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Indigenous research ethics: new modes of information gathering and storytelling in journalism

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Abstract

Veteran Indigenous affairs reporter Tony Koch emphasises the importance of respect, trust and listening in his journalism practice. This paper draws on Koch’s insights as well as recent scholarship on the politics and value of listening to support the proposal that Indigenous research ethics provide a concrete framework for improving media representations of Indigenous people and their access to news media. The university ethics process cannot replicate the understanding Koch has gained from 25 years of interacting with Indigenous people and their communities. However, this paper argues it provides a pathway along which journalism academics and their students can learn to engage with Indigenous people, navigate Indigenous public spheres and produce high-quality reporting that reflects Indigenous peoples’ aspirations. Journalists within the academy, who are not subject to the commercial or organisational pressures of the news industry, are especially well placed to collaborate with Indigenous people to develop new ways of conducting research and telling stories that privilege their perspectives. Koch’s newsgathering practice demonstrates that many principles of this progressive approach are also achievable in mainstream journalism.

Introduction

Some senior Walpiri people from Yuendumu in Central Australia consider that because journalists don’t listen to them or take an interest in issues they regard as important, their agendas and perspectives are not heard in public discussion of Indigenous affairs. This view was expressed in February 2010 during the first telephone meeting to discuss Yuendumu’s participation in one of the case studies for the News Media and Indigenous Policymaking 1988-2008 Australian Research Council Discovery project. In a May 2010 interview for the same project, highly regarded
Indigenous Affairs reporter Tony Koch, of *The Australian* newspaper\(^2\), said the best advice he could offer about reporting on remote Indigenous communities was “… you don’t go there to speak to them, you go there to listen, and that’s just a wonderful experience if you’ve got the patience for it”. Walpiri people’s frustration with not being heard and Koch’s advice for other journalists provide evidence from the field on the fundamental importance of listening in responsible reporting of Indigenous affairs.

Walpiri people’s experience of the news media is also reflected in the growing body of research concerned with the politics and value of listening, upon which this paper draws. Scholars observe that the difficulty of producing positive changes in marginalised groups’ access to media and their representation is not an inability to speak up on their part. Rather, it is an inability or a refusal to listen on the part of both news media and their assumed audiences (Dreher, 2010, p. 98). This paper suggests the university ethics process for working with Indigenous people provides journalism academics with a framework for developing a new approach to reporting based on an obligation to listen. It also seeks to show that the research methods suggested here offer valuable guidance for training the journalists of the future, as well as working journalists covering Indigenous affairs.

It is important to note from the outset that from an Indigenous perspective, no difference exists between journalism and other forms of non-Indigenous research. For Indigenous people, research is one of the key means that colonisers and imperialists have used to “take” their knowledge, objectify them as “Other” and rob them of their sovereignty (Rigney, 1999). Kaupapa Māori researcher Linda Tuwai Smith says: “The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary.” (Smith, 2004, p. 1) Mainstream Western journalism still operates with the positivist-objectivist epistemology that reproduces and reaffirms the cultural assumptions of “the world” and the “real” by the dominant group (Rigney, 1999; Meadows, 2001). Therefore, new epistemologies are needed if journalism is to reflect Indigenous understandings of “the world” and “the real”.

The literature on race and media representation shows that Indigenous people often have little power over the ways in which they are depicted and that the routines and values of mainstream journalism present barriers to them telling their stories. Indigenous research ethics can offer a framework for ensuring Indigenous people have greater control over the ways they are represented and are empowered to tell their stories. Adopting this ethical paradigm involves a commitment to respecting difference, listening to Indigenous people and ensuring that their needs and priorities are emphasised in the news reports that are created.

This paper draws on the National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) *Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health* (2003; 2007), Indigenous research methodologies, recent scholarship on listening and Tony Koch’s newsgathering practices. It argues that journalism academics, their students and working journalists can be more effective agents of change if they look beyond professional ethics codes and reporting protocols, to Indigenous research methodologies. The ethical framework advocated here requires self-reflexivity, meaningful engagement with communities and individuals and making the effort to structure projects so they privilege Indigenous voices and perspectives, thereby expanding, diversifying and challenging stereotypical media representations.

‘Imagining’ Indigenous people

Much research on media representation of race presents a depressing picture. Scholars have found the media perpetuate stereotypes of black people and ethnic minorities, take a problem-oriented angle and tend to ignore structural inequalities and peoples’ lived experience (Entman, 1990; Hall, 1986; Gilroy, 1987). Cottle (2000) argues that this has sometimes led to a fairly static
and uniform picture of ideological or representational closure, and in the process has tended to cover over the historical processes of change (Cottle, 2000, p. 9). He argues that some research is revealing how changing ideas and political agendas of assimilation, multiculturalism and anti-racism have informed the media and “point to further representational complexities and differences in and across the media” (Cottle, 2000, p. 9). Others emphasise that, while forces including new technologies, global capital and deregulation are resulting in greater cultural homogenisation, new technologies are opening up media to marginalised groups and being used to sustain and promote culture (Husband, 2000). In the Australian context, vibrant “Indigenous public spheres” have been created (Avison & Meadows, 2000; Meadows, 2005) that enable Indigenous people to deliberate together, to develop their own counter-discourses, and to interpret their own identities and experiences which can then interact with the wider public sphere. The Indigenous media sector is an important part of this process (Meadows, 2005, p. 37). Mickler (1998) has emphasised the agency of Indigenous people in shaping representation, and Hartley and McKee (2000, p. 209) suggest Indigeneity “is the point around which political debates – debates about social justice, about fairness, and the adequacy of social structures – take place in Australia”. McCallum (2010) observes that since Indigenous issues moved into this key position, they have presented a major challenge to the values and practices of Australian journalism. This paper argues that journalism academics in particular are ideally positioned to take up this challenge, engage in dialogue with Indigenous public spheres (Langton, 1993; Meadows, 2005) and contribute to positive developments in wider public discourse as both news media producers and educators. This is important work because, as Meadows has observed, journalism has played and continues to play a crucial role in “imagining” Indigenous peoples and their affairs for most non-Indigenous people:

The news media play a significant role – as they have always done – in framing the ways in which we think about issues, especially Indigenous issues, as there are virtually no other sources for most people. (Meadows, 2005, p. 39)

According to Said (2003), the media play a key role in the process of entrenching racism at an institutional level through the routine, day-to-day reinforcement of stereotypes (Said, 2003, p. 26). Meadows’ (2001) study of national television news coverage of Indigenous people found it reinforced the dominant ideology of non-Indigenous racial superiority, thereby contributing to a stream of research that has found that media representations of Indigenous Australians and issues are racist discourses (Cottle, 2004; Jakubowicz et al., 1994). Media representations and narratives have been found to sensationalise Indigenous issues by highlighting violence and dysfunction. As Hollinsworth (2005) says: “Stereotypic representations include stories of criminality, drunkenness, poor health, welfare dependency, family violence, alongside sporting prowess and artistic ability.” (Hollinsworth, 2005, p. 17) McCallum (2010) argues that the persistent representation of Indigenous violence and substance abuse in the mainstream news media has contributed to a discourse of risk and crisis dominating public discussion of Indigenous issues. The capacity of Indigenous people to represent their own concerns and interests is seriously compromised by these dominant discourses as well as a lack of media resources and media access (Hollinsworth, 2005; Jakubowicz et al., 1994).

Indigenous scholar Marcia Langton observes that:

Paradoxically, even while Aboriginal misery dominates the national media frenzy – the perpetual Aboriginal reality show – the first peoples exist as virtual beings without power or efficacy in the national zeitgeist. (Langton, 2008)

The role of news media in Australian Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations became a major focus in the early 1990s, when the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnston, 1991) and the Human Rights Commission National Inquiry into Racist Violence (Moss, 1991) found media representation exerts a powerful influence on community attitudes and institutional behaviour towards Indigenous people. The Royal Commission praised the many exam-
amples of thoughtful, well-researched journalism, but identified a set of practices that was harmful and widespread. These findings presented a major challenge to Australian journalism to improve its practices and inspired academic interest in the subject (Hartley & McKee, 2000). However, despite academic and industry initiatives, almost two decades later the reporting of Indigenous issues in Australia remains problematic, with recent studies finding that Indigenous issues are framed in routine and predictable ways and are often played out as classic “moral panics” that can have significant effects on policymaking (McCallum, 2010, p. 165).

Pressure groups often criticise journalists for coverage that has negative social consequences (McCallum & Holland, 2010), and journalism curricula have given much emphasis to educating university students about the sensitivities of reporting “race” (Sheridan Burns & McKee, 1999; O’Donnell, 2003; Hess & Waller, 2010). In the Indigenous context, such criticism and awareness have resulted in interventions to improve Australian journalism’s coverage of Indigenous people and issues, from recommendations of the Royal Commission (Johnston, 1991) to the development of reporting guidelines and in-house protocols for reporting on Indigenous issues and people (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009; Stockwell & Scott, 2000; Australian Press Council, 2001) and tertiary and professional training (Eggerking & Plater, 1992; University of Queensland, 2010). But despite these efforts to educate journalists and journalism students about techniques they can employ in order to report less narrowly and more sensitively on issues of race, emphasis on the news value of conflict and the unchallenged assumptions about the “white” or mainstream nature of news audiences remain problematic (McCallum & Holland, 2010).

In-house protocols and professional reporting codes are regarded as important because “on some fronts, journalists take these guidelines very seriously, and … they can be seen to shape the way at least some stories are told” (McCallum & Holland, 2010, p. 44). However, while they may offer more detailed guidance than the Australian Journalists’ Code of Ethics (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 1999), they do not go so far as disrupting the underlying news values and assumptions that have been identified as problematic, nor do they require journalists to focus on the positive self-representation of Indigenous communities (Sheridan Burns & McKee, 1999). For example, both the ABC’s protocol (2009) and the Australian Press Council’s guidelines (2001) are mostly concerned with avoiding offence to Indigenous people by using certain terms or interrupting cultural practices such as “sorry business”. This appears to be more a form of “cultural politeness” designed to minimise obstacles to the journalist getting the story, rather than encouraging genuine attempts to understand, respect and reflect cultural differences.

For many years, journalism academics have demonstrated a commitment to classroom discourses that require students to critically engage with the sensitivities of reporting on issues of race (Hess & Waller, 2010). However, this paper suggests they could be more effective agents of change if they looked to methodologies catering to the ethical design of research involving Indigenous peoples in order to inform their own journalism, and if they encouraged their students to do the same. This would require pedagogical approaches that encouraged students to question the objectivist-positivist epistemology of mainstream Western journalism, as well as distilling the principles of Indigenous research methodologies for use in the classroom and the field. This framework requires self-reflexivity, meaningful engagement with communities and individuals and structuring of projects so they privilege Indigenous voices and perspectives, thereby expanding, diversifying and challenging stereotypical media representations. This kind of approach has been advanced by Meadows (2005), who suggests that journalists need to learn how to navigate Indigenous public spheres in the same way they learn to move within and between other information networks as part of their daily practice. He says that enabling Indigenous speaking positions requires journalists to understand not only the impact of negative or stereotypical representation, but also the effects of silencing Indigenous people and making them invisible:

Sensitivity to such issues might invoke reporting strategies such as using an indirect approach in news interviews, consultation and negotiation over meaning,
acknowledgment of the existence of indigenous English and local languages, and making use of translators or subtitles where appropriate – in other words, negotiat-
ing Indigenous identity through dialogue with Indigenous public spheres. (Mead-
ows, 2005, p. 36)

Re-imagining journalism

Conventional journalism presents itself as reflecting social reality and representing the most important events and issues. However, its representations construct public understanding of the everyday world and exclude many issues and events (Silverstone, 2007). This is understood to flow from the fact that journalism’s professional standards police and reproduce the conventions of news, rather than challenging or exploring new possibilities (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Threadgold (2006) offers another perspective when she says the silences on marginalised groups within news discourse can be attributed to the great inequality in access to resources and credibility between marginalised people and elite sources, as well as the lack of “dialogue of the co-operative kind which might recognise the story of the other as worth telling or hearing/seeing” (Threadgold, 2006, p. 233). Dreher (2010) suggests that entrenched news values and existing story agendas often work to shape listening and speaking by focusing on addressing the stereotypes and concerns of “mainstream” audiences, rather than providing ways through which marginalised voices can be heard. She argues that our thinking needs to change to include hearing and listening as well as speaking.

Dreher is one of a group of media scholars who are concerned with the politics and importance of listening. Husband advocates for a universal right to be understood (1996), and Downing (2007) builds on Husband’s work with his concept of “active listening”. He argues that positive cultural change depends on developing “a sense of obligation to listen” to people who have been historically excluded from public conversation. Bickford (1996) says change can occur when we understand that how we listen determines the ways in which others can speak and be heard. In her recent work on listening, Dreher (2010) suggests that the nature of media power can be usefully rethought:

> Media power might entail the privilege of choosing to listen or not, the power to enter into dialogue or not, to seek to comprehend the other or not, the privilege of demanding answers and explanations and justifications. The challenge for media change then might be how to undo the privilege of not listening at multiple levels – including the news conventions which structure journalists’ hearing stories, and the presumed interest of the assumed audience in listening to others. (Dreher, 2010, p. 101)

Despite interventions by Indigenous people, scholars, educators, and the news media itself, Indigenous people and issues continue to be routinely represented in negative ways and there are documented cases of Indigenous people’s calls for action being ignored for decades by govern-
ments and news media (Thill, 2009). Fair representation and access to news media for Indigenous people are more likely to be achieved by working outside of or re-imagining news conventions, challenging routine source strategies and using different modes of information gathering and storytelling (Dreher, 2010). Journalism academics are well placed to take up the challenges of media change suggested here by working through the university ethics process, which facilitates dialogue with Indigenous public spheres. New subjects as well as ways of storytelling can be developed from Indigenous peoples’ definitions of issues and priorities for research. Different modes of information gathering would include working together to negotiate what will be investi-
gated and how that inquiry will be carried out. Establishing meaningful relationships that extend beyond information collection can displace routine source strategies. Respecting Indigenous cul-
tures and knowledge, including people’s right to be understood in their own languages, facilitates speaking and listening. The ethics process is designed to ensure research outcomes that satisfy the needs and aspirations of Indigenous people, and these could be works of journalism that tell the stories Indigenous people want the world to hear.

**Using the ethics process to re-imagine Indigenous reporting**

Indigenous people think and interpret the world and its everyday realities in different ways from non-Indigenous people because of their experiences, histories, cultures, and values (Rigney, 1999). However, one of the most profound effects of scientific racialisation has been the reconfiguration of knowledge about Indigenous peoples to the “common sense” colonial view (Smith, 2004). The ways in which objectivist-positivist Western epistemologies reinforce and reproduce the cultural assumptions of “the world” and the “real” by the dominant group are revealed and resisted by Indigenous research methodologies (I use this term to mean a specific approach, both epistemologically and in terms of methods for conducting research involving Indigenous participants) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 2004; Jones & Jenkins, 2008). It is worth reiterating that these methodologies make no distinction between academic research and other forms of inquiry, including journalism research (Smith, 2004). Indigenous researchers have drawn on the critical studies paradigm that advocates for those most oppressed in society and have incorporated feminist theory in their development of qualitative methodologies for decolonising research about Indigenous peoples (Rigney, 1999). These methodologies demand greater self-reflection in research and emphasise “the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). They call for research projects that are designed to reflect Indigenous peoples’ values, respect cultures, histories, communities and individuals by serving their purposes and needs first and foremost, and are designed to advance their self-defined struggles for self-determination. The broad principles that have been developed through these methodologies form the basis for Australia’s ethical standards for academic research involving Indigenous participants (NHMRC, 2003; 2007).

The National Ethics Application Form (NEAF) requires researchers seeking to undertake studies involving Indigenous people to meet obligations to respect the spirit and integrity of those who participate (NHMRC, 2010). To gain university ethics approval, research projects must be carefully considered and designed through a process of meaningful consultation with potential participants that should result in the privileging of the voices, values and needs of the Indigenous people who are involved (Rigney, 1999). Broadly speaking, this is achieved through establishing respectful, reciprocal relationships and defining outcomes that deliver meaningful results for the individuals and communities who participate, as well as researchers.

The sections of the NEAF that relate to Indigenous research specifically require researchers to provide detailed accounts of how their project incorporates the principles set out in section 4 of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC, 2007). In the introduction to its guidelines, the NHMRC says these are based on the importance of trust, recognition and Indigenous peoples’ values (NHMRC, 2007, p. 4). The overarching aim is “to ensure the explicit recognition and commitment of researchers to respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural values and principles” (NHMRC, 2007, p. 5). This is underpinned by a process of respectful engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and Indigenous participants at every stage of the process:

- Within the research process, failing to understand difference in values and culture may be a reckless act that jeopardises both the ethics and quality of research …
- Working with difference in a research context takes time, care, patience and the building of robust relationships … The soundness of trust among its stakeholders
is essential to a successful and ethical outcome. Trust has to function at all levels of the research enterprise … Where trust persists, research can be sustained. (NH-MRC, 2007, p. 3)

Planning research that satisfies these principles requires that researchers design their projects to address three key concerns. The first involves building in processes to ensure that consultation, negotiation and free and informed consent are maintained and are acknowledged by the researcher as an ongoing responsibility, along with ways for ensuring there is shared understanding about the proposed project. The second is respect, recognition and involvement of Indigenous people. Researchers must explain how they will show their respect for Indigenous knowledge systems and processes and ensure that intellectual and cultural property rights are respected and preserved. It calls for Indigenous researchers, individuals and communities to be involved as collaborators.

The third principle relates to benefits, outcomes and agreement, and stresses that a researched community should benefit from, and not be disadvantaged by, the research project. It also calls for agreement regarding how research results are used and who has access to them, and requires researchers to ensure that negotiations include agreed outcomes that are specific to the needs of the researched community.

Working within this ethical framework presents serious challenges to the conventional methodologies of mainstream, non-Indigenous journalism, which remain firmly rooted in the positivist-objectivist tradition (Lamble, 2004). A central logic of practice within the journalism field is that of objectivity. Hearing “legitimate” sources speaking from different sides of an issue and neutrally reporting what is said remains the paramount aspiration of most journalists. However, research methodologies involving Indigenous participants reject the idea that research is neutral and value free. Journalism’s focus on objectivity has also been critiqued in the West. For example, Mancini argues that Italian journalists, by focusing on themselves as neutral intermediaries, fail to see themselves as political actors (Curran, 2005). Many journalists may no longer use the word “objectivity”, but it continues to be entrenched as an attainable and desirable goal. Hackett and Zhao (1998) maintain that fairness “still implies the same old claim – that news is basically impartial, and independent of particular interests” (Hackett & Zhao, 1998, p. 59). In this paradigm the journalist is an independent figure who decides what is newsworthy, and balance and fairness mean treating everyone the same. This contrasts with Indigenous research ethics, where the principles of fairness and justice mean that treating marginalised people equally will often involve treating them differently (Husband, 2000, p. 212).

Ethical research methodologies involving Indigenous participants reject the notion of objectivity outright and privilege Indigenous perspectives. I argue that working within this paradigm is a worthwhile challenge for journalism academics as well as their students, as it has the power to transform the ways in which Indigenous peoples and issues are represented and discussed in public conversation. This approach gives no priority to news media production schedules, news-gathering routines, news values or journalistic independence. This means journalists within the academy, who are not subject to the commercial or organisational pressures of the news industry, are in a unique position to pursue this work with the support of their universities.

Journalism research of the kind advocated here can also translate into innovations in industry. Tony Koch of The Australian newspaper provides an example of how some of the approaches discussed in this paper can inform mainstream newsgathering. As revealed in an interview conducted with the author (May 23, 2010), Koch’s philosophy on reporting Indigenous issues reflects a deep understanding of the spirit and values Indigenous people demand in research, and his professional practice incorporates some of the Indigenous research principles discussed here. These go well beyond the Australian journalists’ code of ethics or in-house reporting guidelines. I include Koch’s insights here to show how moving journalism in the direction Meadows first suggested in 2005 is achievable.
The importance of listening and returning

Tony Koch has been visiting Indigenous communities in the Gulf Country, Cape York and the Torres Strait for 25 years. These communities are not just a part of his reporting round: they are the homes of longstanding friends, and he chooses one as his holiday destination every year. Koch says his passion for barramundi fishing helps his reporting:

I take my holidays up there ... every year I go to one of them. I’ve got a brother who’s a mango farmer up in Bowen and he’s a good boatie, so we just hook up and we go to one of the communities, stay there and we’re always with the locals. Go camping with them and getting turtle eggs and everything else. Just living with them on the beach, having a great time. Meeting all their kids.

The time Koch spends on holidays relaxing and fishing with his brother and the locals helps him to maintain trust with the communities he writes about, which he says takes time and a lot of work because “people are sick of journalists coming in and writing horrible things about them”. He says many of the reports he has written over the years on topics including violence and alcohol could be classed as quite negative. However, unlike many other journalists he is responsible to the people he writes about because he has connections with them that go well beyond the conventional reporter-source relationship. He frequently returns to the communities he writes about and sits down with people face-to-face to discuss his work. He says he has had to justify himself to individuals and communities on many occasions, explaining his reasons for what he has written and why he believes an issue or event needs to be part of the national conversation. In academic research terms, this discussion and negotiation can be understood as a process of gaining and maintaining peoples’ consent for their continuing involvement in his journalistic research. Linda Tuhwai Smith discusses the importance in Indigenous research of the Māori concept of kanohi kitea or “the seen face”, which means ”being seen by the people – showing your face, turning up at important cultural events … it is part of how one’s credibility is continually developed and maintained” (Smith, 2004, p. 15). In Australia, Indigenous researchers point to the different layers of entry that must be negotiated when they seek information, while others describe their research as involving long-term relationships which extend beyond a research relationship to one involving families, communities, organisations and networks (Rigney, 1999). Koch describes his journalism research in these terms.

According to Koch, geographical distance is a major challenge to the Australian media’s ability to report well on remote Indigenous communities in northern Australia, as the major news outlets are in the south of the country and policy is made in Canberra, but implemented far away. Meadows (2005) emphasises the importance of journalists learning how to navigate Indigenous public spheres and Koch provides some examples of how to do this. He says an important part of his round is ensuring that he knows when people from remote communities are attending conferences and other major meetings in Brisbane or regional centres. These events are crucial for him to find out about current issues and maintain contact with communities. Despite the significant distances and expense, Koch also underlines the importance of reporters spending time and building relationships with remote communities to do their jobs well:

With visiting Aboriginal communities, the first couple of years you don’t hear much or see because they don’t trust you. They don’t know you. In Queensland there’s this term, they call us “seagulls” – politicians and journalists. Because they say that we fly in, shit on them and leave. So you have to get over being a seagull, and the only way to do that is they have to see you coming back all the time ... unless those reporters get off their butts and go out, and not just go out with the minister flying in the government jet and you know, be a seagull, drop in for a couple of hours and be given the candy coated version … You’ve got to go to the communities and spend some time there, spend some days there … to listen to the people talk … to the old ladies … and find out what’s really going on.
The NMHRC guidelines say that:

within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures respect is reinforced by and in turn strengthens dignity. A respectful relationship induces trust and co-operation. Strong culture is understood as a personal and collective framework built on respect and trust that promotes dignity and recognition. (NHMRC, 2007, p. 11)

Koch stresses the importance of this principle for all journalists. He says there is an onus on reporters not only to respect, but to make a real effort to understand Indigenous peoples’ worlds and their values and that this is achieved through listening:

The best advice I can ever give anyone about reporting on communities is that you go there to listen. You don’t go there to speak to them, you go there to listen and that’s just a wonderful experience if you’ve got the patience for it.

Conclusion

Meadows and McCallum describe Koch as “an agenda setting journalist” in Indigenous affairs news\(^8\), and it is clear that agenda is shaped to a significant extent by listening to Indigenous people. The respect and understanding Koch brings to his work has been developed through 25 years spent interacting with Indigenous people in their communities as a journalist, a friend and a fisherman, which is rare in Australian journalism. However, he is a senior writer with News Ltd’s flagship publication, The Australian, and his reporting occurs within the confines of the news production cycle and values of the newspaper, just like that of all its journalists. The processes involved in fulfilling the ethical requirements for university research involving Indigenous participants cannot replicate the understanding that comes from a quarter of a century of personal/ professional experience. However, it can provide a valuable process for journalism academics, their students and working journalists who want to engage in dialogue with Indigenous public spheres. It is important to note that journalism academics enjoy an editorial freedom that industry journalists can only dream about and it can be argued that journalism academics have an ethical responsibility to use that freedom to demonstrate what is possible.

The university research ethics framework is far more rigorous than the Australian journalists’ code of ethics or professional protocols. It is a concrete path along which to explore the more enlightened approach to journalism practice for which Michael Meadows was calling in 2005. It involves learning to navigate Indigenous public spheres, just as journalists learn to move easily within and between more familiar information networks as part of the everyday practice of newsgathering. It facilitates active listening and thereby enables Indigenous speaking positions. Those journalism academics who are prepared to set aside positivist-objectivist methodologies and work within the ethical paradigm suggested here are in a particularly strong position to improve public and media discourses through meaningful partnerships with Indigenous peoples.

Notes

1. The research for this paper was conducted for the Australian News Media and Indigenous Policymaking 1988-2008 ARC Discovery Project [DP0987457]. Ethics and formal ethics permissions procedures are not the main focus of the Australian News Media and Indigenous policymaking 1988-2008 ARC Discovery Project or my doctoral study Two Way Talk: News
Media and the Northern Territory’s Bilingual Education Policy 1988-2008, which is part of the larger project. However, both are underpinned by a practical commitment to Indigenous research ethics and give considerable attention to the issues raised in this paper. Both projects have ethics approval from the University of Canberra. The Australian News Media and Indigenous policymaking 1988-2008 ARC Discovery Project investigates the relationships between media attention to Indigenous issues and policy development processes in this area, taking as its focus the way in which Indigenous policies in the period 1988-2008 emerged within specific discursive environments, and the media’s role in both representing and generating Indigenous issues as “intractable” policy problems. Responding to the need for more detailed examination of the nature of discourses about Indigenous issues, including the understandings of those who influence and produce news texts, this research project will map the dimensions of the public discussion of Indigenous issues across multiple textual terrains between two key moments in Indigenous affairs – the bicentenary of Australian colonisation in 1988 and the “Sorry Statement” of February 13, 2008 – with the aim of better understanding the discursive environment in which Indigenous policy is created.

2. Interview conducted with the author, May 23, 2010.

3. In this section of the paper the term “research” includes journalism.

4. Indigenous researchers are involved in the project of “decolonising” research (see, for example, Smith, 2004). Decolonising research involves activism and is based on postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) explain: “Decolonising research recognises and works within the belief that non-Western knowledge forms are excluded from or marginalised in normative research paradigms, and therefore non-Western/Indigenous voices are silenced and subjects lack agency within such representations. Furthermore, decolonising research recognises the role of colonisation in the scripting and encrypting of a silent, inarticulate and inconsequential indigenous subject and how such encryptions legitimise oppression. Finally, individually and collectively, decolonising research as a performative act functions to highlight and advocate for the ending of both discursive and material oppression that is produced at the site of the encryption of the non-Western subject as a ‘governable body’ (Foucault, 1977).” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, pp. 35-36)

5. See sections 5.3.1; 6.1.1 and 9.7-9.7.7 of the National Ethics Application Form.

6. See section 2.2.3 of the Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, which concerns equality. It notes that: “One of the values expressed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and cultures is the equal value of people. One of the ways this is reflected is a commitment to distributive fairness and justice. Equality affirms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ right to be different. Equality as a value may sometimes be taken to mean sameness. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples hold strong beliefs that sameness is not equality. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have sought the elimination of ‘difference blindness’ so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures can be appreciated and respected.” (NHMRC, 2007, p. 14)

7. The Australian, which is the nation’s only national daily general newspaper and the flagship of global media baron Rupert Murdoch’s empire in Australia, has maintained a close focus on government policies regarding racism and multiculturalism for many years and its standpoint has remained almost unchanged, going back to 1991 when it indicated a clear commitment to a position that denied institutional or structural racism existed in Australia (Jakubowicz et al, 1994, p. 112). This paper is concerned with reporter Tony Koch’s newsgathering practices. It makes no attempt to analyse the journalism that results. Nor should it be read as an endorsement of the newspaper’s coverage of Indigenous Affairs in general.

References


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