The dimensions of mediated policy-making in Australian Indigenous affairs

Citation:

DOI: http://www.dx.doi.org/10.1515/commun-2017-0013

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Abstract: This article analyzes media-related policy-making practices in the bureaucratic realm of Indigenous affairs in Australia. It considers the implications of an increasingly media-oriented bureaucracy for particular social policies in the light of recent mediatization theory. A qualitative study explored how bureaucrats working in Indigenous affairs articulated their understanding of the news media’s role in policy development. The article identifies and describes five dimensions of mediatized bureaucratic practice – expertise, monitoring, anticipating, reacting and strategizing – and concludes that mediatized practices have permeated the very fabric of the policy-making process. It finds evidence of an increasingly intimate relationship between the logics and agendas of mainstream news media and bureaucrats working on complex and politically controversial policies. In Australia, mediatized policy-making practices contributed to both the intractability of Indigenous affairs policy and the introduction of radical policy solutions to address apparent policy failure. These findings add to the body of empirical research exploring the mediatization of policy-making and its implications for politically sensitive fields.

Keywords: mediatization, public bureaucracies, news logic, race, minorities and media

1 Introduction

The field of mediatization studies in political communication is expanding with major surveys exploring theoretical, methodological and definitional debates (Couldry and Hepp, 2013; Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby, 2010; Lundby, 2014; Strömbäck and Esser, 2014) as well as the limitations of the concept for understanding the changing relationship between media and politics (Deacon and

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Stanyer, 2014). A number of empirical studies have attended to the mediatization of politics, concluding that changes in the media have had a major influence on the structural processes of political decision-making and political communication (Strömbäck and Esser, 2014, p. 4; Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). While there has been some exploration of mediatization from an institutional and situated perspective (Hjarvard, 2013, 2014), few studies have considered mediatized politics within specific policy contexts (Reunanen, Kunelius, and Noppari, 2010; see Maltby, 2012; Rawolle, 2010). Significantly, little attention has been paid to the implications of the media-related practices of government bureaucrats operating in mediatized environments for social policy outcomes (see the exceptions of Briggs and Hallin, 2010; Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou, and Øyvind, 2014).

This article responds to the calls of Couldry (2004), Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten (2010), Davis (2007) and Hjarvard (2014) to explore mediatization within specific policy fields and institutional contexts. Our broader research project1 has investigated the relationships between news media and the development of Indigenous affairs policy in Australia. As the most marginalized Australians, disadvantaged on measures including health, education, employment, justice and housing, Australia’s traditional owners have been subject to harsh media and policy spotlights. Successive governments have failed to bridge the gaps between the Indigenous populations and the mainstream, leading to Indigenous affairs being referred to as a ‘wicked’ policy domain (APSC, 2007), an intractable policy problem, or an area of policy failure. As a result, the suite of policies and institutional practices that govern the lives of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) populations has been characterized by what often appear to be sharp and radical policy shifts. Following early genocidal practices, through assimilation with the mainstream and a brief period emphasizing Indigenous self-determination, recent governments have pursued a neo-liberal policy agenda in Indigenous affairs that emphasizes personal responsibility while imposing increasingly paternalistic requirements on individuals.

Our aim is to identify the key dimensions of mediatized policy-making as it operates in this politically sensitive policy field. Rather than examining the practices of politicians, our focus is on policy professionals operating in the bureaucratic realm. We explore the media-related practices (Couldry, 2004) of those deepest inside the policy-making process; the bureaucrats responsible for developing, implementing, and promoting Indigenous affairs policies within

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1 Research for this article was partially funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council – Australian News Media and Indigenous Policymaking project (DP0987457).
Australia’s federal and territory governments. We focus on the two politically contentious policy sub-fields of Indigenous health and bilingual education, as well as a key policy event: the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response. Qualitative depth interviews with bureaucrats working across Federal and Territory administrations explored the localized understandings of these policy actors as they explained the increasingly central role played by attention to news media in their everyday practices and its impacts on policy outcomes.

This has enabled us to consider the way policy is developed in a mediatized political and policy-making environment and to conceptualize news media influence in a particular national, institutional and policy context. While our approach does not attempt to demonstrate mediatization of policy-making over time, it provides precise insights into mediatized policy-making practice. We found that bureaucrats have become media experts, confident enough to critique the practices of journalism and politics, and equipped with a range of tools and strategies to monitor, pre-empt and react to media-driven political agendas and media representation of their policy field. Our analysis led us to contend that the intensification of ‘news logic’ (Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014) has contributed to policy intractability and recent dramatic swings in Indigenous affairs policy. Significantly, policy-makers’ preoccupation with narrow, racialized and sensationalist news framing of Indigenous affairs has intensified the development of an interventionist and paternalist policy agenda.

2 Mediatized policy-making practice

This research contributes to a long tradition of qualitative political communication studies exploring the relationships between news media and the institutions of politics (Bennett and Entman, 2001; Blumler and Gurevitch, 2002; Cook, 2005; Herbst, 1998 Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944). In recent years the concept of mediatization has been used to broaden political communications’ methodological and theoretical focus to consider the role of media in societal change (Nielsen, 2014). Developed through a line of German, British, Scandinavian and North American scholarship, the concept of mediatization is “used to analyse critically the interrelation between changes in media and...

At the time of our study, responsibility for Indigenous affairs was split across several portfolios, including Health and Ageing, Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Upon the election of the Abbott government in 2013, responsibility for Indigenous affairs was centralized into the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, with the PM ultimately responsible for Indigenous affairs policy decisions.
communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other” (Couldry and Hepp, 2013, p. 197). According to Hepp (2010) and Couldry (2004), mediatization shifts the focus of research away from media-centric approaches and communication effects studies. Rather, its object of interest is the process whereby “everyday practices and social relations are historically shaped by mediating technologies and media organizations” (Lundby, 2009, p. x). Our research fits within the growing sub-field concerned with the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck and Esser, 2014). According to Mazzoleni and Schultz (1999, p. 250), “mediatized politics is politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media”. Mediatization itself has been accused of becoming an empty signifier (Deacon and Stanyer, 2014), so it is important to precisely locate our use of this increasingly ubiquitous and influential term.

Recent theorizations have emphasized the multi-dimensional nature of the concept, with Couldry and Hepp (2013) identifying two currents in mediatization research. A “constructivist” approach focuses on the broad changes in politics and society brought about by the increasing reliance on media (Hepp, 2010), whereas the “institutional” perspective emphasizes the changing structural relationships between media and different spheres of society (Hjarvard, 2014, p. 201). Our research aligns with Hjarvard’s institutional approach which argues that “we need to analyze the role of the media in a multitude of social contexts” (2014, p. 200). The institutional perspective also emphasizes micro-processes such as “media logic”, whereby routines, priorities and practices of news media are internalized and embodied by policy-makers (Altheide and Snow, 1979). In this way, mediatization is not viewed so much as a meta-process of social and cultural change (cf. Krotz, 2007; Lundby, 2009) but as a phenomenon that impacts in particular ways in certain cultural and institutional settings. Cook’s classic (2005) study of the relationships between news media and US politics demonstrated the manifestation of news media logics in that particular institutional setting. Ward (2007) documented the structural changes that have accommodated the increasing presence of media in Australian government (see also Young, 2013). Thorbjørnsrud et al. (2014) have further refined “media logic” to “news logic” to distinguish between the pervasiveness of media technologies in the bureaucratic realm, and the permeation of the logics of news into bureaucratic processes and policy-making outcomes. They identified that bureaucrats appreciated the power of news to describe and define reality. In our study, “news logic” refers to the adoption of journalistic routines and practices in the bureaucratic setting, as well as policy experts’ attention to the discursive content of journalistic output.
Another defining element of our research is its “actor-centric” approach (Schultz, 2014) to exploring how policy actors enact media logics in institutional settings. Hjarvard (2014, p. 20) draws on Giddens’ structuration theory to explain how an individual “becomes capable of employing a variety of social rules and resources in particular situations and may be able to act creatively, not in spite of, but because of the acquired institutional rules and resources”. Davis (2007) has qualitatively explored what he refers to as “mediated” politics in elite political contexts. His research supports a line of thinking developed by Couldry (2004) and Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten (2010) that calls for greater consideration of the uneven terrains in which media is situated and in which policy is developed, including different national systems of government, policy domains, individual agency, institutional rules and conditions.

While there is a growing body of literature refining and applying mediatization theory to politics, there is less research examining the development of policy in contexts outside of the political realm. A small number of studies have used ethnographic methods, including qualitative depth interviewing with elite actors. Maltby (2012) examined the mediatization of the military’s communications operations, while Briggs and Hallin (2010) have explored mediatization processes in health policy-making, and Schillemans (2012) conducted interviews to compare media in public services in Australia, The Netherlands and Britain. More recently, Thorbjørnsrud et al. (2014) employed ethnographic methods to develop a typology of mediatization processes in the Norwegian immigration bureaucracy. It emphasizes the importance of the news rhythm and news formats, but also the significance of being in the news, and how this leads to a reallocation of resources and responsibilities within the organization. This study was unique in its application of mediatization to both institutional practices and policy outcomes. As such, it provides strong parallels for our study of media-related practices in Indigenous policy-making settings in Australia.

3 Media and Indigenous affairs policy-making in Australia

The policies that govern Australian Indigenous people are rooted in the bureaucratic process of colonization and the complex history of Australian federalism (see Anderson and Whyte, 2006; Sanders, 2006; Sullivan, 2011). The Australian Constitution does not recognize the prior occupation of the land by its Indigenous people and there is no formal representation for Indigenous people at any
level of Australian government. Despite this lack of formal recognition, no other group has a more “public” relationship with the state (Meadows, 2005). The invasion and decimation of the Indigenous peoples, the refusal to acknowledge prior occupation, assimilationist and neo-liberal policies, met by ongoing demands for self-determination, have contributed to political sensitivity of this portfolio area (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Maddison and Denniss, 2009; Hunter, 2007; Sanders, 2006), and its construction in media and policy discourse as an intractable policy field (APSC, 2007). According to Maddison (2012, p. 269), “[i]n policy terms, Aboriginal people in Australia have rarely been seen as anything other than a “problem to be solved””. As a result, Indigenous affairs policymaking is characterized by fierce policy battles, strongly held ideological positions between political parties and advocacy groups, and fragile public opinion (Goot and Rowse, 2007).

Administered by state, federal and territory governments, the Indigenous affairs policy domain operates across multiple portfolios. Government ministers employ personal staff but also oversee the bureaucrats who are responsible for providing independent advice and implementing government policy (Maddison and Denniss, 2009). They are advised and supported by these public servants in the development of policy options, but, in practice, “policy” and “politics” are co-dependent and there is no clear process whereby policy is decided in the political realm and handed over to bureaucrats to implement (Colebatch, 2002).

In the 20-year period examined in our project, policies pertaining to health and bilingual education were subject to significant policy shifts. Indigenous health is arguably the most intractable of all Indigenous policy issues, characterized by the failure to address the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and the highly politicized funding and delivery of Indigenous community-controlled health services (see Murray, Bell, Couzis, Grant, and Wronski, 2003; McCallum 2011; McCallum 2013). Recent conservative governments with neo-liberal policy agendas (Altman, 2010; Lovell, 2014) have shifted priorities towards the ‘mainstreaming’ of services for Indig...
nous peoples within the broader health system. Education provides a second example of a policy field characterized by periodic radical policy announcements. First introduced in the 1970s, bilingual education policy in the Northern Territory has been the site of fierce policy battles frequently played out in the news media. In 2008, the Territory government announced by media release a policy that the first four hours of the five-hour school day would be in English only, a move that effectively shut down bilingual education programs (Waller, 2012).

The most dramatic shift in recent Indigenous affairs policy was the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER or Intervention) in June 2007. In a nationally televised media conference, the Prime Minister announced that the military would be mobilized to “stabilize, normalize and exit” 73 remote Indigenous communities in Australia’s Northern Territory (Altman and Hinkson, 2007). The trigger for the Intervention was the documentation and publicity of child sexual abuse within remote Indigenous communities (Anderson and Wild, 2007; Graham, 2015)^4, but the policy marked the dramatic culmination of an agenda progressively implemented during the Howard administration (1996−2007) (Hunter, 2007; Macoun, 2011; Sanders, 2006; Sullivan, 2011). Intervention policies included measures such as quarantining of welfare payments for Indigenous families and compulsory child sexual health checks on all Indigenous children in the NT. This suite of coercive and paternalistic legislative changes required the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act and were condemned by the United Nations special rapporteur on Indigenous people. It was later revealed that the decision, made months before a federal election that saw the defeat of the conservative Howard government after 11 years, was politically motivated in the hope this radical Intervention would be perceived positively by urban voters.\(^5\) Despite a lack of success in relation to its stated aims, the Intervention marked a fundamental change in the direction of Indigenous affairs policy and intensified the adoption of both neo-liberal and paternalistic policy agendas (Altman, 2010; Altman and Russell, 2012).

A substantial body of research implicates Australia’s mainstream news media in Australian Indigenous affairs policy-making. Over four decades, Austra-

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^4 In one exceptional event, a senior bureaucrat was found to have appeared in disguise on a controversial report by the national broadcaster. This report alleging shocking child sexual abuse in a remote community was to have significant policy implications and, according to journalist Chris Graham (2015), led directly to the 2007 NTER.

^5 ABC Insiders, 25 November 2007, Foreign Affairs minister Alexander Downer commented that the Intervention “was very popular with the public but it didn’t shift the opinion polls” http://www.abc.net.au/insiders/content/2007/s2100454.htm.
orian researchers have supported international findings demonstrating that Indigenous issues and people have been represented through racist, stereotypical and narrow frames (Jakubowicz et al., 1994; Meadows, 2001). Research conducted for the Media and Indigenous Policy project found that such framing narrowed the scope of political debate and favored some policy agendas over others (McCallum, 2010; 2013). In addition, changes in the media industries have contributed to an intensification of campaigning journalism that has allowed some narrow perspectives to dominate (McCallum and Reid, 2012). We have argued elsewhere (McCallum and Waller, 2013) that the coupling of intermittent attention with narrow framing and sensationalist coverage has real implications for the nature of policy development in a politically sensitive policy field.

4 A media-as-practice methodology

We aimed to examine the media-related practices of bureaucrats and the ways these play out in the development and implementation of Indigenous policy. We adopted Couldry’s (2004) “media as practice” approach that emphasizes participants’ practices rather than analyzing their responses to survey questions, discourses or narratives. Couldry (2004, p. 39) asks: “What do people do in relation to the media and what do people say in relation to the media ... across a whole range of situations and contexts?” Working with practice methodology to theorize the relationship between news media and Indigenous policy involved listening to the spoken word of study participants. We drew on the methodologies developed by Gamson (1992) to examine political talk. Gamson argued politics was socially constructed and best understood through interviews and “peer conversations” in localized social settings. Herbst (1998) and Davis (2007) have also used interviews to learn about how elites practice mediated politics. We followed these traditions and used depth interviews to access the professional and personal perspectives of Indigenous affairs bureaucrats.

The following analysis is based on interviews with 25 Federal and Territory public servants who worked, or had worked, in Indigenous affairs administration. Potential participants were identified according to their role and experience in the organization and through referrals. The majority of these participants had worked in policy development or implementation roles, some in very senior positions. It is important to note that we were not talking with staff employed in communication sections or in political offices, but with policy bureaucrats whose role is to give independent advice to their Minister and his
or her privately appointed staff. Interviews of between 30 minutes and two hours were conducted between May 2009 and August 2011. Most interviewees wished to remain anonymous, but all were frank and gave their insights freely, within the confines of the Public Service Act.

Our interviews were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed using grounded theory techniques to build theory about the nature of mediatized policy-making practices within the Australian bureaucracy. Inductive analysis of the interviews, in concert with political communication, policy and Indigenous studies literature, identified the common and contested themes in policy actors’ spoken words and enabled us to theorize the mediatized practices involved in the process of developing, responding to, and implementing policy. The material that follows focuses on two policy areas and one key policy event outlined above – Indigenous health, bilingual education and the 2007 Intervention. Participants shared personal experiences of developing, promoting and influencing policy, expressed opinions about the role of media in their portfolio area, and reflected on their own professional practices. Their local understanding provided insights about how mediatized practice yielded particular policy outcomes and revealed the media’s powerful role in the process. Five themes emerged to explain the role that news media played in the policy process. Bureaucrats demonstrated expert knowledge of media processes, monitored news about their portfolio area, anticipated coverage of relevant issues, pre-empted and adapted decisions to account for positive or negative news reports, and used news media strategically if indirectly to manage news for political ends.

5 Five dimensions of mediatized Indigenous affairs policy-making

5.1 Bureaucrats are political and media experts

The senior managers we interviewed demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of news media content and processes. Passionate about their area of policy responsibility, they were attuned to debates in print, radio, television and online media. They could be described as media experts with a precise understanding of why journalists report controversial or prominent issues. One explained the news media’s agenda-setting role in exposing violence against women and children in remote communities in 2006 and 2007:

We were grateful that some of this stuff was being promoted in the mainstream media. At least it meant that attention was being paid to it and that it might attract some government attention.
This statement captures the bureaucrats’ faith in the Fourth Estate ideal of journalism to hold governments to account. It accords with the third element of Thorbjørnsrud et al.’s (2014) typology, which emphasizes bureaucrats’ belief in the significance of news. Participants shared a common understanding that news media attention was an indicant of public opinion (Herbst, 1998). It was therefore incumbent upon bureaucrats, as part of the elected government to understand and respond to news media processes and agendas.

While senior policy bureaucrats oriented their practices towards their Minister’s office, they made a clear distinction between the policy realm and the political realm. Many were deeply committed to improving health or education standards, and had a strong understanding of the history, politics, science, and environmental contexts of Indigenous affairs. They understood these factors work together to make Indigenous health an intractable or “wicked” social policy problem susceptible to sudden policy changes (Hunter, 2007). One bureaucrat explained how the machinations of party politics affected his daily routine:

Of all the programs that my department runs, I would hit the media four or five times more than all the others ... That’s right. You have a journalist who is driving a story and an Opposition who has a lot of interest in showing that there’s poor results.

Many were critical of news practice, and related examples of how the media “got it wrong” or misrepresented an issue they were working on. Some said constant negative, sensationalist reporting and the recycling of the same issues frustrated their efforts to realize policy solutions. One manager in NT Health bemoaned: “Media ... don’t tend to report on good things that happen or the strengths in a community ...” Another observed:

They’re incredibly complicated issues, and the media is just light years away from getting its head around how, in these days of hype and public grabs, how do you present public issues in a way that will raise public awareness, or bring people to an understanding to share the solutions? It’s hugely challenging.

They also had a strong appreciation of the symbiotic and adversarial roles of news reporting in the political sphere (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2002; Hjarvard, 2013, p. 45). A senior manager in Indigenous policy told us:

What gets frustrating is where you get deliberate mischievous behavior in media, which can happen ... Like there is a continual pulling forward of, you know, ‘you wasted all this money on consultants, you’re expending this huge amount on people’, very selective presentation of information.
Bureaucrats, for whom accountability is central to their professional practice, were bemused by journalists’ perceived fickleness – that a news organization could campaign strongly on an issue, and then a few weeks later take an almost oppositional stance in their reporting.

5.2 Bureaucrats monitor media content

Bureaucrats explained in precise detail how they incorporated media practice into their daily routines. They described how they monitored media coverage of issues they were working on and accepted this was integral to their role, not something they left to the department’s communication specialists. In doing so they revealed there was much less distance between journalism and policy practice than we had previously assumed. A former bureaucrat explained the alignment of ministerial and bureaucratic focus on coverage of issues in their portfolio areas.

Folk in the ministerial environment ... and at senior levels in bureaucracies are scanning media endlessly and responding to it endlessly, and shaping themselves in relationship to what is increasingly intimate dialogue.

Government departments have established routines for monitoring media interest. Communication sections employ media specialists to formally monitor media activity. Ward (2007) has described the growth of communication and public affairs within government, but our study found that these functions increasingly take place within policy areas as well as in specialist communication units. One senior manager described how the monitoring of news occurred in his section:

I’ve got a team in my group that particularly focuses on issues we know will be running. I can log onto my email at 8:00 and I’ll see the news clips. We’re very regular stories on the weekend, so I have a little text message service that comes to me from the communications area about what’s on page 3 of The Australian etc.

Another described the centrality of media routines to policy work:

So we do run on a media cycle every day, we check media ... we do our media response work. We need to get our media response back so that you can get back into press the next day if you need to refute a story.

These accounts provide evidence of the permeation of “news logic” in complex bureaucratic work. They accord with the findings of Thorbjørnsrud et al. (2014), whose analysis of bureaucratic practices within the Norwegian Immigration
department found bureaucrats were increasingly attuned to news media formats and rhythms. Furthermore, resources typically quarantined for “media work” were being spread throughout government departments.

5.3 Bureaucrats anticipate and pre-empt media coverage of their issue

Participants in our study highlighted how, at the highest levels of the department, policy-making practices were oriented outwards with an eye to the mediated public discussion of issues. A senior manager explained that a key function of her job was to pre-empt the outcomes of policy decisions that might cause trouble for the department or the Minister. This orientation contrasts with the dominant conceptualization of the policy development process as a “policy cycle” with the news media as an external influence (Althaus, Bridgeman, and Davis, 2007; cf. Bacchi, 2009; Colebatch, 2002). Our research showed that some Indigenous health policies, bilingual education and the NT Intervention were subject to intense news coverage at key policy moments. Political sensitivity was heightened by the news media’s tendency to report on Indigenous and other race issues through the frames of crisis, failure and individual blame (Cottle, 2004).

It was at these times that bureaucrats monitored news coverage intensely and worked with their department’s communication team to anticipate impacts. Davis (2007, p. 104) referred to these as “anticipatory” media effects, whereby political elites “are critical of news media and skeptical about its ability to reflect public opinion, they are still very concerned with its output”. One senior Northern Territory bureaucrat explained that when implementing the politically driven and controversial Intervention policy in 2007:

Media management and media interaction just became a necessary part of the functions, and particularly in terms of dealing with Indigenous remote contexts with all of the overlays ... of the Intervention.

Our participants’ accounts of their media-related practices echo Thorbjørnsrud et al.’s (2014) study, which details how Norwegian bureaucrats reallocate resources and responsibilities to media-related activities. We were told “in an area such as the bilingual education policy normally there would have been heavy consultation with the media ...” Another senior bureaucrat working on bilingual education policy commented that the communications team was also involved to some degree in policy development:
I ... guess it's some of the core of your work ... the media was seen as absolutely hand in

glove with successful policy implementation.

Likewise, a health department bureaucrat told us her area would adjust their

policy advice or the announcement of a policy, depending on “the optics” –

their fine-tuned understanding of how a policy would be “seen out there in the

world”. They used their knowledge of how the news media operate to adapt or

withhold policy decisions, or to capitalize on opportunities for gaining positive

attention for their programs. As another explained:

You have to be aware of the political implications of what’s going to happen if something

you do goes public. Is it a good news story or a bad ... if it’s not saleable to the general

public ... it won’t happen, or it will be defused, rather than put in place something that ...

the talkbacks or the tabloids might get hold of.

This research finding suggests that mediatization affects not only the routine

practices of policy development and implementation. Significantly, it can mean

that an evidence-based policy proposal may never see the light of day, for fear

of political damage caused by news media reaction.

5.4 Bureaucrats react rapidly and calmly to media agendas

and media-driven political announcements

With their keen understanding of how the news media operated, bureaucrats

were aware that many of the controversies in Indigenous affairs were driven

by news values of conflict and drama, and the routine news framing of Indige-

nous people as a problematic racial minority. Some argued this could frustrate

their ability to maintain policy stability. A middle-level bureaucrat recounted

this insight from an older colleague:

I was in the hot seat and suddenly we had that one picture of a kid with a [hypodermic]

needle ... it made the entire world spin on its axis and suddenly we went off in this other

direction. And [my colleague] used this as an example to me to say, “you can go to all

these meetings ’til the cows come home but decisions are made on talkback radio and in

the paper”, and it certainly seemed that way to me ...

In 2008, poor national numeracy and literacy results in national testing became

the subject of intense media focus. The issue was presented through a discourse

of Indigenous deficit and as an education crisis in which Indigenous children

were failing. This was seen to put political pressure on the education minister

and her department to change its bilingual education policies. A former educa-
tion department CEO said this media coverage “was absolutely a critical lever in the series of events that then impacted on the bilingual program”:

I mean the media was actually the trigger behind all of that policy change to go from bilingual to a four-hour full-on English experience, and it was the national publication of results, the Northern Territory’s need to respond to look like they were on top of this and handling it ... so it was part of that role of responsiveness to the media.

Most participants accepted that responding to media was an integral part of their job. One observed that if the news was perceived to have political significance, “... then that means we go into a media response arrangement. So we will pull together the information that’s required in order to respond to the story in a timely way.” This very senior bureaucrat was pragmatic, saying, “but the other thing also is, if one of those stories is mishandled, or the wrong information gets into them, it might put me out for a month if I’m there on the front page”. Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten (2010) say that increased media scrutiny leads to “amplification”:

The dynamic and direction of a policy can change dramatically. Increased media coverage usually intensifies conflict ... Policy alternatives must then be formulated in a manner that suits the media’s thirst for sound bites and catchy headlines, and since the conflict is now enacted in front of the public eye, compromises and backstage deals become less likely. (Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten, 2010, p. 5)

Senior bureaucrats were surprisingly comfortable in their ability to straddle the policy and political realms. They balanced the demands of their advisory role with their relationships with the Minister’s office. There were times, however, when a policy announcement was so politicized that it caught them off guard. Participants identified the 2007 NT Intervention as a template for media-driven policy-making in Indigenous affairs. News reporting, particularly The Australian’s coverage of child sexual abuse, was attributed with great significance in providing the Prime Minister with the justification for overriding the NT government and its own racial discrimination laws. This policy announcement was so politicized that even senior departmental officials were surprised:

They’re on their way ... Everyone was shocked. It was a public announcement ... And these were senior managers, and they had to get ready for, who was it, the army, and God knows, was arriving on their doorsteps – “Oh, God, no”. They were shocked. Scrabbling to find out what this was all about.

In such cases, bureaucrats had to adjust to the new policy direction and amend existing programs. They may have been ambushed by the Prime Minister’s Intervention announcement, but senior health department officials described
how they were opportunistic about the announcement. Even before the dust settled, they said they looked for ways to make the most of the pot of funding for Indigenous health that was part of the package. One said: “And, so obviously the decision had to be made about how the huge additional resource was to be used positively”. A health policy advocate told us that:

People in the Health Department were totally unaware of what was being done. So they’re playing catch-up and in a big way it’s to [now Prime Minister] Tony Abbott’s credit, they came up with AU$100 million straight away for the Intervention ... we kind of negotiated with the community controlled sector ... I’m sure they would have been told the morning of the announcement, that’s what I reckon.

5.5 Bureaucrats are strategic media operators

Policy uncertainty occurs at those sites of most political controversy, over “intractable” policy problems that are hardest to resolve (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Schön and Rein, 1994). Our participants identified that news media themselves can amplify the intractability of an issue, or Indigenous advocacy groups can keep an issue alive and unresolved. In these situations, the media often provides the platform where the various stakeholders, including government departments, play out their policy battles (Hutchins and Lester, 2015; Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). Senior policy bureaucrats work closely with Indigenous stakeholders in their area and know the media strategies of these service providers and advocacy groups. One tactic is to ensure that the Minister’s office is provided with information to counter a negative news story. We found bureaucrats used their knowledge of how the news media operate to capitalize on opportunities for gaining positive attention (see also Thorbjørnsrød et al., 2014). One explained:

I use the media team the other way. So if I’ve got something like the Minister’s going to do a launch or something, open a new facility. We would do talking points and a media release. It would go to the communications area, they’d make sure it was well presented as a media release and then it would go over to the Minister’s office.

Despite this “strategic dance” (Cook, 2005; Gans, 1979), most bureaucrats have only an indirect relationship with journalists, adhering to departmental policy that generally allows only media advisors to speak directly with the news media. A senior manager who worked on Indigenous policy explained:

I don’t know, there’s certainly much more political sensitivity around responding to media and how it’s portrayed. But I don’t remember ever, in my time, it being the norm that public servants would have spoken to media.
Our findings accord with international research that concludes increased scrutiny leads to intensified media management (Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). Journalists we spoke to talked of “tight drip feeds” and “laughing drains” of information, depending on whether a particular government department wanted a story to be publicized or hosed down. One journalist described her experiences of trying to procure comment about bilingual education programs from NT education department staff:

And people who are at the coalface aren’t allowed to speak and you get some trumped up director from whatever region, parroting the line. There’s no resemblance to what the people on the ground are telling you.

Some journalists said bureaucrats would speak “off the record”, especially regarding a policy they thought the Minister had implemented without consultation, but they agreed that over time, governments had become increasingly expert media managers:

We found it increasingly hard to get leaks, but there were still people who were ideologically just opposed to what was occurring under the Intervention. So on that grounds they were leaking and we got leaked a lot of stuff.

6 Conclusions

Exploring mediatization within a specific policy field and institutional context has yielded precise insights about the dynamic interplay of news media and Indigenous policy-making in Australia. Bureaucrats’ local understanding of the relationships between the news media and Indigenous affairs policy shows that ‘news logic’ operated at all levels of the policy process, from development, through announcement, to implementation. As media experts, skilled in monitoring, anticipating, pre-empting, responding to and managing news media, Australian bureaucrats working in Indigenous affairs portfolios have incorporated media routines into their own policy-making practices. This suggests that not only has politics lost its autonomy and become dependent on media in its operations (Strömbäck, 2008), but that those who are tasked with giving “frank and fair advice” to their Ministers also operate in a mediatized environment.

While at times bureaucrats were uncomfortable about the outcome of “managing the optics”, they skillfully negotiated the media landscape as they developed, communicated and implemented government policy. They were re-
flexive about their position in a mediated policy environment and acknowledged that their media-related practices fed the journalists’ routines, reacted to Minister’s political agendas, and helped them to promote policies to the public. They acknowledged that they used their understanding of news media as a strategic and frequently tactical device in the discursive battle to define policy problems and solutions. With one eye on the potential reaction of news media to a particular policy solution, policy advisors pre-empted potential bad press for their Minister. When faced with an overtly politicized decision such as the 2007 Intervention, they calmly adapted, advised on and implemented the policy of the government of the day. Our research supports accounts of the intensification of political media management (Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten, 2010; Young, 2013), revealing the mediatization of bureaucratic practice as an important element of this trajectory. As such, the study provides empirically grounded insights into the changing nature of bureaucratic practice that has relevance for other domains of policy-making practice.

Australian bureaucrats demonstrated a strong appreciation of the Fourth Estate role of journalists and media organizations. They saw it as their duty to respect and respond to that basic tenet of democracy. At times they rued the permeation of news media in the policy-making process, its short-term focus, distracting properties and impact on sound policy development. Our findings suggest that the impacts of racialized news media discourse are significant on policy outcomes, as political leaders and their bureaucratic counterparts become increasingly reliant on news media in their policy-making practices. We suggest that a focus on political listening (Dreher, 2009) could offer a fresh lens for investigating bureaucrats’ patterns of attention to media and how different voices in the news might be reflected in the policies that govern the lives of Indigenous Australians. We conclude that as the relationship between the bureaucracy and the media becomes more intimate and as media logics permeate the very fabric of bureaucratic practice, this risks a fracturing of the “chain of accountability that is supposed to operate in a democracy” (Blumler, 2014, p. 37).

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