Apology and the Public Sphere

It was a moment when one felt grateful for the omnipresence of the media which is often criticised for its biases and flaws. USHA M RODRIGUES reflects on the power of the media in conveying a historic moment.

Can media be subservient to people's need for interaction? That is hard to believe in current media environment - private ownership, rating wars and promotion of consumer culture. But, that is exactly what happened last week, when the newly elected Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd apologised to the 'Stolen Generations' of Australia for past government policies. Millions of people from all over the continent shared the moment via their radio, television or newspapers' online editions.

It was a moment when one felt grateful for the omnipresence of the media which is often criticised for its biases and flaws. The Age Online reported that afternoon, 'in parks and squares around the country there was an outpouring of emotion as large TV screens carried the prime minister's formal parliamentary apology to the stolen generations.' Because of its brief and sudden appearance on the horizon, the sense of connectedness among Australians on this occasion even went beyond the late last year's federal election coverage when government changed hands.

Such sharing and outpouring of emotions could not have been possible without the media. It was not just the few thousand people who were in the Capital city of Canberra or a few hundred who were in the Parliament Gallery on February 13 to witness the apology; it was the millions of people living in various parts of Australia. They felt the moment with their family, friends and fellow citizens at home, in offices, in community halls and in the streets.

The apology, which was long demanded since the release of the 'Bringing Them Home Report' more than ten years ago, came after a 'deafening silence' from the former Prime Minister John Howard, and took people by surprise because the new government decided to 'get on with it' by offering it on the second day of Parliament sitting following its election win on November 24, 2007.

The simultaneous national broadcast of the Prime Minister's speech on various radio and television channels and the Internet aided the sharing of this moment. It did not matter whether people supported the apology or not, but everyone felt connected because it had been a long pending act for the people of Australia - be it the first people of Australia, the settlers whose ancestors came in the 19th and 20th centuries or the immigrants who now call Australia home.

It also did not matter that the opposition party leader Brendon Nelson articulated a few qualifications to the apology, unlike the Prime Minister, it became an act of necessity. Also, it did not matter whether some media shock-jocks and their listeners vented their opposition to the apology, or pointed out the futility of the apology in the light of the pathetic realities of some of the indigenous people's life today. The media was there to offer an opportunity to all to witness the event, to talk about their feelings, to share the historic moment and to connect to each other as people living in this land.

One witnessed what is called Habermas' public sphere where media provided a space in which conflicting opinions and identities interacted with each other, albeit via intermediaries where reporters, presenters and editors gave the interaction and communication their own bend. Not to forget the impact the medium's ownership and its capacity had on the message.

It was not difficult to see the difference in the coverage of the event provided by the Australian public service broadcasters and commercial broadcasters. Similarly it was not difficult to witness the immediacy of radio, the visual power of television and in-depth analysis of the print media in this coverage.

But, one could not deny the power of the media at the historic moment of the apology to bring together Australians as a nation. One of the common feedbacks from the public on this occasion is telling, 'I feel proud to be an Australian today'.

The identity of being an Australian was reinforced by this sharing of the 'apology' moment. Whether one supported the apology or not, the sentiment most felt was to do with patriotism. Some felt that being an Australian meant that we needed to apologise for the past wrong-doings, whereas others felt that being an Australian meant that there was no need to feel ashamed and apologies for good intentioned policies. Perhaps, that is why the media became secondary to people's interaction albeit mediated interaction.

Habermas in 1964 talked about the media as a mediator and intensifier of public discussion. Although, today's mass media as a public sphere is influenced by the influx of private interests, media owners still need public's support as consumers of their product.

Last week, within the limits of media ownership, individual journalists' agenda, and various medium's capacity, this need for the media to remain open to the public was obvious. All media outlets
irrespective of their stand on the issue had to open their channels to the Prime Minister's apology and public reaction in its aftermath. The open, honest and pluralistic coverage of the event by various media outlets almost made the media as whole seem subservient to public needs.

It was more than the media's role in bringing the event to the public sphere; it was the public engagement in the issue, lead by the day's Prime Minister, which made the media almost accountable to the diversity of public opinion.