

In Crisis, on Crisis: technology-driven industrial change and the Northern Territory Emergency Response 2007

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Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of an inquiry into child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (NT), the Australian Federal Government announced an 'emergency intervention' in June 2007. A key element of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was the initial announcement of compulsory child health checks for signs of abuse in Aboriginal children living in 71 proscribed communities. However, a short time later, amid allegations from the medical profession and others that the compulsory nature of the checks would itself constitute child sexual abuse, the government amended this element of the policy so that child health checks would be voluntary and of a non-forensic nature.

This paper investigates the circumstances and discursive practices that enabled a government to announce and then amend this hastily packaged child health checks policy, and the role of the Australian media in reporting on this moment of change. Following a critical discourse analysis methodology, where primarily newspaper reports and other media reports that relate to them intertextually are examined in the social and cultural contexts of their production, the paper explores the discursive practices of reporters and government ministers, and how news media represented the medical lobby and the indigenous health policy advocates who expressed concerns about the policy. It traces how in a crisis situation a 'policy on the run' was actually developed as it was reported on through the media. The paper provides evidence that, at this key moment of the policy's

development, many routine journalistic practices were not followed, with consequences including that government ministers were unchallenged in making unsubstantiated or misleading claims. This analysis highlights some considerations around journalism practice that adversely affect the fair and equal representation of Aboriginal Australians, in what is characterised as a crisis situation in our transitioning newsrooms and – as a result – in our democracy.

This analysis centres on the dual meaning of ‘crisis’ in the intervention context. The release of the ‘trigger’ report, *Little Children are Sacred: The Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007* (Anderson and Wild, 2007), provided the impetus for then Prime Minister John Howard and Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough to launch the NTER in response to what they identified as a crisis in NT Indigenous communities. Meanwhile, media scholars and journalists have characterised the ongoing print media industrial changes as a crisis in our newsrooms. Australia’s newspaper industry has been operating in a resources vacuum. Reeling from losing to the online domain the ‘rivers of gold’ revenue from classified advertising, it has yet to establish a viable online business model (Finkelstein, 2011). In 2007, print journalists, whose industry was already in crisis, had a brief timeframe in which to report on this emergency policy response provoked by an alleged crisis situation. We argue that enduring newsroom practices combined with industrial pressures – whereby journalists are expected to do ever more work in less time – hampered their ability to respond to and report on this crisis.

Reporting of the child sexual health checks policy during the two-month period between the NTER announcement and its enactment in August provides a powerful case study of the resultant vacuum that exists in the democratic process. In media and democratic theory, the media is supposed to perform a Fourth Estate role in society; that is, to enable an informed citizenry and act as a watchdog on government. While it is arguable whether this ideal was ever a reality (Zelizer, 2012), it is demonstrable that neither role was being adequately performed at this particular time in relation to the NTER. This paper argues that it is at times of policy crisis that the policymaking and broader communities are reliant on quality journalism. Although always important, fact checking – one of the routine practices central to ‘doing’ journalism – becomes absolutely critical for journalists grappling with the

meaning, origins and consequences of a speedily evolving, unprecedented and controversial policy.

This paper's analysis seeks to bridge the gap between studies of representation – through textual analysis – and studies of news production and the structural constraints imposed by the political economy of the newsroom. Norman Fairclough's dialectical-relational critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, which is a text-oriented discourse analysis, argues that analysing the contexts of texts' production as well as the texts themselves is essential to understanding discourse, as texts are not produced in isolation (Fairclough, 1992). CDA is employed here to look primarily at the news report, then the journalistic discursive practices involved in its production, and the wider socio-cultural context. Through the textual analysis of news reports about the NTER, with reference to the social context of newsroom discursive practices and the wider cultural context, this paper shows that a significant aspect of the Northern Territory Emergency Response policy – the rollout of health checks for NT Aboriginal children – was not adequately examined by the news media.

Indigenous child sexual abuse: discourse and policy

Child sexual abuse is an ongoing issue of concern for those living in remote, rural and urban Indigenous communities, as it has also been in non-Indigenous communities. Since the 1980s it has been the subject of numerous inquiries and reports by state and federal governments, health professionals and non-government organisations. Since Atkinson's (1990) groundbreaking report there have been as many as 40 official inquiries into domestic violence and sexual abuse in Indigenous communities (Webb-Pullman, Nethercote and Vorrath, 2007; see also Robertson, 1999; Memmott, 2001; Gordon, Hallahan and Henry, 2002; ACSAT, 2006; Anderson and Wilde, 2007). Health and social research has concluded that the reasons for both the higher levels of sexual violence against women and children, and the lower levels of reporting, can be attributed to factors including stigma, racism, fear of retaliatory violence, and lack of resources for health professionals, particularly Indigenous health workers (Stanley, 2003: 3; see also Ring and Wenitong, 2007). "CSA [Child sexual abuse] in Indigenous communities needs to be understood in the context of the broader setting of trauma, deprivation and racism, in which the problems of CSA is completely entwined" (Stanley, 2003: 6).

Sexual abuse against children is not solely a health issue, but is part of a wider discursive paradigm incorporating colonial and post-colonial ideas about Indigenous men and violence, Indigenous women, sexuality and responsibility, and Indigenous children and vulnerability. Increasing attention to child sexual abuse in Australian Indigenous communities reflected the historical public denial of the issues, and subsequent growing awareness globally. Kitzinger (2004: 34) argues that “[c]hild sexual abuse as it is understood today ... was not ‘invented’ until the 1980s”. Growing awareness of, and opposition to, paedophilia in the 1970s, followed by news media attention to family abuse, and finally abuse within institutional settings, focused public and policy interest on the issue.

Despite the breadth and longevity of official inquiries into child sexual abuse in this sector of Australian society, health and Indigenous policy advocates say that, rather than a lack of awareness, the problem has been a lack of willingness for state and federal governments to address the issue. Indeed, the government’s own evaluation of the Intervention’s Child Health Initiative stated that:

Part of the policy problem was that the difficulties being experienced and documented in Aboriginal communities were largely invisible on the national stage, and were not given sustained attention by the Australian Government (Allen and Clarke, 2011).

In Australia, the 1997 *Bringing them Home* Report (HREOC 1997) provided shocking revelations about the historical and social causes and impacts of institutional abuse of Australian Aboriginal children in the 20th century. Rather than leading to clear government policy initiatives to tackle the outcomes of past child protection practices, however, the revelations of the *Bringing them Home* Report precipitated fierce political and public division. The then Prime Minister, John Howard, refused to apologise to Indigenous people on behalf of the Australian population on the grounds that the current generation should not be held responsible for the actions of past governments. Indigenous Affairs subsequently became a divisive policy issue for the government, culminating in the announcement – on the eve of the Howard government being voted out of office – of the suite of radical policy initiatives of the 2007 NTER.

Reporting Indigenous issues in a time of industrial change

The representation of Australian Indigenous communities has been the subject of substantial scholarly inquiry. Critical media and race studies have examined media content as a form of racist discourse (Cottle, 2000), concluding that racialised and racist meanings are embedded within and reproduced through mediated representations (Jakubowicz et al., 1994; Meadows, 2001; Mickler, 1998; Bacon, 2005; see also Hall, 1995). Taking a constructionist news framing approach, McCallum (2007) found that news media characteristically associated Indigenous men with violence and as a source of risk. The author found that from 2000-2006 the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* and *The Australian* newspaper led the news agenda to raise public awareness of child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities (ABC Lateline, 2006a; ABC Lateline, 2006b; Graham, 2012). News stories typically drew on frames of *Individual Blame*, *Health Crisis*, *Policy Failure* and *Failure of Indigenous Leadership* to tell the story of remote Indigenous disadvantage and dysfunction. Reid and McCallum (2012) found that *The Australian* engaged in 'campaigning journalism' in its crusade to focus political attention on both the living conditions and behaviours of Indigenous communities in the remote Northern Territory.

Routine news-gathering practices are a significant contributing factor to the way journalists report on Indigenous issues. Professional journalism practice imposes certain expectations on news reporters, including that they will get both sides of the story; ask follow-up questions to, for example, clarify statements or investigate claims; that they will check facts; that the reporters will make an attempt to understand the context of what they are reporting on, to 'join the dots' as it were; that they will hold those in authority to account – that is, will put critics' allegations to them; and that part of that quest for accountability is that they will attempt to get their sources on the record – that is, to use unnamed sources sparingly; that they will keep on top of a running story, knowing who has said what and when; that they will question inconsistencies in their sources' stories and statements; and – a minor but significant detail – that they will, as newspaper style guides require, use the 'active voice' in news reports.

Despite these journalistic norms, journalism studies research has found that in the area of indigenous affairs reporting they are frequently ignored with the result that Aboriginal voices have been found to be largely absent from news reports, even when those reports are about their communities or interests. Jakubowicz (1994: 85) found that, in news reports, “[t]he exclusion of Aboriginal voices as authoritative is persistent”. One factor that impedes ‘quality’ journalism in this field is the journalistic practice of favouring official over unofficial sources (Sigal, 1973; Meadows, 2001; Schudson, 2003). Reporters tend to go first and often only to official sources, such as police spokespeople, politicians, or give official sources first say. That results in critics of these official sources – if they are mentioned – being given a reactive, hence inferior (Gans, 2003: 46), position. An important dimension to this is that the ‘reactive’ voice in a news report is a subordinate voice (Gans, 2003: 46). When Aboriginal sources are included, they tend to be either the only voice in the news report with no context and no one in authority called to account (Bacon, 2005), or as an afterthought, at the end of a news report. This disadvantages them further in the traditional ‘inverted pyramid’ news report structure whereby less salient points are left until the end.

This paper argues that industrial factors in the news media industries have contributed to such representations of Indigenous Australians, and to the reporting of ‘crisis’ issues such as the NTER. With the advent of online advertising and publication, and the consequent loss of advertising revenue and the relative high cost of print production, the newspaper industry globally, including in Australia, has been undergoing accelerating and extensive – some predict fatal – structural change. A great number of print journalists have lost their jobs, and those remaining are having to do more work in less time (Curtin, 1999; Lewis et al, 2008; Bacon and Crikey, 2010; MEAA; Finkelstein, 2012). In the tight two-month timeframe between the announcement of the NTER policies and their enactment, it is likely that a shrinking pool of journalists were pressed for time to explore the issues fully. This paper suggests that this was likely to have been a factor in a series of incidences where routine journalism practices were not followed in the news reports under discussion.

Critical Discourse Analysis as a theory and methodology for analysing news media

The term ‘discourse’ does not have a fixed meaning, but for the purposes of this paper discourse, after Foucault, incorporates the relationship between language, structure and

agency. Texts are not created in a vacuum, hence Norman Fairclough's definition of discourse, which embraces context, whereby contextual factors are integral to analysis (Fairclough, 2001: 20). Critical Discourse Analysis enables us to look at media representation and its effects. CDA has several approaches oriented to different epistemological bases; however, all CDA approaches are problem-oriented and interdisciplinary, and seek to demystify power and ideology through the examination of semiotic data (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 3) – in this case, news media reports of the NTER – and exploring their relationship to the social and cultural contexts of their production. Fairclough's dialectical-relational CDA approach, a text-oriented methodology, provides a framework for the exploration of how journalism's discursive practices variously allow access to, give rise to, favour or silence voice in newspaper reports. The exploration of discourse can encompass "context, background information or knowledge shared between a speaker and hearer" (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 7). Fairclough's CDA analysis of context includes intertextual analysis, whereby other texts show up in, or give rise to, a text. A running news story such as the NTER gives rise to numerous incidences of intertextuality, as the story develops.

Fairclough devised a framework for discourse analysis that has three levels of analysis – text, discourse practice and sociocultural context. The analysis on each level involves description, interpretation and explanation – with description and interpretation being at times indistinct (Fairclough, 1992: 198). The texts were examined on a lexical and sentence level, including looking for evidence of discursive practices, such as incidences where the routine journalistic practices described above had not been followed. The sociocultural context was then examined to further illuminate what was observed in the text. The Factiva database was used to identify newspaper stories on the Intervention into Aboriginal Communities, between 15 June 2007 – 18 August 2007, generating a data set of some 1750 items.

A search within this research corpus for incidences of the phrase "health check" elicited a number of articles, some of which referred intertextually to reports carried on the national broadcaster ABC. This prompted a further search on Newsbank for such reports in the two-month period. This Newsbank search also found reports from the wire service Australian Associated Press, a number of which were carried within the newspapers' news pages, either as intact reports or as supplements to reports the newspapers' staff journalists wrote.

This data subset was then read as a whole. The narrative that emerged is explored in detail via exemplars in the Findings and Discussion section below. For example, where routine journalistic practices, as described above, were not followed, the consequences of that are discussed.

Findings and Discussion

A close examination of the texts individually and as a group in this data subset (the news reports on the health checks aspect of the NTER policy), including the journalistic practices involved in their production, is revealing in two significant aspects.

First, this analysis explores the relative legitimacy extended to Aboriginal and mainstream health advocates who sounded the alarm on the abusive potential of compulsory health checks of children, whereby the Indigenous advocates' concerns were either not put to Government representatives by the reporters or, when they were, those concerns were deflected by the Indigenous Affairs Minister recasting the scenario. This recasting was reported uncritically in the news reports. The policy was only changed when mainstream medical advocate the Australian Medical Association raised the same concern.

Secondly, this analysis explores the uncritical reporting of veiled threats by official sources against NT Aboriginal parents. These veiled threats, being presented as unremarkable in the news reports, serve both as a coercive rhetorical device and as a cultural signifier that positions Aboriginal parents in the NT as unfit parents. Through close textual examination, some instances of the breakdown of routine journalistic practice are highlighted in the news reports of the health checks aspect of the NTER policy, specifically around this 'moment' of change; that is, when the formerly announced mandatory health checks for children which would include examination for sexual abuse became voluntary and general, without a sexual abuse examination.

The story unfolds

Indigenous Doctors Association (IDA) president Dr Mark Wenitong is among the first reported to be questioning the ethics of the health checks as announced by the Prime Minister. Wenitong said the IDA's doctors would not examine children without parental

consent and that more detail was needed regarding how the sexual abuse detection aspect of the examination was to be carried out. He said patients could be scared away by the prospect of, in his example, an eight-year-old girl being genitally examined by an unfamiliar male doctor (ABC News, June 23, 2007). The reporter does not seek a response from any Government official to this concern.

When a response to criticism *was* elicited in a *Sydney Morning Herald* report on the same day (June 23), the criticism is deflected in a striking manner. Primary health care program the Co-operative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health's Dr Ben Bartlett is reported as saying that "Sexual abuse checks would be 'highly inappropriate' and could themselves amount to sexual assault" (Metherell et al., 2007). Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough *is* called to account by the reporter, but deflects the criticism by saying,

"We don't want to compulsorily require anyone. If you're in a community where abuse has occurred there can be all kinds of pressure not to have your children checked.' He added: 'We will accept medical advice as to the best way to do checks.'" (Metherell et al., 2007)

Beyond the redundancy of 'compulsorily require' (and its odd echo of 'compulsorily acquire' lands, which was a contention, again dismissed, regarding the NTER as a whole and could be interpreted as a discursive slip) in this report, although an official is asked to address a critic's concern, we see that the concern is immediately recast to encompass an unrelated and hypothetical oppositional relationship. Immediately following the concern being raised in the news report, the minister positions the communities affected as collectively implicated in hypothetical abuse. In Brough's statement, the communities have an implied motive for putting pressure on parents to not allow their children to attend health checks. He also says that the Government "will accept medical advice", but does not allow for the legitimacy of this Indigenous health advocate's advice.

Shortly after this, on June 27, *The Australian* reported that Health Minister Tony Abbott said that that the checks would not be mandatory after all – that they would only be carried out with parental consent (Karvelas and Shanahan, 2007). He emphasised that they would be of a general nature; that is, that children would only be checked for signs of sexual abuse if their initial health check revealed any cause for concern, in which case they would be

referred on for a more specialised exam that would investigate the possibility of sexual abuse.

Oddly, this news is not taken up by the Fairfax press (whose journalists were under more strain from structural changes and the resources squeeze than their News Limited counterparts at *The Australian* [Finkelstein, 2011]), for a number of days. It was only on July 6 that *The Age* reported that the compulsory aspect of the checks policy had been changed, and that: "*The Age* believes that the Government changed its approach on the advice of its own expert taskforce and the Australian Medical Association." (Government softens stance on child health checks, 2007).

According to *The Age's* 'belief' (which is often journalistic code for an off-the-record briefing from someone involved in the policy development process), the Government's impetus for changing the compulsory aspect of the policy was lobbying from the AMA and the Government's own advisors. The Indigenous health lobby is not part of the picture, either in the news report or in the Government's policy development process.

By July 1, AAP (2007) and several other media outlets (as a consequence of their use of the wire service) reported that:

Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott has raised the possibility of cutting off welfare payments to indigenous parents who refuse to allow their children's health to be checked. ... He gave the example of childhood immunisation being compulsory because parents lost benefits if their children were not immunised...

Tony Abbott's misleading comparison that suggests that immunisation is compulsory – which it is not – is not questioned in the news reports. However, Abbott, the then Health Minister, was giving a very false impression here, and was allowed to get away with it by the media, who did not inquire into the immunisation policy that Abbott is drawing on as a template for compulsion regarding the health checks. While there is a small financial incentive to have one's child immunised, there is no penalty.

One exception to the reporting of this was in the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* (Nicholson, 2007), which reported that in effect Abbott was offering a cash incentive to parents to have their children attend a health check. However, even this *Age* report failed to make clear that Abbott, regardless of his intention, was being misleading.

There was a noteworthy report in *The Australian* on this issue a day later, on July 2 (Karvelas, 2007):

... The plan to force children in Indigenous communities to undergo health checks has been altered amid concerns that mandatory examinations could amount to assault. The Government has also backed away from a claim by the architects of the plan that the aim of the checks was to uncover and treat cases of abuse...

Note how the report distances the 'Government' from the plan's architects; however, the Government *was* the plan's architect. It was the Prime Minister and the Indigenous Affairs Minister who devised it. The effect here is to distance the Government from its own criticised plan. Also of note is the passive sentence construction, that the plan "has been altered amid concerns". The passive construction obscures agency, that is, *who* has altered the plan. This passive construction, which is not normal journalistic practice for a news story, also serves to remove the Government from the picture.

By July 6 media outlets were reporting that parents who do not allow their children to be checked would be subject to an investigation about their Centrelink payments (the example used here is from *The Australian*, but *The Age* among others also reported this):

Indigenous parents ... who refuse to allow medical inspections of their children ... will face welfare checks. ... sources said last night ... News of the plan emerged ...

Mr Abbott ... would not elaborate. But it is understood that where parents rejected the examinations, officials would put their welfare arrangements under close scrutiny (Hart and Shanahan, 2007).

This reads as a veiled threat, a scare tactic, because there is no policy link between child health check-ups and adult welfare payments.

These veiled threats are coercive, which is contradictory to the revised policy of the health checks being voluntary. The threats also position the welfare recipients as people who may have something to hide, both as parents who do not want their children's health assessed and as welfare recipients who may be fraudulently or otherwise undeservedly claiming payments that could be adversely affected by scrutiny.

It is notable also that this report, as do other reports on this day (July 6, 2007), relies upon anonymous sources, pointing to an off-the-record briefing from a senior official, perhaps even the minister himself: "sources said last night..."; "News of the plan emerged..."; "it is understood that...". Not putting their name to a statement serves a purpose for the unnamed source: it blurs the lines of accountability, and the claims or statements can be easily refuted later. On the day of publication, that claim by the unnamed source is refuted by Prime Minister John Howard. The ABC News reported that: "Mr Howard says it is a misunderstanding to suggest that there will be any penalty imposed on those who refuse the checks" (ABC News, July 6); yet, although the substance is now denied, the threat, having been made, has currency.

Furthermore, the sentence construction in this ABC report is noteworthy: whose misunderstanding was it? Whose suggestion? The reporter does not raise these questions and as a result the threat-makers' agency is further obscured if not deleted, and the threat is downplayed or downgraded to a "misunderstanding". The veiled threat vanishes.

Parents are another absence in some of the news reports. Children, being minors without full agency or responsibility as social actors, are usually represented as passive recipients of policy outcomes, unless the news story is about a politician's visit to their school or some other such photo opportunity. They are not usually given agency in news reports, which is why an exception to this is noteworthy – a report from *The Australian* on July 20 (the following is an excerpt, showing the headline, the introductory paragraph and the closing paragraph):

Headline: Kids queuing for checks

No Aboriginal parents have refused to allow their child to undergo a medical examination four weeks into the [NTER].

...

Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough said yesterday "... the kids keep coming"

(Karvelas and Wilson, 2007a).

The headline 'Kids queuing for checks' has the effect of erasing the parents' role in bringing their children for health checks (which required parental consent), and also has the effect of contrasting the children's apparent willingness with the previously reported potential wariness of their parents, (as foreshadowed by Mal Brough in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of June 23, above).

This construction implies an oppositional relationship between the children and their parents. Such an imagined relationship has a long, sorry and potent history in Indigenous affairs. (For example, children of the Stolen Generations were taken from their parents as their parents were deemed not fit to parent them simply by virtue of being Aboriginal.) It serves as a repertoire which the producers and consumers of the text may draw on in interpreting the text. It also serves the purpose of legitimising the NTER, by reinforcing the basis upon which it was built: that NT Aboriginal children were in need of protection from their adult carers and communities.

Furthermore, the introductory paragraph in the report under examination (Karvelas and Wilson, 2007a) renders the adults passive. The 'double negative' of the sentence construction not only raises as a likelihood that parents would refuse to bring their children for health checks, as foreshadowed and detailed above, but it could, for example, have been rewritten into the active, positive voice (as is routine journalism practice for a double negative) to say instead: "Aboriginal parents are taking their children for health checks." This would give a fairer representation of the parents' engagement with the health checks, without altering the facts of the report.

On August 7, in response to criticism from former NT Labor MP John Ah Kit, a member of a delegation of Aboriginal leaders, that the NTER legislation as a whole amounts to "genocide", Prime Minister John Howard focussed in on the health checks aspect of the legislation in reply: he told the ABC's *7.30 Report* (which, intertextually, is repeated in other media outlets) that the health checks, 500 having been undertaken at that point, have uncovered evidence of child sexual abuse: "I've been told that those screenings have led to

a number of referrals to the child protection authority. I also know that some of them have led to further checking for sexually transmitted diseases” (ABC 7.30 Report, 2007). Howard emphatically and unambiguously “know[s]” this, but does not say who has told him this. His source is unnamed. This has a function of allowing Howard both to deflect Ah Kit’s criticism and to contrast it with claims that child sexual abuse – the trigger for the NTER – has been uncovered.

The unnamed source of Howard’s claim was unlikely to have been, for example, the NTER Taskforce Commander Major General David Chalmers. *The Australian* reports 10 days later on August 17 (Karvelas and Wilson, 2007b):

But [taskforce commander] Major General Chalmers said he was not aware of health workers notifying authorities of any cases of child sexual assault. No allegations of abuse have been passed to Territory police since the intervention began.

In saying that no evidence of sexual abuse has been uncovered and that no allegations of abuse have been passed to the police, Major General David Chalmers directly contradicts Howard’s emphatic claim of 10 days earlier. Furthermore, this claim is not referred to in the news report, and appears on first glance to not have been put to Chalmers by the reporter. However, a small but significant element of this report is the use of the word “But” to begin the paragraph. This is a grammatically incorrect, odd way to begin a sentence. Furthermore, more odd still is that this ‘But’ is not referring to anything prior in this news report. It is a discursive slip. This discursive slip is a trace of a previous report in this discourse chain. It refers to a previous claim that such abuse had been uncovered. Howard’s claim has been refuted but he is not called to account by the reporter for having made it to dismiss Ah Kit’s criticism of the NTER policy.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that, in reporting on this moment of change in the NTER policy, reporters allowed Government ministers to hide policy faults, obscure coercive intent, deflect criticism with dog-whistling hypothetical scenarios, and employ rhetorical devices to support uncontested claims. Reporters’ uncritical reporting of ministers’ and unnamed sources’ unsubstantiated assertions allowed them to deflect criticism, and allowed in turn

the uncritical dissemination of ministers' and unnamed sources' unsubstantiated counter-claims.

This 'policy on the run' was developed as it was reported on by a news media on the run. Not only was their industry in decline, resulting in journalists having to do more work in less time, but the journalists had several other big simultaneous running stories competing with the NTER, for example the arrest of Dr Mohammad Haneef in Queensland for his alleged links to the Glasgow airport bombers. More systematic research into the use of wire service copy in newspaper news reports of the NTER would shed more light on the link between industrial change and journalism practice. For now, we have seen the dissemination of misleading claims enabled by the use of AAP copy by several media outlets.

Some consequences of government ministers being unchallenged in making unsubstantiated or misleading claims include that coercion becomes a factor in the formulation of bad policy. For example, the concerns of Indigenous health advocates, who are experts 'on the ground', are ignored or dismissed. The claims of these oppositional voices were not put to officials, and their criticisms were negated and recast to justify the intervention policy.

Beyond this, parents, whose actions as carers are erased in the reports, are not only not given a voice, but are subject to coercion via veiled threats that, reported uncritically, represent them as being disinclined to act in their children's best interests. A threat is an expression of intended consequence for a directive not being followed. Veiled threats are threats that are concealed in or obscured by the linguistic context of the threat's delivery. The consequence is expressed indirectly as a possible undesirable outcome resulting from some often unrelated action. This disguising of the veiled threat's threatening character serves to shield the threat-maker from accountability for making that threat. It can be claimed, for example, that a perceived threat was only a misunderstanding. On announcing that the formerly announced "mandatory" health checks would actually be voluntary, in that they would require parental consent, and that they would be for general health assessment, not sexual abuse assessment as originally implied, the then Health Minister Tony Abbott and an unnamed highly placed news source (who may or may not have also been the minister) made two discrete veiled threats against parents regarding any welfare

payments they may be receiving. Abbott implied first that parents' welfare payments would be reduced if they did not allow their children's health to be checked, and secondly the unnamed source was quoted as saying that parents who refused to have their children's health checked would have their welfare payments scrutinised – the implication being that that scrutiny would be unwelcome and could be to the claimants' detriment. From a journalistic practice perspective, both veiled threats were unchallenged in the news reports which as a consequence, represented them as being unremarkable, and therefore obscured their rhetorical function as threats.

The substance of the veiled threats was also misleading. There was no mechanism, for example, for the reduction in welfare payments for non-compliance with a non-compulsory preventative health measure, as Abbott claimed there was when he invoked the template of the immunisation program. Furthermore, there was no NTER policy link between curbing welfare payments and health checks, and there was no legal way to scrutinise the welfare payments of non-compliant parents if their non-compliance with a voluntary program was unrelated to their Centrelink payments; that is, if the payment was not for the compliance. It was a coercive tactic that was unexplored in the news reports.

This paper raises considerations around journalism practices that adversely affect the fair and equal representation of the interests and perspectives of Aboriginal Australians. For example fact-checking, which is central to 'doing' journalism, has been critically undermined by the industrial changes whereby a large proportion of editorial jobs that have been lost in recent years have been those of sub-editors, whose central function is ensuring factual accuracy in news reports. It suggests that, in the rapidly changing world of Australian journalism, where fact-checking and investigative reporting are being left behind in the resources squeeze, that a more reflective journalism practice is required to fulfil the news media's Fourth Estate role.

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