for the actions of others?' written by 'Samoan in Brisbane'. They said they were annoyed that 'all Samoans have been labelled 'violent' and 'gang members' after the incident. They said that they had been concerned for their own safety in the wake of the event and said:

I think it is in poor form for the Indigenous people of Australia to target Samoans and other Pacific Islanders now, will they punish others for what only a small minority have done. (Mail Courier 2008 [post by 'Samoan in Brisbane'])

Similarly, another comment headlined 'Why are we ALL to blame?' said:

It is amazing to think that we are a multi-cultural nation, with over 100 different ethnicities, but we are being singled out by those who make remarks that we as Samoan people are all the same, gang affiliated and violent. (Mail Courier 2008 [post by 'Young Samoan'])

They also said that living in the western suburbs of Brisbane they had heard of many incidents 'where Aboriginal people have bashed Samoans to the point where the law has been involved'.

Under the heading 'Cooler heads have to rise up' another person highlighted the Samoan community's desire for harmony:

I hope that someone of Samoan descent rise up in the area and Number One offer a prayer and reach out to this community that has been in existence for thousands of years in Australia. The same community that has uniqueness and utmost qualities shared with our people. (Mail Courier 2008 [post by 'cooler heads'])

Similarly another person said:

I hope the Pacific community of Queensland are able to rise up and find a better grounding to soothe relations with the indigenous community in Brisbane. (Mail Courier 2008 [post by 'E.M.'])

A new dimension of the story emerged in early November (Gold Coast Bulletin 2008a, 2008b, 2008c) In the *Albert & Logan News* ((Helbig, 2008a, p. 1; Helbig, 2008b, p. 2) a front page story headlined 'Racial taunts traded online' reported that:

Aboriginal and Samoan youths are using the internet to trade threats over the bashing death of Woodbridge man Richard Saunders.

Police are monitoring the social networking site Bebo, where youths claiming links to US gangs the Bloods and Crips are threatening racial violence.

The website messages indicate that Tongans and Aborigines are loosely affiliated with the Crips, while Samoans have banded together under the Bloods gang name and colours.

The president of the Logan Samoa Advisory Council is reported to have said he had heard of rumours about such gangs but was not convinced they existed and is quoted as saying it's only in the schools for young people but that no such thing is happening in the community. The extension of community discussion to social networking sites, and the power attributed to them, demonstrates the inter-textual nature of the contemporary news environment and raises new challenges for journalists as translators of public issues for news audiences.

Discussion and conclusions

In January 2009 reports of a peace treaty between the 'Samoans' and 'Aborigines' were making news (ABC News 2009). The *Albert & Logan News* reported that Logan's Samoan community would apologise to 'Aborigines' over the bashing death of Richard Saunders. The president of the Logan and District Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders is reported to have said that they have agreed to accept the apology on behalf of the Aboriginal community. She also added:

This is a multicultural society and we seemed to be getting swallowed up in the multiculturalism, and for us to continue with our own identity it's important for us to have respect from these groups. (Albert & Logan News, 2009)

This comment captures the impact of news reporting of cultural conflict on local communities. Through their reporting of a routine news story of localised inter-group violence, Brisbane journalists helped play out a bigger story of the place of urban Indigenous communities in an environment governed by multicultural policy. What is the place of urban Indigenous communities in a multicultural setting like Logan? Are Indigenous communities merely one of the 160 ethnic minority groups represented in the area? Or do they hold a significant place as Australia's first settlers?

At the outset, local Brisbane journalists can be seen to have reported with a degree of care and sensitivity to both groups. In contrast with earlier analyses of news reporting from the 1980s and 1990s (see Jakubowicz et al, 1994; Ewart, 1997), journalists seemed to have heeded at least some of the messages embedded in media guidelines and protocols. They did not racialise the story until a clear theme of inter-cultural conflict emerged. Throughout their coverage journalists gave a voice to both Indigenous and Samoan representatives, rather than merely relying on official police and government sources. There was no strong sense that the journalists favoured one side over the other or demonised one group over another. They approached each group for comment and reported their views fairly and comprehensively. In this way, Brisbane journalists complied with the recommendations laid out in Stockwell & Scott's (2000) guidelines for fair reporting on multicultural issues. Initial reporting did not assume a racial motivation, and the racial element of the story unfolded through comment from each community.

Journalists also paid particular attention to reporting both local efforts and police intervention to reconcile the incident. This reporting showed parallels with Colic-Peisker & Tilbury's (2008) case study of Indigenous-Somalian conflict in Perth's Northern suburbs, where much was made of Indigenous Australia's role and responsibility to welcome other minorities into 'our' country. This emphasis on healing represents the desire of journalists (and Australians in general) to see Australia as a unified country (McCallum, 2007).

Close analysis of news reporting of this issue reveals how journalists in Brisbane's media were ambivalent about privileging an Indigenous identity over other racialised minorities. By giving such a strong voice to activist Richard Saunders, local journalists took a sympathetic stance towards the threatened identity of urbanised Indigenous communities, and made an Indigenous Rights frame available to news audiences. But this Rights frame did not dominate reporting.

While Indigenous Australians were variously reported as the victims of race-based violence and essentialised as Australia's first-settlers, for whom all migrant communities were new-comers, news reporting racialised them as one of many ethnic minorities, and represented them as ultimately to blame for conflict with other minority groups.

Underlying this ambivalence, however, was a dominant framing in news reporting of the Saunders incident as a catalyst for inter-cultural conflict between two ethnic minorities. Despite no actual violence being reported between the two groups after the initial incident, journalists were quick to embrace metaphors of war, portraying the conflict between the two communities as a civil war within the bounds of Australia. Despite reporting of a 'silent protest' outside the court-house, media reports expected a violent response from Saunders' family and friends. Likewise, Samoan-Australians were represented as a war-like group, and an inevitable source of violence to any community. Journalists did not hesitate to use ethnically-based identifiers, and in some cases added visual imagery to blatantly mark out the two groups. As such, these two groups were marked out as representing the boundaries of mainstream Australia, and Logan, like Redfern and Cabramatta in Sydney, was identified as a site of lawlessness. Such reporting can be seen to play on existing stereotypes, and perpetuate community fear and suspicion of the 'other within' Australian society (see also Dreher, 2002; Perera, 2007; McCallum, 2007).

Online news blogs and invited columns extended the reach of discussion about these significant local issues, providing valuable space for the expression of public opinion and direct conversation with journalists. The provision of a space for localised discussion among the Samoan community, for whom this was clearly a damaging experience, was particularly important. But caution should be exercised before extolling the benefits of online discussion, as these sites can limit legitimate discussion and provide a mouthpiece for racist sentiment. In contrast to the careful negotiation displayed by journalists, online community responses were largely negative towards both groups. In particular, the local Aboriginal community was ultimately framed and blamed as being the source of the violence against it; a theme that may have been signalled to readers in news reporting.

News reporting and online responses can be seen to have highlighted racial conflict at the expense of everyday community experience, and reinforced taken-for-granted assumptions about the risks posed by both these 'outsider' groups to 'mainstream' Australia. The coverage of Richard Saunders' death and its consequences for local inter-cultural conflict in Brisbane provided the opportunity to examine the depiction of apparent conflict between two minority racial groups in the context of the Australian population. The juxtaposition of frames – Sporting Hero, Racial Conflict, Indigenous Rights and Willingness to Reconcile – demonstrates the multiple and conflicting layers of discourse available to news audiences. Such reporting can be seen to shape our understanding of Indigenous and multicultural issues more broadly.

Discussion and recommendations for journalism practice

This case study has analysed in some detail the reporting by mainstream journalists and the responses by members of the public in online discussion forums of two contemporary news stories. The 'White Flight from NSW schools' story of March 2008 and the 'Indigenous/Islander conflict' in Brisbane of October 2008 each highlight a number of important themes in the way that Australian journalists and their audiences negotiate the complex relationship between Indigenous and multicultural discourses.

We have analysed media reporting of both the 'White Flight' and 'Indigenous/Islander conflict' stories in terms of the policy environment governing each, a range of academic literature, and in relation to published guidelines and codes of journalistic ethics. This conclusion provides a brief summary of those analyses.

Australia's colonial history and contemporary Government policies of Indigenous affairs and multiculturalism provided an important backdrop for the reporting of both the 'White Flight' and 'Indigenous/Islander conflict' stories. On the surface of the 'White Flight' story, *Sydney Morning Herald* journalists accepted as natural the benefits of a multicultural policy, and reported widely on comments by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs to that effect. Nevertheless, their sensationalist reporting of the 'White Flight' issue as a crisis can be seen to have inflamed the overwhelmingly negative sentiment toward the policy revealed in online public comment. Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2008) also found that official interventions to promote positive stories and interactions between Indigenous and African communities met with limited success. This highlights the conflict between official and local news frames that journalists must negotiate within their institutional and professional constraints.

Our second exemplar, about the reporting of Indigenous and Samoan cultural conflict in Brisbane, also highlighted that the legacy of Australia's colonial history and the shifting official discourses about multiculturalism and Indigenous sovereignty are played out through contemporary journalism. While journalists attempted to report fairly on both communities, they nevertheless framed the story in such a way that suggested multicultural and Indigenous rights policies were to blame for local community conflict. The public's response to that framing, through blogs and letters, can be seen to have fed on that framing, frequently demonstrating outright rejection of multicultural policies and rights for Indigenous Australians.

There is a wide literature available that locates these responses in a deep individual and systemic racism in the Australian public and media (Jakubowicz et al., 1994; NSWADB, 2003; Bell, 1997). Overtly racist opinion was evident in some opinion columns and in several online responses. These generally rejected any government policies advocating cultural diversity, and directly blamed Indigenous and ethnic minority groups for causing conflict. More common is what can be called 'new racism', where the behaviour of outsider groups is blamed (Dunn et al., 2004). Many respondents to the 'White Flight' story rejected the suggestion that white racism was to blame for the increasing racial segregation in NSW schools, instead pointing to specific examples of 'bad behaviour' that left no alternative for their turning to non-Government schooling (McCallum, 2007). Likewise, reporting of Indigenous/Islander conflict can be seen to feed 'new racism' as it reinforced the unacceptable behaviour of *both* Indigenous and Islander communities in Brisbane's suburbs.

Theories of whiteness are also valuable for analysing the impact of these two news stories. The Brisbane story of inter-cultural conflict can be seen to invoke the impression that the bad behaviour of these two outsider groups marks out the boundaries of 'whiteness' in urban

Australia (Perera, 1999). Without mentioning 'white', it is clear that it is those marked by colour who threaten the safety of Brisbane's suburbs. The 'White Flight' story, by contrast, invoked and left largely unchallenged the term 'white'. This acceptance of what is meant by 'white' coincided with the marking out of Aboriginal, 'Asian', and 'Muslim' minorities as 'non-white'. In their reporting, journalists act to keep alive the category of whiteness, and explain the social reality of a racialised Australia to their audiences (see Kaufmann, 2006). As a key institution, the news media play an important role in maintaining, reinforcing and challenging the policies that govern cultural diversity in Australia.

Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2008) concluded that inter-cultural conflict between African and Indigenous communities in Perth was based in class as well as racial realities. In both our exemplars, this alternative class frame was available, but each time journalists chose to ignore the fact that such conflict is equally based in social disadvantage as it is in racial difference. Both times the racial conflict frame dominated reporting of the issue. Surprisingly, community responses challenged this dominant framing, with several respondents blaming government education policies for increasing social disadvantage.

Journalists play an important role in explaining Indigenous and multicultural issues to news audiences. But as Deuze (2005) has argued, multiculturalism has played a key role in shaping journalistic practices. We suggest that, in the Australian context, Indigenous affairs have played a critical role in national political discourse, and in doing so have challenged and shaped the practices of journalism. Journalists are frequently pulled up by interest groups over the consequences of their reporting, and journalism educators have placed intense emphasis on the training of undergraduate journalists to be aware of the sensitivities of reporting 'race' (O'Donnell, 2003).

Guidelines and codes of practice for the reporting of multicultural and Indigenous issues are therefore of vital importance. Our analysis reveals that on some fronts, journalists take these guidelines very seriously, and that they can be seen to shape the way at least some stories are reported. However, the continued emphasis on the news value of conflict, and the unchallenged assumptions about the 'white' or 'mainstream' nature of news audiences means that much reporting remains problematic.

Sheridan Burns & McKee (1999) called for journalists to move away from polarised debates around 'racism' and accusations of 'racist' reporting, and to focus on the positive self-representation of Indigenous communities. Brisbane journalists also effectively gave voice to both the subjects of the story – responding to a common criticism that so often only official and 'white' sources are quoted. Indeed, both Samoan and local Indigenous people were the players in this story. By contrast, the 'White Flight' story ignored entirely the minority groups who were supposed to have caused white families to leave the schools. The SMH privileged the voices of official sources and the 'white' families.

It could be argued that journalists reporting on the Brisbane Indigenous/Islander conflict story had heeded Sheridan Burns & McKee's call to take care when reporting an unfolding story. At the outset, journalists were careful not to assume a racial motive and did not identify the race of the victim or perpetrator until it was made public through the courts.

As Stockwell & Scott (2000) have observed, identifying and labelling minority groups in news reporting can promote community stereotypes with negative consequences for the stereotyped groups. Many Samoan respondents rejected the media's tendency to generalise 'Islander' communities as violent and 'warlike'. More concerning was the apparent doctoring of images to make clear the 'battle-dress' of each of the communities. Likewise, the naming of Indigenous,

'Asian', and 'Muslim' communities in NSW as the cause of 'White Flight' can be seen to stigmatise these groups. Our case study concludes that such reporting is unproductive and, while it may provide a sensational headline, does little for wider public understanding of the issues.

Both the 'White Flight' and Islander/Indigenous conflict stories reiterate the assumption that multiculturalism and 'Australian' are mutually exclusive concepts. By labelling Australian as 'White', the 'White Flight' story in particular marked out the boundaries of that 'whiteness'. Indigenous, 'Asian', and 'Muslim' communities were clearly identified as not belonging to Australia. More subtly, the behaviour of both Indigenous and 'Islander' communities in Brisbane mark them as outside mainstream Australia.

Together, these stories exemplify Curthoys' (2000) 'uneasy conversation'. Journalists translate for their news audiences the meaning of 'White Australia', but they use multiple and often contradictory framing devices to convey what it means to be 'not White' in contemporary Australia. They sometimes privilege the sovereign rights of Indigenous Australians, as in the Indigenous/Islander conflict story, where the Indigenous voice resisting colonisation and demanding respect was clearly heard. But the reporting of Indigenous people as resisting moves for social cohesion and 'harmony' also frame these Australians as a barrier to successful cultural diversity. News media reporting of issues involving conflict between Indigenous and immigrant communities mirrors many of the wider, unresolved, issues in contemporary discourses about multiculturalism and diversity in Australia.

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