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Managing the optics of Indigenous policy

Kerry McCallum and Lisa Waller

It was one of their favourite words, the *optics* of it. Have you heard that one yet? ... Optics, how it looks to the outside. Yeah, do you hear that? It's a very public servant word ... The optics. When you're dealing with stakeholders and do you something, it's the optics. How will this be seen out there in the world?

A major outcome of the *Media and Indigenous Policy* project has been to identify and document the ways in which news media practices have increasingly been incorporated into the development, communication and implementation of Indigenous affairs policymaking. We found that at every level, from Minister to junior bureaucrat, news media routines, priorities and practices have been internalised and embodied by bureaucrats working on Indigenous affairs policies. Rather than policy professionals simply reading and responding to mediated messages, however, they had adopted a 'media logic' into their practices (Althiede & Snow, 1979). We conclude that the portrayal of Indigenous issues in mainstream news media had a significant, but indirect, impact on specific Indigenous policies in the 20 years between 1988 and 2008.

This essay outlines how 'mediatized' policymaking practices operate in particular fields of Indigenous affairs. A key concept in media studies, mediatization theory, describes a media saturated culture where media norms and resources become part of everyday activities (Couldry, 2008; Silverstone, 2007). It is the process whereby 'everyday practices and social relations are historically shaped by mediating technologies and media organisations' (Lundby, 2009, p. x; Davis, 2007). This emphasis on mediated policy practice contrasts with traditional approaches to policy analysis whereby news media is frequently understood as an outside,

unidirectional influence on policy (e.g. Cook et al, 2009; Althaus et al, 2007). This essay draws upon mediatization theory to explore and map the discursive environments in which specific Indigenous affairs policies are developed. This has enabled us to reconsider the way policy is developed in a mediatized world and to re-theorise how the media can play a key role at certain policy moments.

The extreme example of mediatized policymaking was the announcement via the news media of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER or Intervention) in June 2007, whereby Australia's Prime Minister announced a military-led incursion into NT Indigenous communities to instigate a suite of policies that fundamentally changed the direction of Indigenous affairs policy (Allen & Clark, 2011). This dramatic policy announcement was made in the wake of intense publicity surrounding the shocking but by no means new documentation of child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory. As Meadows points out in his essay for this report, not all policies are developed with such political scrutiny or media attention. Meadows gives the example of remote Indigenous broadcasting as a policy area that has developed in a 'vacuum'. This point is reinforced by the graphs in the *Indigenous health reporting 1988-2008* section of this report that demonstrate that, more often than not, Indigenous people and issues are ignored rather than attended to by Australia's news media. Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer (2010, p. 219) concluded that 'any shade of media influence is possible, from 'non-existent' to 'high'. Moreover, even within a policy field, long periods out of the limelight may be interspersed with short bursts of media attention'. But the participants interviewed for the *Media and Indigenous Policy* project argued that behind this apparent lack of media and political

interest in Indigenous affairs lies a deep political sensitivity to Indigenous issues in Australia.

We have therefore taken a policy-specific approach to understanding the media's role in the policy process. This essay focuses on two distinct policy fields — Indigenous primary health care and bilingual education. Our examination of Indigenous health policy since 1988 takes as its focal point the delivery of primary health care through the network of Community Controlled Health Organisations. Four key 'policy moments' were chosen that characterise the tendency for governments to propose dramatic policy changes to tackle the Indigenous health 'crisis':

- the 1989 National Aboriginal Health Strategy, which placed Indigenous self-determination through community control at the heart of health service delivery;
- the removal of Aboriginal health from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 1995;
- the declaration by Minister Abbott in 2006 of a policy of 'new paternalism' in Aboriginal health; and
- the 2007 Intervention which proposed mandatory health checks on Indigenous children.

Bilingual education provides a second example of a policy field characterised by periodic radical policy announcements. First introduced in the 1970s, bilingual education policy in the Northern Territory has undergone a number of shifts in direction:

- In 1999 the NT government backed down on a decision to abolish its bilingual education programs following community opposition and the independent Collins Review of Indigenous education.
- In 2008 the NT Minister for Education 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.

- In late 2012 bilingual education policy was reintroduced by the new Country Liberal Party Government.

Interviewing Federal, state and territory bureaucrats about their media-related practices has enabled us to tease out the precise way they incorporate news media practices into their everyday routines. In this essay we summarise the results of our analysis of interviews with public servants working in Indigenous health, education, and related social policy areas about their understanding of the news media's role in policymaking. Rather than, say, ministerial advisors or politicians, we chose to speak with the public servants responsible for developing, implementing, and promoting Indigenous affairs policies. We wanted to access the local knowledge of a group of people whose roles were not traditionally oriented towards media and public opinion, but whose primary functions included providing expert policy advice on behalf of their departments to their portfolio Ministers, and to implementing and communicating the policy decisions of their government. Drawing on Waller's innovative doctoral research, we took a 'media-as-practice' approach (Couldry, 2004), where we asked simply: 'what do people do with media and what do people say about media'. In this way, we have been able to explore the media-related experience of those deepest inside the policymaking processes.

Our participants spoke candidly and with extraordinary expertise about the way they orient their practices toward the Minister's office and the public. A number of themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews. The first finding was that Indigenous policy bureaucrats were media experts with a sophisticated knowledge of news media processes. They described in detail their operation at the political, Ministerial, communication and policy levels. Secondly, they explained the localised media practices of their policy field. They identified that policymaking practices had become increasingly media oriented over time, with the Northern Territory Intervention given as an

extreme example of media-driven policymaking. They rarely had any direct contact with a journalist, but they were, nevertheless, media experts who could monitor news, anticipate how an issue might play out in public media, adapt their practices to pre-empt the public response to their policies, react with skill to negative and positive news stories, and use the news media strategically to develop publicly-successful policies. Finally, through their interviews, policymakers revealed a high level of reflexivity about the media-related nature of their policymaking practices, and its impact on policy outcomes over the 20-year period between 1988 and 2008.

Media experts

Policymakers have a fine-grained and sophisticated understanding of news media processes. They are passionate about their area of policy responsibility and they follow the content of print, radio, television and online media. Many of the public servants we spoke to could be described as media experts with a good understanding of why journalists cover controversial or prominent issues. A former communications officer said of the 2007 NT Intervention: 'Whether you were for or against the Intervention as a journalist, it was just a big story and go in and cover it.' A senior manager revealed an intimate working knowledge of the *Australian* newspaper, and a close, if

indirect relationship with its Indigenous affairs journalists. She told us:

Because the *Australian* doesn't have the same parochial interests as states, it has a greater ability to determine, perhaps more so than its readers, its particular campaigns, where it will go in hot pursuit. It's often referred to as a campaigning newspaper.

Many were critical of media practice, and related examples of where the media 'got it wrong' or misrepresented a policy issue they were working on. Some of those who worked closely with Indigenous communities found the constantly negative, sensationalist reporting, and the recycling of the same issues, frustrated their efforts to realise policy solutions. One manager in NT Health bemoaned that '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.

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KEY POINTS

Indigenous policy bureaucrats:

- demonstrated a high level of policy commitment and accountability to their Minister and the Australian public
- had increasingly media-oriented policymaking practices
- were media experts with a sophisticated knowledge of news media processes
- saw the NT Intervention as the extreme example of media and politically-driven policymaking
- monitored news, anticipated coverage, pre-empted and adapted policies to negative and positive news stories
- used news media strategically to develop publicly-successful policies
- Revealed a high level of reflexivity about the media-related nature of their policymaking practices, and its impact on policy outcomes.

issues, frustrated their efforts to implement policy solutions. A senior manager in Indigenous policy told us:

What gets frustrating is where you get deliberate mischievous behaviour 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 of people, very selective presentation of information.

Policymakers, for whom accountability is central to their professional practice, were bemused by journalists' perceived fickleness — that they could campaign so strongly on an issue, and then a few weeks later take an almost oppositional stance in their reporting. A former communications officer gave the media's intense campaigning against the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (ATSIC) as an example:

Journalists, who were almost the same people who'd helped get rid of ATSIC, suddenly said, 'Oh, this bloody government's got rid of ATSIC, now they're doing all these terrible things'. The next lot of scandal.

Monitoring

Policy 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 that monitoring media coverage was an integral part of their job, not one that was left to the domain of the department's communication specialists. In doing so they revealed that there was a much closer distance between journalism and policy practice than we had previously assumed. A former public servant in bilingual education told us:

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, because journalists' storytelling ... is

through this close relationship with the political environment.

Government departments have established routines for monitoring media interest in their policy area.

Communication sections of each department employ media specialists to formally monitor media activity. Ward (2007) has described the growth of communication and public affairs within the Commonwealth, but our study found that these functions take place within policy areas as well as in specialist communication units. One senior manager described in detail how the monitoring of news occurred in his section:

Okay. So physically every morning I have somebody that comes into my office. So we have a communications branch, there's a team in there. We buy a media monitoring service. That team pulls together clips. 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.

Anticipating, and pre-empting

We were surprised to learn the extent and closeness of the working relationship between senior managers and the communications sections of their departments for the implementation of new policies. One senior Northern Territory bureaucrat said:

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.

Another 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. Not necessarily so much policy development, although there had been in the policy development before it was decided, a fully comprehensive consultation — public consultation, site by site. So that had involved the full-blown media.

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.

This senior manager highlighted how, at the highest levels of the department, practices were oriented outwards. 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. We were told that 'in an area such as the bilingual education policy normally there would have been heavy consultation with the media...' Likewise, a health department bureaucrat told us that 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'. 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.

Reacting

While they understood the news values that drove media outlets to sensationalise controversies in Indigenous health, policy professionals argued that this frustrated their ability to implement long-term policy issues. Policymakers were divided in their levels of cynicism. One relayed the advice of an older colleague:

I was in the hot seat and suddenly we had that one picture of a kid with a needle in Redfern ... 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, which was seen to put political pressure on the education minister and her department to change its bilingual education policies. A former education department CEO said this '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 out of responsiveness to the media.

Most participants accepted that responding to media stories was an integral part of their job. If the monitored news is 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'.

Media and policy scholars 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 & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010, p. 5)

Straddling political and policy realms

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. There were certain times when a policy announcement was so politicised that it was announced with minimal departmental involvement. Policymakers identified the 2007 NT Intervention as a 'template' for media-driven policymaking in Indigenous affairs. News media reporting, particularly the *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 politicised that even senior departmental officials were caught unaware:

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, departmental officers were required to adjust to the new policy direction and amend existing programs in line with the new policies. They may have been ambushed by the Prime Minister's reaction to the media's portrayal of the *Little Children are Sacred* report, but senior health department officials described how they were opportunistic about the Intervention announcement. Even before the dust settled, pragmatic departmental workers said they looked

for ways of making 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 Tony Abbott's credit, they came up with a hundred 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.

Strategic

Policy scholars Schön & Rein (1994) and Gamson and Modigliani (1989) found that policy uncertainty occurs at those sites of most political controversy, over 'intractable' policy problems that are hardest to resolve. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, news media itself can amplify the intractability of an issue, or Indigenous advocacy groups can keep an issue alive and unresolved (see the essay, *Intractable or indomitable?* on p. 69 of this volume). In these situations, the media often provides the platform where the various stakeholders, including government departments, play out their policy battles. They work closely with Indigenous 'stakeholders' in their area and know their stakeholders' media strategies. One tactic is to ensure that the Minister's office is provided with information to counter a negative news story. We found that bureaucrats used their knowledge of how the news media operate to capitalise on opportunities for gaining positive attention for their programs. 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.

Our findings accord with international research that concludes increased scrutiny leads to intensified media management (Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). Journalists we spoke to talked of 'tight drip feeds' and 'laughing drains' of information, depending on whether the department wanted a story to be publicised or hosed down. One journalist described her experiences of trying to procure comment about bilingual education programs from NT education department staff:

The education department ... are real thugs. They have no hesitation in bullying, threatening staff. The department does not tell the truth, certainly not the truth as we hear it from other people who aren't being told what to say by the department. It's a really forceful, repressive, far from free speech environment.

... 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.

Despite this 'strategic dance', most public servant have only an indirect relationship with journalists, adhering to departmental policy that generally allows only media advisors to speak directly with the news media. The relationship is indirect however; while public servants' practices are intimately involved with news media, very few outside of the communication area of the department or the Minister's office have direct contact with a journalist. 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.

Some journalists did claim that public servants spoke '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.

Reflexive

As media experts, policy professionals were surprisingly reflexive about the role of media in the policymaking process (cf. Tanner, 2012). They acknowledge their own role in a mediated policy environment and are aware of their mediatized policy practices. Study participants working on health and bilingual education policy accepted that the policy issues they worked on were highly significant and politically sensitive, the subject of scrutiny by interest groups and opposing political parties, and therefore the subject of media interest. But they understood the media's Fourth Estate role:

Oh, look, I think media have a huge influence on policy ... media tends to highlight the issue and demand that there be some result, which then I suppose, prompts the government to respond in a faster way, or at least be seen to be respond in a faster way ...

Most participants were critical of practices of 'policy by press release', 'knee-jerk policy' and 'policy on the run'. They argued that the short news cycle encourages bad policy, discourages evidence-based policy, discourages genuine community consultation, and discourages risky or long-term policy decisions. They find these aspects of their jobs frustrating and frequently demoralising, but many have a passion for their area of expertise that enables them

to continue in the hope that they can make a difference:

A policy bureaucracy always wants to be getting it right. I actually think there's a bit of a disease which is people want to move from one policy to another, there's not enough patience to say well, let's get it right, let's get it right with the community and let's think in five and ten years

They were also sensitive to the distinctions between the political and bureaucratic realms. The Minister's office operated on an agenda driven by political and public opinion imperatives, while these processes were less overt within government departments. Those working at the most senior levels of the department oriented themselves towards the Minister and his or her office and therefore towards those political imperatives. They understood implicitly that issues that were the subject of intense news media interest had the potential to reflect poorly on the Minister. As political issues, Indigenous health and education were more likely to require media management. They also saw that news media attention to an issue could, at times, force governments to attend to politically difficult issues:

I guess their policies have produced a lot of sensitivity ... And that's where media actually questioned what the government was doing. So, yeah, I guess government give its reasons why ... yeah, I suppose media is a constant headache for government.

A policy bureaucrat commented that the sustained media campaigning around issues of violence in remote Indigenous communities helped focus government attention on policy issues otherwise ignored:

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.

Conclusion

This examination of policy bureaucrats' local understanding of the relationships between the news media and their health and education policy areas has found that mediatized practices had been incorporated into the very heart of the policymaking process. Contrary to our expectations, Australian public servants demonstrated a strong appreciation of the Fourth Estate role of journalists and media organisations. They were reflexive about their position in a mediated policy environment and acknowledged that their mediatized practices fed the journalists' routines, reacted to Minister's political agendas, and used the media strategically to promote their policies to the public. While they were at times uncomfortable about the outcome of 'managing the optics', they skilfully negotiated the changing technological, political and industrial media landscape as they developed, communicated and implemented government policy.

Our study has found that news media have played a vital role in the development of both health and bilingual education policy as a strategic and frequently tactical device in the discursive battle to define policy problems and solutions. The bilingual education policy example provides evidence of the 'intimate dialogue' between the media field and the policy field that shaped public and policy discussion of how best to deliver education programs to Indigenous children in some remote communities. The outcome of that mediated policy discussion, and the mediatized practices of policy professionals, had real and devastating impacts on the lived experiences of children and families living in remote NT communities. The decision to effectively axe bilingual education from the school curriculum has been widely understood as bad policy (Scrymgour, 2012). Likewise, the mediatized practices of health policymakers were found to have real impacts on the delivery of primary health care to Indigenous Australians. While Indigenous health was shielded

from the media spotlight, funding and commitment for Indigenous health grew. But a growing tension between players in the health policy field, played out against the backdrop of the media's sensationalist reporting of the Indigenous health crisis and child sexual abuse, culminated in the announcement of the dramatic policy shift towards 'new paternalism' and the radical policy announcement of compulsory child sexual health checks as part of the NT Intervention in 2007.

Participants told us that the Australian news media's short-term focus on sensationalised stories of community dysfunction, chronic disease and poor standards of literacy worked against good long-term policy development (Hunter, 2007). In the future we can expect Indigenous health and education policies will at times be driven by knee-jerk political reaction to media campaigns that fit the Intervention template. Most significantly, our study has found that media-related practices are intimately woven into the fabric of policymaking. Media 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 policy bureaucrats working in Indigenous affairs portfolios have incorporated news media routines into their own policymaking practices. The permeation of 'media logics' into the everyday practices of Indigenous policy development has been found to narrow the range of policy options available for improving the health and educational wellbeing of Indigenous people.

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