Media representations of Indigenous Australians

The media constructs and repeats images of people so that they inform an audiences’ understanding of a group or issue⁵.

Indigenous people have rarely had control over the way they are represented. This is because “mass media ownership, control and production in Australia is in the hands of non-Aborigines”². Therefore, Indigenous Australians are often represented by non-Indigenous people who have little contact with Indigenous Australia³.

Additionally, representations of Indigenous Australians are primarily made for non-Indigenous audiences⁴. This is because minority audiences are often ignored.

Hollinsworth argues that minority groups are underrepresented in the media because of a lack of minority media workers⁵. Indigenous Australians are also absent from drama and comedy shows, featuring mostly in news and current affairs⁶.

Media representations of Indigenous Australians are embedded within a racist framework and reproduce this framework⁷. Many representations of Indigenous Australians are in fact misrepresentations⁸.

**History of Indigenous media representation**

Colonial discussions of Indigenous Australians constructed racial stereotypes⁹. Many representations constructed Indigenous people as primitive¹⁰. European explorer William Dampier described “Aboriginal people

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on first contact” in his journal as “[t]he miserablest people in the world”. This and other historical examples created a representation of Indigenous people before the arrival of Captain Cook and the First Fleet.

“As a key cultural resource – and most often, the only source of information about ideas of race – the media (and journalists) since first contact have fulfilled a key ... role in framing Indigenous people in particular ways.” This was through looking at them through a non-Indigenous lens.

Common representations

Many representations of Indigenous Australians “focus ... on conflict, [violence, criminality] and difference.” “Indigenous people have been represented ... as the exotic other, ... a dying race, welfare dependent, the drunk, the activist, the threat to existing order, the invisible.” Their behaviour is often represented to be irrational and out of control and they are constructed as a “risk” to society.

“Indigenous leaders are frequently represented as militant radicals, or accused of fraud, mismanagement or sexual assault”

These negative representations work alongside representations of their “sporting ... and artistic abilities.”

Another representation of Indigenous Australians is that they are privileged in terms of the amount of welfare they receive in comparison to impoverished non-Indigenous Australians. This is based on the assumption

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 281.
14 Ibid., p. 282.
that they receive excessive amounts of government assistance.22

Further, the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians is often represented to result from their own incompetence, which constructs them as their own ‘problem’.23

Some representations construct Indigenous people as all the same despite “diversity within and between Indigenous communities”.24

Indigenous voices are rarely heard in stories about them in mainstream media.25 This supports existing negative representations of them.26

Further, some journalists do not understand Indigenous culture and use familiar stereotypes to position their stories.27 Stories can also often be based in sensationalism,28 news values and ratings.

Example: The “Redfern Riot”

**Background:** “On 15 February 2004 Thomas ‘TJ’ Hickey, an indigenous youth, died after he was impaled on a fence in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern”29. It was believed that he was being chased by the police before his death, although the police denied this.30

Following his death conflicts between Indigenous youth and the police broke out in Sydney.31 It was described as a riot by the

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25 Ibid.


28 Sensationalism means “(especially in journalism) the presentation of stories in a way that is intended to provoke public interest or excitement, at the expense of accuracy” (Oxford University Press, ‘Definition of ‘sensationalism’ in English’, Oxford University Press, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/sensationalism [15 November 2013]).


31 Ibid.
The conflict resulted in police and civilian injuries and damage to some buildings.

**Reporting:** Gargett suggests that the media’s reporting of the Redfern riot linked Indigeneity and criminality. This ignores the historical context of Indigenous colonisation, dispossession and assimilation. By constructing Indigenous people as criminal it represents the Indigenous race as outside society because of their deviance requiring regulation and control.

The riot is represented as emerging from Indigenous belief that TJ was unfairly targeted and his death was the fault of police because he “was being unreasonably harassed.” However, any police misconduct was silenced in media representations which continues the us (non-Indigenous) vs. them (Indigenous) representation.

Relatily, Atherford suggests that the media at times heightened the conflict through their representations of Indigenous people and through their neutral and then ‘victim-like’ representations of the police.

Budrick and King in their study analysed representations of the Redfern riot in the *Koori Mail* (an Indigenous owned, national publication), the *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* and the *Daily Telegraph*. They found that the papers each approached the riots from different angles.

In the *Koori Mail* the riots were represented as another problem faced by the Redfern community. Their articles also based causes for the riots on historical policies and the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people and they included Indigenous voices.

The *Koori Mail’s* representation focused less on violence, deviance and conflict than the *SMH* and the *Daily Telegraph*. In the *SMH’s* coverage racial tensions between Indigenous people and the non-Indigenous police were represented as the cause of the riots. This was followed by a drugs and crime representation.

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34 Ibid., p. 9.
36 Ibid., p. 9.
37 Ibid., p. 10.
38 Ibid.
which was similar to representations in the *Daily Telegraph*.

Atherford also studied newspaper coverage of the event focusing on the *SMH* and the *Daily Telegraph*. She suggests that the *SMH* balanced out the sensationalised media coverage with other stories\(^{41}\) which moved beyond “conflict and drama”\(^{42}\), unlike, the *Daily Telegraph* which focused on this angle.

The *Daily Telegraph* used words associated with war like ‘battle lines’ and headlines like “Redfern erupts” alongside claims “of an “uncontrollable mob” and the “unleashing of nine hours of terror””\(^{43}\)\(^{44}\).

Additionally, *SMH* and *Daily Telegraph* articles were dominated with interviews and comments from the police and politicians with limited engagement with Indigenous people\(^{45}\). When Indigenous comments were included these were towards the end of an article. This constructs a hierarchy of who is authorised to discuss Indigenous issues.

Further, often when Indigenous people were quoted in articles statements “were generally emotive and highlighted their lack of education”\(^{46}\). These statements were set in contrast to prepared statements by the police and politicians, which took on qualities of rationality and authenticity.

The articles also represented Redfern as ‘dangerous’ and ‘dilapidated’. This is problematic because audiences may assume that such problems infiltrate the individuals residing there\(^{47}\)\(^{48}\).

In actual fact, the ‘Redfern Riots’ were a small gathering of largely non-violent protestors who wanted a proper explanation for the police’s reasons for chasing a youth who hadn’t committed a crime.

**Positive journalism**

Positively “persistent journalists reporting on the deaths of Indigenous people in custody


\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) While there were exceptions most articles negatively represented the issue.


\(^{47}\) Ibid.

did influence the setting up of a royal commission in the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{49}

Additionally, technological advances and alternative media like blogs, posts and social media sites are able to challenge negative representations.\textsuperscript{50}

Further, despite negative representations of Indigenous people, the media, in particular, Indigenous media can play a role in “cultural [and language] maintenance.”\textsuperscript{51}

We should control Indigenous representations

One way that negative media representations of Indigenous Australians can be challenged is through Indigenous control of media sources.\textsuperscript{52} “Indigenous people have established Indigenous print (e.g. The National Indigenous Times\textsuperscript{53}, the Koori Mail\textsuperscript{54}), radio (e.g. National Indigenous Radio Service\textsuperscript{55}) and television (e.g. NITV\textsuperscript{56}) media as an alternative to mass media.”\textsuperscript{57}

However, although ownership over media production is an issue, the problem lies within mainstream media and it is difficult for Indigenous media sources to challenge the negative media representations because their access is limited.\textsuperscript{59}

Some have argued that “the mainstream media ... [should] work toward promoting more positive images of Indigenous people.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{53} For more information on the National Indigenous Times go to http://www.nit.com.au/.
\textsuperscript{54} For more information on the Koori Mail go to http://www.koorimail.com/about-koori-mail/.
\textsuperscript{55} For more information on the National Indigenous Radio Service go to http://www.nirs.org.au/.
\textsuperscript{56} For more information on NITV go to www.nitv.org.au.
\textsuperscript{60} Michael Meadows, ‘Media Images of Indigenous Affairs in Australia’, in J. Leigh and E. Loo (eds.), \textit{Outer Limits: A Reader in
“However, ... Langton reminds us, simply replacing negative stereotypes with positive and uplifting images ‘does not challenge racism’”61.

Some have argued then that audiences should influence and change the agenda of media production so that it adequately represents Indigenous people.

What do you think?

Stuart Hall, media theorist, argues that “things ‘in themselves’ rarely if ever have any one, single and unchanging meaning”62. This becomes relevant to a discussion of representations because he is arguing that it cannot be assumed that all representations are accepted without challenge by society. Hall argues, meanings are contested, negotiated, disrupted and challenged. “Representation functions less like the model of a one way transmitter and more like the model of a dialogue”63.

What do you think about this in relation to media representations of Indigenous people? Do negative media representations of Indigenous Australians affect and influence the way we think about Indigenous people?

Questions

1. Indigenous Australians most commonly feature in
   a. Comedy and drama programs
   b. News and drama programs
   c. News and lifestyle programs
   d. News and current affairs programs

2. Why are historical representations identified in the article as a concern in the way they frame Indigenous Australians?
   a. They are concerning because since colonisation historical representations have played a role in the way Indigenous people are framed.
   b. They are not concerning.
   c. They are concerning because the way they framed Indigenous Australians was a?

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63 Ibid., p. 10.
correct representation which means that Indigenous Australians have become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

d. They are concerning because they accurately represent Indigenous Australians.

3. Why it is problematic that Indigenous voices are silenced in media representations?
   a. It is problematic because using Indigenous voices can support the representations.
   b. It is problematic because excluding their voices does not allow them to challenge the representations therefore, reproducing them.
   c. It is problematic because excluding their voices does positively, allow them to challenge the representation but negatively, continues to reproduce the negative representations.
   d. It is not a problem.

4. What are the three solutions to challenging negative representations identified in the article?
   a. Indigenous control of media sources, the promotion of positive images of Indigenous people by mainstream media and audiences should demand change in media agendas.
   b. There are no solutions and nothing needs to change.
   c. Indigenous control of media sources, more guidelines on reporting on Indigenous people and audiences should demand change in media agendas.
   d. Indigenous control of media sources, the promotion of positive images of Indigenous people by the mainstream media and more guidelines on reporting on Indigenous people.