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# 1. Packaged good: Responses from Australian journalism educators on the Reporting Diversity Project

## ABSTRACT

The Reporting Diversity Project provides teaching materials on reporting cultural diversity for journalism educators and university students. This article reports the findings from a survey designed to gauge journalism educators' awareness of the online curriculum resources and their views on the usefulness of these materials. The survey was also used to capture journalism academics' views on educational resources produced with government support. This article includes the findings from a series of trials of the Reporting Diversity teaching resources with a small cohort of academics from throughout Australia. It includes their evaluation of the resources and reveals ways in which the modules are being used and adapted for different classroom settings.

Keywords: cultural diversity, cultural training, ethnic minorities, Indigenous, Islam, prejudices, religion, Reporting Diversity Project, stereotypes.

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**A**MERICAN PASTOR Terry Jones became an international hate figure and was condemned by world leaders in 2010 after he posted a message on Facebook calling for his followers to burn the

Koran to mark the ninth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. While social networking sites may have helped him to reach a considerable audience, it was the mainstream media's coverage of his extremist views that elevated him to the global stage. Counter-terrorism expert David Schanzer said the news media should have ignored Jones to undercut his power and that such exposure gave him more credibility than he deserved (Weaver, 2010). Days later, a Queensland University of Technology academic made headlines across Australia when he posted footage of himself on YouTube smoking marijuana rolled in pages from religious texts such as the Bible and the Koran before rating which 'burns better' (Trounson, 2010).

Recognition and an understanding of cultural diversity and migrant communities present mounting challenges in a globalised world (Dueze, 2004, Morgan, 2006, as cited in Robie, 2009). The literature highlights a correlation between the way some minorities are represented in the media and how they may be perceived by media audiences (Phillips, 2011; Hannis, 2009; McCallum, 2010). In most Western nations the dominant cultural voice is 'White' and other groups, including ethnic minorities, often struggle to be heard (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004; Global Media Monitoring Project, 2005, as cited in Hannis, 2009).

In Australia, the media's relationship with Islam is arguably the most controversial dimension of reporting on cultural diversity at present and is the primary focus of this study. It should be acknowledged however, that across the Asia Pacific region there are many minority groups who struggle to have their voices heard in the mainstream media, or are portrayed in negative ways. In New Zealand for example, an article published by leading magazine *North & South* created angst after painting a misleading picture of rampant Chinese crime following a rapid increase in the number of Chinese immigrants to the country (Hannis, 2009).

Some sections of Australia's news media encourage hysteria about Islamic fundamentalism and demonstrate a willingness to reinforce stereotypes and prejudices (Jakubowicz, 2010, p. 659). Phillips (2011) argues that when ethnic minorities, notably Muslims, are featured in commercial media, they tend to occupy peripheral roles, and when they are allowed a central role, it is usually to be shown as threatening and menacing to the Anglo mainstream. Her study of television news programmes found that reporting practices on commercial stations deliberately or unwittingly encouraged a sense of racial hierarchy in which the Anglo dominates.

A report produced for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 2004 (Poynting & Noble, 2004) revealed a disturbing level of discrimination and vilification against Arab and Muslim Australians, particularly in the wake of September 11 and the Bali bombings. The example of the planned burning of the Koran in the United States highlights levels of vilification are still high in Western societies and that the news media's importance in creating a degree of cultural harmony cannot be overlooked. In the immediate aftermath of the Cronulla riots in 2005, for example, the Australian news media was accused of inciting the violence after comments such as those by Sydney radio commentator Alan Jones:

My suggestion is to invite one of the biker gangs to be present in numbers at Cronulla railway station when these Lebanese thugs arrive ... It'd be worth the price of admission to watch these cowards scurry back onto the train for the return trip to their lairs...Australians old and new shouldn't have to put up with this scum. (ABC, 2006)

In a culturally pluralist and multi-faith society there can be dangerous consequences for social cohesion and intergroup relations if prejudices are allowed to masquerade as objective truths (Jakubowicz, 2010, p. 660). Australian journalism educators have demonstrated they understand this through some innovative approaches to teaching students how to deal with multiculturalism. The University of South Australia had a groundbreaking project in the early 1990s with an emphasis on 'practical training and personal experience' (Richards, 1993, p. 83) and at the University of Wollongong students went into 'ethnic enclaves' to experience cultural difference first-hand (Loo, 2004).

To improve cultural awareness in the wake of the Cronulla riots, the federal Department of Immigration and Citizenship provided funding for the Journalism in Multicultural Australia Project which was launched in 2005 and followed in 2007 with further funding for the Reporting Diversity and Integration (RDI) Project—a partnership of universities and news media organisations that aims to raise awareness among the news media of the challenges of reporting on multicultural affairs and 'to provide materials for skills building to help raise the quality of reportage and thereby enhance community harmony' ([www.reportingdiversity.org.au](http://www.reportingdiversity.org.au)).

As part of the project, curriculum modules for use in tertiary journalism

education and for journalists in training were developed by Professor Lynette Sheridan Burns of the University of Western Sydney. These teaching and learning resources are designed to encourage students and early career journalists to focus on the complexities and ‘deeper questions’ of reporting on cultural diversity so they have ‘the tools they need to respond accurately and ethically when reporting multicultural issues’ (Burns, 2007, p. 21). Professor Burns devised four case studies as part of the curriculum materials, including one that presents a potential news story involving allegations of racial discrimination against Muslim netballers. Another explores an on-going political situation in the local community where a right-wing group is making damaging public statements about one ethnic group in the community.

A bibliographical database comprising a comprehensive range of national and international resources and scholarly research relating to the reporting of multicultural issues in Australia was also developed as part of the Reporting Diversity site ([www.reportingdiversity.org.au](http://www.reportingdiversity.org.au)). It was compiled by a team of academics from the University of Canberra including Kerry McCallum, Kate Holland, Julie Posetti and Elanna Herbert.

The Reporting Diversity materials were promoted at academic education conferences and a one-off road-show was conducted to communicate and receive feedback about the project from Australian journalism educators who could contribute to the ongoing development and refinement of the resources.

Our research in this area began in 2008 when we were invited to adapt and trial the Reporting Diversity curriculum materials with undergraduate university students at Deakin University. We also gauged its usefulness to industry by inviting 30 journalists working for non-daily and regional newspapers to participate in a trial of the materials (Hess & Waller, 2010). The results from this initial research were encouraging as both university students and working journalists indicated a strong desire to be educated about issues of cultural diversity and the news media. We also devised a learning module based on the Reporting Diversity curriculum materials which has been incorporated into the Country Press Australia post-cadet journalism programme. The programme educates up to 80 regional and rural journalists from non-daily newspapers each year (Hess & Waller 2009).

This article reports on the second round of trials to highlight the ways in which these resources are being used. It also presents the views of a group of journalism academics who were surveyed to gauge their awareness of the

resources and their views on the usefulness of these materials. The responses to this survey show some academics were not aware of the resources and others had not used them in their classrooms. We argue that sharing different teaching approaches to the materials through the Reporting Diversity website may assist more academics to adapt the resources for their own use.

### **Methodology**

This research was conducted in two stages. *Stage one* involved recruiting five journalism academics from across Australia to trial teaching materials from the Reporting Diversity website and to evaluate their experience of working with the resources. Four of the academics were selected using a stratified purposive sample of journalism schools across Australia. A fifth academic became involved in the research on advice from others involved in the Reporting Diversity project. The participants were identified through university staff directories and contacted by email and telephone. They were each offered a \$500 payment to trial the materials and participate in an evaluation at the end of that semester. Semi-structured interviews were used to conduct evaluations with each participant. Questions included: 1. How did you use the material?; 2. What unit of study did you incorporate the study materials into?; 3. Why?; 4. On a Likert scale of 1-7 how would you rate the usefulness of the material? 1 being not useful, 4 being useful and 6 being extremely useful; 5. Outline your reasons why/why not?; 6. Would you use these materials again?

*Stage two* involved a stratified purposive sample of Australian journalism academics to gauge their awareness of the online curriculum resources and their views on the usefulness of these materials. There are 22 journalism schools in Australia listed on JournOZ ([www.journoz.com/journ.html](http://www.journoz.com/journ.html)). This was narrowed down to 15 institutions as those universities whose academic staff had participated in stage one (research trials) were excluded. We also excluded journalism schools that were not affiliated with a university. Our sample included a total of 30 academics (two representing each journalism school). The participants were identified through university staff directories and contacted by a research assistant via email or telephone. Questions posed to each academic included: 1. Are you aware of the Reporting Diversity website?; 2. Where did you hear about this project?; 3. Have you used the materials in your course curriculum?; 4. If so how? If not, why not?; 5. After

reviewing the material, would you use these resources in your course curriculum?; 6. Would you use teaching materials that deal with areas of national significance which have been produced with the assistance of federal government funding?; 7. Can you see advantages/and or disadvantages to using these types of resources in the future? What are they? Ethics clearance for this research was granted by Deakin University's ethics committee.

## Results

### Stage one—curriculum material trial cases

Participants were asked to assess the success of the materials on a Likert scale of 1-7, one being not useful and 7 being extremely useful. The range of responses was 3.5-7 and the mode was 7, indicating that the material was considered by the participants to be highly beneficial in their teaching. A summary of the teaching strategies used by the participants is outlined in cases listed below.

#### *Case 1: Dr Nasya Bahfen, lecturer in journalism, RMIT University*

The Reporting Diversity resources were used as part of assessment in a radio course with a cohort of 60-65 undergraduate students. Traditionally students in this second-year radio unit have been required to compile 90-word radio stories for assessment, based on four case studies from a test bank. Dr Bahfen said in the past the case studies available had been 'Anglo centric' (for example, stories about an Australian ban on the import of carbon from the Pacific, the Australian Football League and a new collaborative research scheme for cancer bodies) and did not include issues of cultural diversity. Two curriculum modules from the Reporting Diversity resources were incorporated into the student assessment task: case study 1 (the Muslim netballers) and case study 2 (Sudanese refugees). Dr Bahfen said she believed these case studies were most relevant because of their currency and interest to the student cohort. She said issues of violence and Sudanese refugees were constantly resurfacing in the media, and a spate of Indian student bashing was a major issue in Melbourne at the time of teaching. The Reporting Diversity resources encouraged students to make a real-world connection to current events in Melbourne:

They [case studies] were useful to broadcast because the students have to think about cultural issues as well as write something that they had

to read out, so pronouncing names correctly, those sorts of things, were really important.

She said the case studies were challenging for the students and highlighted to them the need to seek out a range of sources and viewpoints when dealing with culturally sensitive stories: 'I think students need to be taught about cultural diversity because it's always an afterthought and in the media certain groups are often victimised.'

*Case 2: Dianne Jones, lecturer in journalism, University of Southern Queensland*

Dianne Jones challenged her third-year broadcast students to investigate issues from different cultural perspectives and used the Reporting Diversity website to scaffold their learning when researching and compiling current affairs stories: 'Most of the class of five students were white, middle-class women so this got them out of their comfort zone!'

She began by familiarising students with the website and encouraged them to use all the resources available, from the bibliographical database to research papers and case studies. The Reporting Diversity materials were used as a platform for three assessments. This included a five-minute radio current affairs story of broadcast quality, a discussion conducted on a course wiki at the start of the semester on the merits of the website, which focused students' thinking on what they had learned and how it may assist their research; and an evaluation at the end of semester addressing how the website assisted in the preparation and development for their story.

Some students utilised the site more than others, but in the end we had stories about native title, a shortage of Indigenous health workers, cross cultural marriages (female perspective), cross-cultural marriages (male perspective) and youth suicide prevention in Indigenous communities.

She said the bibliographical database was most useful to students for gathering different sources and viewpoints for their articles:

We want to train journalists to be fair-minded representatives of the community and we need them to acknowledge that Australia is not just comprised of white Anglo-Saxon people.

*Case 3: Mary-Anne Romano, associate lecturer in journalism, Murdoch University*

Before Mary-Anne Romano was introduced to the Reporting Diversity material she admits the reporting of cultural diversity ‘was gleaned over in tutorials ...we’d maybe talk about the Cronulla riots or what’s topical’.

The case study on Muslim netballers was incorporated into her media law and ethics unit, studied by 120 students, including second-year and third-year undergraduates and some postgraduate students. She used the materials during a two-hour tutorial dedicated to ethics and the reporting of race. The Muslim netballers scenario was chosen because Romano said she believed it was what students would identify with most: ‘The materials were perfect for teaching students what I wanted them to become aware of when reporting about these types of issues and didn’t require any adjustment’.

Students were briefed on the scenario and given the list of questions provided on the website to assist them to gain insight into their cultural assumptions and understandings. They were then shown the website and divided into groups to discuss how they would report on the issue outlined in the case study, using the materials available. Each group presented its discussion findings to the class.

*Case 4: Dr Angela Romano, senior lecturer in journalism, Queensland University of Technology*

Reporting Diversity teaching and learning resources were used with two cohorts of students. The first was a large, mainly undergraduate foundation studies course that teaches the principles of reporting. (There are about 150 undergraduate students and 10-12 graduate certificate and masters students). The other was a postgraduate Theories of Journalism course.

Case study 1 (the Muslim netballers materials) was used in the foundation studies course as part of a lecture that provided an introduction to concepts reporters need to approach using their higher order thinking skills. They were asked to consider how newsrooms could incorporate the principles of responsible reporting of issues regarding cultural diversity in their day-to-day practice.

Homework was assigned before the lecture and a participation grade was attached to the exercise to ensure students engaged with the materials and prepared for group discussion. They were required to read the Muslim netballers materials on the Reporting Diversity website and write a potential lead for a story based on the scenario.

Dr Romano's lecture addressed the discussion points provided on the Reporting Diversity site. This provided the scope to encourage thought and discussion about the situation from a range of perspectives, including Anglo-Australians' attitudes towards modesty. Students were then asked to review the lead they had written before the lecture and rewrite it in class. Many found they could not come up with a different style of lead, which rather than being a negative outcome, provided an opportunity for students to think deeply about hard news writing.

The writing exercise was valuable because news stories are so often conflict oriented and it challenged students to consider other approaches to writing hard news that would appeal to audiences, and how they could pitch a different style of report to news editors.

The postgraduates studying Theories of Journalism worked with case study two, which involves a far-right activist making damaging public statements about an ethnic group in the community. The scenario is based on events involving Newcastle's Sudanese community, but none of the students realised that Dr Jim Saleam of the Australians Only Party was a real person until they conducted their own research in class. Dr Romano described the materials as a whole resource set which allowed students to go further with their exploration of the issue of how journalists cover extremists.

Dr Romano expanded on the scenario by asking students to research Saleam and other real people and events, including former politician Pauline Hanson and Australian neo-Nazi Jack van Tongeren. Dr Romano's preparation for the class included identifying high-quality news reports on van Tongeren, from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, which students worked with as examples of best practice reporting. Some students were asked to provide a summary of the discussion at the end of the class, and in the following week others were asked to reflect on their work on covering extremists. They said they had not given the issue much thought before and the exercise made them consider the ways journalists represent people and issues, and the impact that framing and editorial choices can have on communities.

*Case 5: Katrina McLachlan, lecturer in journalism, University of South Australia*

Case study 1 (the Muslim netballers materials) was used in a postgraduate journalism ethics course with 38 students. The topic of the three-hour class was 'Reporting of Islam issues' and included a guest speaker/lecture and tutorial time used for discussion.

The week before the class students were given a link to the Reporting Diversity website so they could explore the materials and prepare for the session. They were provided with handouts of the relevant parts of the case study in class.

The guest speaker was UniSA postdoctoral research fellow, Dr Minerva Nasser-Eddine, who Ms McLachlan described as ‘the face of social Muslim issues in SA’ and ‘an academic and a great speaker’. Dr Eddine’s one-hour presentation explored geographical and social issues and both good and bad news reporting of issues involving Muslims in Australia. The students were then asked to discuss the case study. McLachlan said the students really engaged with the questions, which also fed into discussions of related issues.

McLachlan said the inclusion of a guest speaker was important because it is a ‘real world approach’ which helps students to deal with questions of reporting diversity as well as blending in the theory:

It’s good for them to confront it physically, in the shape of the speaker  
... People who come into class with a real world perspective adds a lot  
... Minerva’s presence added to it greatly.

She said the students’ work in class was not assessed, however, many chose to look at issues that involved race and ethnicity for their course assessment (two major essays and a group presentation), which showed the materials has engaged them in reporting diversity issues.

### **Stage two—national survey of journalism academics**

Of the 30 academics from 15 universities invited to participate in the survey, 13 responded from eight universities, a response rate of 43 percent. The survey responses to these questions were examined to provide a descriptive analysis of the themes of data collected.

Of the 13 respondents, seven of the academics indicated they were aware of the Reporting Diversity website. Six said they were not. Four who were aware of the resources had worked for universities that were official partners in the Reporting Diversity Project, or had been involved in Journalism Education Association activities. One indicated they found the materials while searching online for ‘reporting multiculturalism’ information, while two educators were briefed on the project as part of a ‘roadshow’ promoting the Reporting Diversity resources.

Of the seven educators who were aware of the site, only two had used the resources and included them in their teaching.

Responses included:

I've just adapted some of the ideas to class discussions. [University does not have] dedicated subject to cross-cultural reporting in our programme.

And:

I've used some of the scenarios as case studies for discussion when we tackle ethics, challenges to journalists reporting sensitive issues and media law. These are generally in the first year 'intro to news' subject. Some materials are revisited in upper level subjects such as media ethics and law. The database also comes in handy as a central repository of materials. It's a wonderful resource in one location.

There were five educators who were aware of the Reporting Diversity website, but did not actually use the material in their curriculum. Two of them were not familiar with what the site offered for teaching purposes. For example, one academic said:

I forgot about it. Also did not realise its scope as a teaching resource as I thought it was more of an academic research project into diversity.

Another indicated:

To be honest, I didn't know what was there. I don't think the content has been particularly well marketed to journalism educators.

Two of the educators said they already covered cultural diversity within their course, or 'the units do not lend themselves to any extra content'.

All of the educators who were not aware of the Reporting Diversity website indicated they would use the materials in future after familiarising themselves with the resources. Some indicated they would not use all of the materials but would consider incorporating them into future course design and curriculum development, or recommend the site to colleagues.

All academics indicated they would use teaching materials that deal with areas of national significance, which have been produced with the assistance of federal government funding. They offered a range of responses to the advantages and disadvantages of using this type of material such as:

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These kinds of resources are useful as long as they are inclusive, embrace all kinds of opinions and are not dogmatic.

Two academics raised concerns about government influence in developing these types of materials:

It depends on the quality of the material and if there are any significant biases. I would definitely consider such material and think they are very important.

And this:

The development of material would have to be kept independent of the Government's stance on highly political issues such as asylum seekers or climate change and developed by academics for academics.

Other comments offered in relation to the usefulness of materials and issues raised in teaching cultural competence include:

My own view is that ... rushing through them or covering them too thinly isn't a good learning experience for the students. My second reservation is identifying what is 'best practice' in reporting on each issue. This is quite complex and sometimes the commercial realities of daily journalism are left behind.

Another indicated that the design of the website could be improved:

The overall appearance of the website is more like that of a government agency or NGO, rather than as a tool kit for academics to use when teaching journalism. An idea, for example, would be to have a simple click from the home page that says 'FOR JOURNALISM ACADEMICS' or 'DO YOU TEACH JOURNALISM?' something incredibly simple and inviting rather than headings on the homepage such as 'CONSULTATIVE STRUCTURE' and 'COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS' which are government-speak, and although probably necessary, for a government-funded site, become a turn off to people teaching the use of simple, direct, powerful language.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

This research highlights how educators who actively engage with the Reporting Diversity curriculum resources are able to use the materials in

some positive ways and adapt the materials for their own course requirements. The materials were used in journalism subjects including ethics, news writing and research and across mediums and with both postgraduate and undergraduate students. Some of the academics involved in the case studies used the resources during one week of term, others used it across an entire semester. The trials demonstrate that the learning activities can be used as tutorial exercises or incorporated into assessment tasks. There were several survey respondents, and one case study participant, who indicated that teaching students about cultural diversity is complex and deserves ongoing, in-depth study. For example, Dr Angela Romano who tested the materials said the resources made it easy to embed the concepts into classes that relate to different topics, such as news writing: ‘It’s not a case of theory, versus applied journalism. The material allows the educator to do both. You don’t have to make time for “multicultural week.”’

The interviews and survey results suggest two areas for future consideration. Firstly, while all the academics who participated in the trials rated the materials as highly useful, only two of the 13 journalism educators who participated in the survey had used the materials. The six survey respondents who did not know about the materials previously said they would use the materials after reviewing them for the purposes of the survey. This indicates that when academics engage with the materials they find they are appropriate and useful for their teaching. It underlines the need to familiarise more journalism educators with the website and its teaching resources. The research indicates a lack of promotion of the educational modules within the materials. Research participants have suggested ways to promote the site and its contents such as the annual Journal Education Association conference JEA, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the *Walkley Magazine*, online JEA discussion forum and developing a media kit similar to the Mindframe resources ([www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info)) available for the reporting of mental illness and suicide in Australia. Mindframe is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and guided by the national Media and Mental Health Group with representatives from media and mental health organisations. It offers a website based on the print resource *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness*, to provide practical advice and information to support the work of media professionals by informing them about sensitive and appropriate reporting of suicide and mental illness.

The Mindframe resources are coordinated and managed by a project team at the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, who are active in promoting the materials across media and other organisations and receive funding to do so. For example, between September 2002 and June 2011 the project team conducted 353 media briefings, drop-in visits or meetings, engaging with approximately 1971 media professionals across Australia ([www.mindframe-media.info/client\\_images/1001199.pdf](http://www.mindframe-media.info/client_images/1001199.pdf)). These have occurred in each state and territory and in metropolitan and rural areas. The institute also runs the Response Ability project, which is closely associated with Mindframe and offers education modules on mental health for use in journalism courses. The Reporting Diversity project has operated with a small promotional budget and the roadshow was largely the responsibility of academics involved in the project.

Academics involved in the trials stress the importance of keeping material relevant to what is happening in the news and participants across both phases of the research suggested that the biographical database was an invaluable research tool for students, which highlights a need to link this resource to the curriculum resources and continue its development. Participants in the trials suggested ways in which the Reporting Diversity resources could be improved for the future included the need to develop a set of best practice examples, including more case studies that raise different issues associated with this area of reporting. Others highlighted the need for more guidance on the website about the protocols associated with reporting across cultures. It was also suggested the materials could be made more medium specific; for example, the use of recorded interviews that students could edit and repackage for radio and/or television. Such suggestions may help guide other resources on cultural diversity developed in future across the Asia-Pacific region.

Despite some reservations about potential bias, all survey respondents are receptive to using material developed with federal government assistance, which suggests cross-partnership projects such as Reporting Diversity which aim to educate students on areas of national significance may be well received by academics in future.

The Reporting Diversity website provides a useful toolkit for working with students on these important issues, but journalism educators need to work out if and how the project can be continued now that the Reporting Diversity Project is complete. This includes the question of who should take responsi-

bility for promoting and expanding the teaching resources as well as keeping them relevant for the future. This too depends on new funding opportunities. The aim of this research project has been to enable journalism educators to share the ways in which they have used and adapted the materials for different cohorts of students and to assess awareness and use of the materials across Australian journalism schools since the website was launched in 2007. We suggest that perhaps the way forward is for the Reporting Diversity website to become a portal where educators across Australia can showcase and share ways for incorporating cultural diversity as part of a collective curriculum renewal approach.

### **Limitations of this study**

Less than half of the 30 academics who were invited to participate in the survey in stage two of this research took part. We present these findings mindful that a response rate of less than 50 percent is not a true representative sample.

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### Websites

[www.mindframe.com.au](http://www.mindframe.com.au)  
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