

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND THE MEDIA^{3/4} REPORTING ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Diana Plater

IN LATE 1985 I WAS AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATED PRESS'S WESTERN Australian correspondent. While I was in Kununurra, the family of a young Aboriginal man who had died in Broome gaol came to visit. They were desperate. They did not believe the cause of death suggested by the prison and suspected some foul play. For this reason they wanted an independent post mortem, only they could not afford it. They had asked the local legal service but they were told it did not see the need for it. So they asked that the story be written to help their case. Like many people, who find little help from bureaucracy, they had gone to the media for help.

Late 1985 was a traumatic time in Western Australia for Aboriginal people—they had held strong hopes for both State and national land rights which were dashed by governments, who were unable to stand up to powerful lobby groups. People who had bared their souls and their intimate knowledge to land commissioners and lawyers learnt yet again that their precious time and effort had come to nothing. Around the same time there was a series of deaths in prisons, police lockups and vans and in hotels. Predictably, people had spent their built-up frustration by protesting, often leading to violence. Coronial inquiries and subsequent court cases had brought little justice.

Some of the journalists working in the area, who were sympathetic to Aboriginal calls for justice, had themselves been verbally attacked by the police and prison officers and accused of bias, treachery and disloyalty to the white status quo. The reason journalists—in Western Australia and in the other States—wrote those stories was because of a belief that the public should know how Aboriginal people were being treated by the law, the police, courts and government. For some, unused to conflict with the state and police, it was a shocking revelation.

However, as the environmentalists have learnt and politicians and the police have always known, the media, for all its faults, is there to be used.

Elliott Johnston QC in his reports to the Royal Commission recognised the role of the media.

The media played a significant role . . . in the establishment of this Royal Commission. By its coverage of the issues, from the death of John Pat to that of

Lloyd Boney, by placing them in their broader social and moral context, and by its presentation of the campaign of the Committee to Defend Black Rights, the media has acted as one of the protagonists in the process of achieving greater justice for Aboriginal people that is the goal of this Commission (Johnston 1991).

Johnston also points out that there is another side to the story. Aboriginal people generally claim that they have had an extremely bad deal from the media, experiencing discrimination in access and presentation. We all accept that and know the pain and suffering that has been caused by the lies and distortions, negative stereotypes and clichés that the media often uses when reporting on Aboriginal issues.

Racial Stereotyping

One of the main problems is the common journalistic practice—also promoted by the police—of identifying the Aboriginality of alleged offenders in crime stories. Of Mark Quayle, who died in Wilcannia in western NSW, Commissioner Hal Wootten said:

The dehumanised stereotype of Aborigines in Australia caused his death. . . . in that stereotype a police cell is a natural and proper place for an Aborigine (Wootten 1991).

The Commission was told by a journalist:

Racial stereotyping and racism in the media is institutional, not individual. That is, it results from news values, editorial policies, from routines of news gathering that are not in themselves racist or consciously prejudicial. It results from the fact that most news stories are already written before an individual journalist is assigned to them, even before the event takes place. A story featuring Aboriginals is simply more likely to be covered, or more likely to survive sub-editorial revision or spiking, if it fits existing definitions of the situation (Johnston 1991).

Although there is a negative side of the media and its coverage of Aboriginal issues, it is important to stress the positive work that is being done between Aboriginal people and some sections of the media and give some examples of how the situation can be improved further.

Journalists believe that there are few extremely racist reporters, but many, many ignorant ones. It is the responsibility of the industry to do something about that ignorance and it needs the help of Aboriginal people.

The industry recognises the work that Aboriginal people such as Lester Bostock and Cheryle Schramm and others have done in writing guidelines, running seminars and working towards the continued employment of Aboriginal journalists and filmmakers in the mainstream media, particularly the ABC and SBS.

Still, however, one of the main gaps is in the teaching of journalism in institutions with a lack of or little discussion of Aboriginal issues. The Royal Commission has recommended that "courses contain a significant component relating to Aboriginal affairs thereby reflecting the social context in which journalists work".

Through the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology in Sydney, Kitty Eggerking and the author are presently working on a project known as "Reporting Cultural Diversity". Consisting of a resource book for working journalists and a text book and a training video for journalism students, the

project is designed to raise awareness about Aboriginal affairs and issues affecting people of a non-English speaking background. The resource book, *Signposts*, was launched during National Aborigines' Week as part of the Redfern Community Festival.

Up until recently, for those journalists who are keen to write non-racist stories on Aboriginal issues, the only guidance they have had has been a clause in the Australian Journalists' Association Code of Ethics. Point 2 of the code says that journalists "shall not place unnecessary emphasis on gender, race, sexual preference, religious belief, marital status or physical or mental disability".

In order to clarify some of the areas, the Australian Journalists' Association (AJA) has passed a set of guidelines on reporting issues affecting Aboriginal people. These are published in the resource book as well as guidelines already written by Lester Bostock for SBS filmmakers, *The Greater Perspective*, *A Guideline for the Production of Television and Film on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, and ones by Imparja Television, the ABC, the Warlpiri Media Association and a guide on reporting deaths in the Warlpiri community.

There has been a great deal of interest in these guidelines, basically because a lot of journalists just do not know where to start. Journalists would welcome any suggestions from Aboriginal people for additions or changes to these guidelines for the text book and update of the resource book.

Positive Stories

The author believes that positive stories about Aboriginal people means portraying them as human beings, not as two-dimensional walking clichés (for example protesters, drunks, criminals and victims) but rather as voters, mothers, fathers, children, students, lawyers, community workers, nurses and so on. Without denying the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, it is important that Aboriginal people are seen in the mainstream of Australian society as people with views about a whole range of subjects that affect everybody and as people who are doing things for themselves, working within their communities for change.

For example, when the controversial documentary, *Cop it Sweet*, about police in Redfern, was shown on ABC TV, it would have been useful to

screen a complementary documentary about the interesting and positive side of Redfern—something that refers to all the wonderful things happening in that much maligned neighbourhood, such as the medical service, the Eora Centre, the pre-school and the legal service.

"Positive stories" means looking more deeply into issues and understanding the history and the background. For example, the fact that Aboriginal people are now publishing their own histories and making their own programs and films should be of enormous interest to the media. Perhaps better reporting on Aboriginal issues could even lead the way to a more responsible, less sensationalist media on *all* subjects and issues.

The Aboriginal Media Liaison Group

Because, sadly, it is still true that many Australians go through life never meeting an Aboriginal person, most people still get their information about Aboriginal people from the media. It would seem that closer contact between Aboriginal people and journalists is the best way to change attitudes.

In Western Australia, a group of journalists and Aboriginal people have got together to do that. Concerned about the coverage in that state of Aboriginal issues they have formed the Aboriginal Media Liaison Group. They conduct campaigns to raise awareness and improve standards as well as holding forums for the media on how to improve reporting and for Aboriginal people on how to handle the media.

One such seminar was held in a country town, north of Perth, which has had a history of racial problems. Although it is not a big city, most of the journalists had never met the local Aboriginal people. After the seminar they went down to the pub together. The group believes having an outside agent organise the seminar made all the difference. We can only hope the media coverage will now improve.

The group, however, has not been so lucky with the *West Australian*, a newspaper that dominates the media in that state. Basically, if the *West Australian* does not run a story, it is not news. Aboriginal people found an ally in WA Premier Carmen Lawrence, who was particularly critical of a front-page story headlined "Aboriginal gangs terrorise suburbs". Forty-five journalists also signed a letter complaining about the story. Highly sensitive to criticism, the newspaper refused to be swayed by their arguments.

The group has also been conducting a campaign to have standards or guidelines introduced in commercial radio in relation to Aboriginal issues, such as those that exist for the ABC and SBS. They are particularly concerned about talk-back radio, where all sorts of racist myths and comments are aired with little opportunity to show the other side of the story. As part of this campaign, a report, *Gambling on the First Race*, a comment on racism and talk-back radio—6PR, the TAB and the WA Government; and written by journalist Steve Mickler for the Louis St John Johnson Memorial Trust Fund has been tabled in Federal Parliament.

There is no reason why similar groups cannot be formed in every State and town.

Media Coverage of other Communities

It is interesting to look at media coverage of other communities and how they have responded. During the Gulf War, Arab Australians were extremely upset about the way they were being portrayed by the media—a portrayal that led to mosques being attacked and harassment of members of their communities. Government bodies were

also concerned about this and meetings between members of the Arab Australian community and senior media people were organised in Sydney and Melbourne.

Those frank chats led to enormous changes of attitude, particularly when the newspaper editors learnt that their negative stories were upsetting a substantial section of their own market.

It was suggested that the Arab and Moslem communities should try to communicate directly with media organisations by, for example, making spokespeople more readily available and responding quickly to inaccuracies (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991).

There is a lesson here for the Aboriginal community. Similar forums between organisations and the media to try and break down these barriers would be an important step to changing attitudes.

Contacts and Representatives in the Aboriginal Community

Another problem is that journalists often go to the same person for a quote, who is then quoted on issues on which he or she sometimes does not have the authority to speak. For a journalist, contacts are everything. So it is important for journalists to have the appropriate contacts in the Aboriginal community. In our resource book, with the help of Aboriginal people, we have provided a directory of Aboriginal organisations. Perhaps Aboriginal organisations could put together such directories and let their local media know the best person to speak to when something happens. It is best to be pro-active, rather than reactive.

Some Aboriginal organisations, such as the land councils, have journalists or media relations officers on their staff. But not all organisations can afford that. If not, it is an idea to appoint somebody who is authorised to speak to the press, who can present a positive image. The guidelines that Aboriginal people have written emphasise that journalists should speak to Aboriginal people about Aboriginal subjects to make it easier for the journalist by having an Aboriginal person available for comment. A journalist being fobbed off to the white spokesperson or lawyer or whatever can be counter-productive.

Journalists

Cultivating individual journalists is one way of getting a story run. At present only a few news organisations have Aboriginal roundspeople but there are certain journalists who have a personal interest in the subject.

It helps of course if they are senior journalists, who are well-respected by the organisation for which they work. To cite the coverage of Coronation Hill, is a good example of how Aboriginal religious beliefs and attachment to the land was not taken seriously by the media. Yet some good examples of

journalism rose above the mire to try to present a different view, such as the articles by Cameron Forbes of *The Age*. Cameron has written about Aboriginal issues for many years, as have a variety of journalists throughout the country. It is interesting if you look at the winners of the Walkley Awards—Australian journalism's most prestigious award—over the years to see how many journalists have been noted for their reports on Aboriginal issues. Freelancers Jan Mayman, writing for *The Age*, and Duncan Graham, for *The National Times*, are two such examples.

Using the Media: Press Releases

In the meantime, however, it is worth remembering that journalists rely heavily on press releases and press conferences. It is worth getting advice on how to write one and how to hold a press conference. ATSIIC and the Western Australian Aboriginal Media Association have published a book, *Yarning with the Media*, with this sort of information.

Some Aboriginal people and organisations already are completely aware of how to use the media, particularly the international media as seen in the international coverage of the protests at the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane and the 1988 anti-bicentennial survival march in Sydney.

Australian Media

Unfortunately, in both cases, there was far less positive coverage from the Australian media. A British journalist pointed out that the Australian media acts a little like the British does when it comes to coverage of the war in Northern Ireland. To many, Aboriginal issues are the blind spot of Australian journalism. But journalists are learning, bit by bit, due to Aboriginal efforts to tell their story, particularly through the Aboriginal media. As the people at Brisbane Indigenous Media Association told the author, they are planning to lift the mainstream media's game through their own example at their new Brisbane radio station.

One of the problems seems to be that the media has been slow to recognise the sophistication that exists in the Aboriginal community. Having roundspeople covering the subject would help. Reporters in the ABC and SBS have also welcomed having Aboriginal journalists working in their organisations, who they can go to for help with stories.

Complaints About Media Coverage

If Aboriginal people are unhappy with a story there are avenues of complaint. Complaints can be made to the Australian Press Council if the error has been made in a newspaper, to the Independent Complaints Review Panel if the error has been made by the ABC and the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal if the problem is with a commercial radio or television station. If it is believed that the station has broadcast racist material, or has been unfair to Aboriginal people on a regular basis, complaints can be made when the station's licence is to be renewed.

Recommendation 208 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody states:

That, in view of the fact that many Aboriginal people throughout Australia express disappointment in the portrayal of Aboriginal people by the media, the

media industry and media unions should encourage formal and informal contact with Aboriginal organisations, including Aboriginal media organisations where available. The purpose of such contact should be the creation of a better understanding, on all sides, of issues relating to media treatment of Aboriginal affairs.

Conclusion

As can be seen, these recommendations are gradually being implemented in some form in some places. Most were already on the agenda before the commissioners made them.

Contact at a grassroots level between people will always be the most successful route to changing attitudes, as the Western Australian group has shown.

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