

INTRODUCTION

“In a complex and changing society where identity emerges out of interaction with others, informed by media representation, ethnic identities are constituted in ways which seriously distort reality.”¹

With the Indigenous Australian populace constituting a mere 3% of the Australian population,² “the closest that many non-Indigenous Australians will come to having contact with an Indigenous person is via their representation in the media.”³ As the macro-sphere institution of the media “plays a central role in the construction of social discourse on what and who is seen to be Indigenous,”⁴ changing media representations of Indigenous Australians are vital in the formation, perpetuation and alteration of micro-sphere perceptions of Indigenous identity and culture. Thus, the hypothesis denotes that *‘Representations of Indigenous Australians in the media have changed over time, leading to a shift in the portrayal and perceptions of Indigenous people and culture.’*

Through a study of contemporary mass media, with a focus on online print media, this study shall ascertain ways in which shifting social values in modernity have made the vocalisation of overtly “stereotypical and tokenistic”⁵ past media portrayals of Indigenous Australians unacceptable, and the resultant display in openly racist public sentiment in the macro world. Rather, with constant technological advancement, increasingly positive portrayals and perspectives have emerged, along with the more subtle ‘new racism’⁶ which consequently causes “such enlightened and progressive reporting to still remain the exception across the spectrum of journalism.”⁷

Secondary research was conducted to provide a thorough understanding of the changing nature of hegemonic representations of Indigenous Australians. Literature such as *Media Dreaming: Representation of Aboriginality in Modern Australian Media* by Kim Bullimore⁸ detailed negative representations of Indigenous affairs in the print media through an in-depth analysis of literary

¹ Goodall, H., Jakubowicz, A., Mitchell, J., Randall, T. and Seneviratna, K. (1990). *Racism, Cultural Pluralism and the Media*, a Report to the Office of Multicultural Affairs. Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney, pp.26.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2013). *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, June 2011. [online] Available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3238.0.55.001> [Accessed 24 Jan. 2016].

³ Bullimore, K. (1999). Media dreaming: Representation of Aboriginality in modern Australian media. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 1(6), pp.73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 85.

⁵ Walter, S. (2012). *Is green the new black? The representation of Indigenous Australians in the news media covering environmental affairs*. pp. 135. [online] Available at: <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/resources/media/thesis-the-representation-of-indigenous-australians-in-news-media-covering-environmental-affairs-sophia-walter.pdf> [Accessed 8 Nov. 2015].

⁶ ‘New Racism’ coined by Martin Barker in: Barker, M. (1982). *The New Racism: Conservatives and the Ideology of the Tribe*. 2nd ed. London: Aletheia Books.

⁷ Wilson II, C., Gutierrez, F. and Chao, L. (2013). *Racism, Sexism and the Media*. 4th ed. Utah: Sage Publishing, pp.135.

⁸ Bullimore, K. (1999). Media dreaming. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 1(6), pp.72-81.

techniques, while the report *Aboriginal People and the Media - Reporting Aboriginal Affairs* by Diana Plater⁹ analysed changing Indigenous representations; particularly, increasingly positive trends in representation and strategies to encourage these trends.

Primary research included a predominantly closed questionnaire,¹⁰ yielding 101 responses, and investigated a myriad of public perceptions towards Indigenous Australians, culture and the media. A content analysis¹¹ of four major Australian newspapers over one week gathered further quantitative and qualitative information concerning the journalistic techniques and rhetoric used to construct contemporary Indigenous portrayals. Finally, an interview¹² with Indigenous Affairs Journalism expert, Dr Michael Meadows, provided detailed qualitative academic perspectives on the impacts of the changing nature of portrayals, thus supplementing any information deficits within the existing literature and increasing the legitimacy and validity of the study.

This PIP will examine ethnicity as a cross-cultural component relating to media portrayals; highlighting the impact of varying representations upon public discourse, and the socialisation of collective Australian values, norms and identity. The project relates to the Society and Culture course as it investigates the continuity and change of media representations and micro, meso and macro level perceptions of Indigenous culture over time, incited by the modernisation of society and technology. It examines how these perspectives are socially constructed by such bodies as the macro-institution of the mass media, thus impacting “structural and ideological power relations”¹³ by disempowering Indigenous people and degrading Indigenous identity through racist stereotypes. It explores the changing role of institutions and agents of globalisation such as technology in altering these social constructions, with forces like the internet and social media contributing to the de-homogenisation of media outlets. Thus, pathways are created for fairer representation of Indigenous people and, resultantly, greater social and cultural literacy and social cohesion in Australian society.

“The media construct a definition of what race is and what it means for society, to help classify out the world in terms of race.”¹⁴

⁹ Plater, D. (1993). *Aboriginal People and the Media - Reporting Aboriginal Affairs*. *Aboriginal Justice Issues* conference proceedings from the 1992 Australian Institute of Criminology Conference, pp. 203-209.

¹⁰ Questionnaire, see Appendix A

¹¹ Content analysis, see Appendix B

¹² Interview, see Appendix C

¹³ Walter, S. (2012). *Is green the new black? The representation of Indigenous Australians in the news media covering environmental affairs*. pp.17.

¹⁴ Hall, 1995; 1996; cited in Due, C. and Riggs, D. (2011). *Representations of Indigenous Australians in the mainstream news media*. Qld: Post Pressed, pp.7.