At 10.20am Friday 19 November 2004, 36 year old Mulrunji Doomadgee was arrested on Palm Island Queensland, and charged with drunkenness and creating a public nuisance. During his arrest and removal to a cell, Mr Doomadgee sustained injuries that caused his death approximately one hour later.

On Monday 22 several hundred residents marched to the police station demanding answers to how he died. Arresting officer Senior-Sergeant Chris Hurley and police liaison officer Lloyd Bengaroo were removed from the island ‘for their own protection’ and police reinforcements flown in from Townsville. Tensions increased over the next two days with minor damage to police property, threats and unanswered questions.

A coroner’s report confirmed that Mr Doomadgee died as a result of internal bleeding caused by a ruptured liver and ruptured portal vein connecting the liver to the spleen. He also suffered four broken ribs. The report stated: ‘the pathologist indicated that there was no evidence that [these injuries] had resulted from direct use of force. Rather the forensic pathologist is of the opinion that they are consistent with the deceased and the policeman with whom he was known to have been struggling, falling on a hard surface, such as the steps outside the watchhouse’ (Courier-Mail 27 November 2004, 1).

Chillingly, such a tragic event could have passed relatively unnoticed as did the death in police custody of another Aboriginal man in the Normanton hospital the day after Mr Doomadgee’s death (Ridgeway 2004). The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnston 1991) investigated 99 deaths up to 1990. In the fourteen years between 1990 and 2003 a further 216 Indigenous deaths in custody occurred, 19% of a total of 1158 (AIC 2004). Deaths in custody, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, have become mundane, scarcely newsworthy at all.

What made events on Palm Island a national and international news story was the violent reactions of some of the residents to the autopsy findings. The coroner’s report provided to the Doomadgee family on Thursday 23 November was read to a community meeting convened the next day by Palm Island Aboriginal Council (PIAC) Chair and Mayor Erykah Kyle. Later that Friday some 300 people surrounded the courthouse setting it and police buildings alight. Police declared a State of Emergency under the Public Safety Preservation Act, although according to the PIAC this declaration was improperly administered (PIAC media release 27/11/04). Graphic video footage showed men, women and children, some armed with shovels, wood and Molotov cocktails milling around burning cars and buildings. There was a ‘riot’ going on!

The front-page coverage was sensational, the television footage remarkable. Fundamental to almost all the initial coverage were reports by the police of threats to their lives. Typical was the Sunday Mail’s front-page photo of the burnt out courthouse with the banner headline ‘They were saying they would kill us’ (28 November 2004). Inside stories included Headers of ‘Island Powderkeg’ and ‘How rioters set trap for police’. The central theme of these first reports was the fear and terror felt by police. Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson declared that: ‘Officers were in the station when it was set alight and grave fears were held by those officers, justifiable fears, for their safety. We can’t have a situation where there are riots and mob rule, where people burn down police stations and buildings.’ (Sunday Mail 28 November 2004, 5).

The response was heavy-handed, 80 police were flown in, storming into homes, brandishing guns on the elderly and children, and violently arresting suspects.

It is incredible to see tactical response police in full gear – riot shields, balaclavas and helmets with face-masks, Glock pistols at the hip and a shotgun or semi-
Media representation of Aboriginality

While such an event is indeed newsworthy, the reportage shows many of the distortions and limitations identified in media representation of racial minorities in Australia and overseas (Jakubowicz et al 1994; Sercombe 1995; Trigger 1995; Ferguson 1998; Gabriel 1998; Mickler 1998; Meadows 2001; Meadows and Ewart 2001; ADB 2003; Manning 2004; Meadows 2004).

It is frequently found that racial and ethnic minorities are under-represented in the media, partly because such groups are not employed as media workers (Jakubowicz et al 1994, 143-158). In the case of Indigenous Australians, the problem is not so much under-representation as representation within pathologised and racist frameworks. There are gaps, for example, in drama and comedy, but Aborigines are over-represented in news and current affairs. As Hartley and McKee found:

Aboriginality is over-represented in the Australian news media in factual stories. While Indigenous fictional characters portrayed in popular culture are quite rare, Aboriginality turns out to be a massive presence in Australian journalism. … Indigeneity has become central for Australia’s status as a nation. It remains as Australia’s ‘running story’, a story that just keeps on going. It is the point around which political debates – debates about social justice, about fairness, and the adequacy of social structures – take place in Australia (2000, 209).

Typically, it is the manner of representations of Aboriginality that is the problem, with most images being produced and authenticated by non-indigenous people (Hartley and McKee 2000; Meadows and Ewart 2001; Ewart 2002). While indigenous people may be arrested, photographed, filmed, and even shot, during events that are managed by police and the media, they are seldom interviewed and even more rarely allowed to interpret, analyse or report their meanings or causes (Bullimore 1999; Selby 1999). As Meadows and Ewart (2001, 127) concluded, ‘the omission of Indigenous voices and perspectives from journalistic accounts offers more powerful support for dominant ideas and assumptions than examples of overt racism’.

Stereotypic representations include stories of criminality, drunkenness, poor health, welfare dependency, family violence, alongside sporting prowess and artistic ability. Indigenous leaders are frequently represented as militant radicals, or accused of fraud, mismanagement or sexual assault. Crucial to the coverage of Palm Island, Aboriginal people are accused of uncontrolled, mindless violence, and in particular riot. For example, a survey of The Sydney Morning Herald from January 1987 to April 1990, found that 40% of the Australian-based usage of the word ‘riot’ referred to Aboriginal people (Johnston 1991, volume 2, 186; see also Goodall 1993).

Racial identification remains routine in much media coverage of criminality despite the Journalist’s Union guidelines and Press Council Principles (ADB 2003; HREOC 2004). This is especially the case with regional newspapers (Ewart 1997). In 1991 a Perth journalist explained to Royal Commissioner Elliott Johnston:

Racial stereotyping and racism in the media is institutional, not individual. That is, it results from news values, editorial policies, from routines of news gathering that are not in themselves racist or consciously prejudicial. It results from the fact that most news stories are already written before an individual journalist is assigned to them, even before the event takes place. A story featuring Aboriginals is simply more likely to be covered, or more likely to survive sub-editorial revision or spiking, if it fits existing definitions of the situation (Johnston 1991, volume 2, 185-6).

It is this entrenched and taken-for-granted nature of racial stereotyping that makes the devising and implementing of strategies to combat media racism so important and so difficult (Stockwell and Scott 2000).

Positive images

One strategy to address harmful media representations of Indigenous people has been to source positive stories of success, achievement and promotion of ‘national goals’. However, as Marcia Langton reminds us, simply replacing negative stereotypes with positive and uplifting images ‘does not challenge racism’ (1993, 41). The meanings available in media (especially visual) images are multiple, contradictory and unstable. A single image can invoke sympathy, hostility, repulsion, fear, boredom, pornographic or tourist interest, and other emotions and thoughts. This ambiguity makes the enforcement of codes of practice very difficult.

In addition, as Stephen Mickler’s excellent analysis of the media’s role in disseminating a discourse of Aboriginal privilege or ‘special treatment’ reminds us: [B]ad news can have positive effects beyond its seemingly immediate stigmatisation of those involved. We cannot forget that the bad news of each death in custody added to the pressure for action. Each representation of ‘Aboriginal riots’, demonstrations, civil disturbances, even with the often prejudicial and sensational treatments given them, heightened the sense of crisis and increased the public visibility of the social crisis (1998, 193-194).

The classic example of this positive impact was the establishment of the 1987-1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC). On 23 February 2005 Palm Island residents presented a petition to Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Vanstone calling for a similar Royal Commission into Mr Doomadgee’s death and subsequent events.
Obstacles to self-representation

Media visibility and attention remains highly problematic in terms of the capacity of ordinary people to extract themselves from prevailing discourses and frameworks, and to be heard on their own terms. This disempowering effect of news values and journalistic practices is stronger when the story is framed in terms of fierce or irreconcilable conflict as in the Redfern or Palm Island ‘riots’. The prevailing agenda continues to be set by the powerful and well-resourced media units of the state government, the police department and the police union (Hall et al 1978; Hartley and McKee 2000; HREOC 2004). Indigenous people can and do respond (Dreher 2003), making sustained attempts to provide essential information, context and history omitted from most mainstream accounts (see below). However, their ability to represent themselves fully and accurately is always inhibited by the assumptions and priorities of journalists, editors and proprietors.

Specific examples include the failure of almost all media to report in detail the many media releases, open letters and eyewitness accounts of the events leading up to the ‘riot’ and subsequent police actions. Accusations of police brutality during the search and arrest of 19 suspects including assaults on women and children and intimidation with weapons and threats went largely unreported. Where such complaints were covered, they were countered by eloquent descriptions of police fears (see above) and commendations of the arresting officer (Courier-Mail 27 November 2004, 5).

Attempts by the PIAC to directly negotiate with Premier Peter Beattie and Police Commissioner Atkinson were overtaken by a media driven necessity to act ‘tough’ in the face of ‘anarchy and violence’. The police union called for rioters to be charged with attempted murder even though as indicated by Palm Island Mayor Erykah Kyle:

No one was hurt yesterday, if our people had murder on their mind then someone would have been hurt because they are very angry about all this. But not one single person was hurt, our people have expressed their feelings about the unnecessary death in custody of one of our favourite sons, and it’s time we were given the opportunity to work through these issues, with all our services restored and resolve them once and for all.’ (PIAC Media Release 27 November 2004).

Since then the issues that caused the underlying sense of frustration and anger expressed in reactions to Mr Doomadgee’s death, even the actual causes of that death, have been buried in a ‘tsunami’ of media sensation, much of it relating to the conduct of key non-indigenous political figures.

Central to this has been the apparent mismanagement and marginalisation of the Queensland ATSI Policy Minister, Liddy Clark. She was not part of the Cabinet delegation that flew to Palm Island to present Premier Beattie’s five point plan (ABC Premium News 28 November 2004, 1; Townsville Bulletin 29 November, 3). She became embroiled in controversy over allegations she had paid for airfares for Brad Foster and ‘notorious’ activist Murrandoo Yanner (Weekend Australian 18 December 2004, 1; Australian 22 December, 6; Courier-Mail 23 December, 20). Mr Yanner had been widely reported as calling for police deaths as ‘payback’ for the death of his cousin Mr Doomadgee unless those arrested for rioting were released:

If we’re not going to get it through white law, we will take it through our own means, through Aboriginal law, which has payback, when someone’s killed, someone must be killed in return. If this policeman isn’t punished, jailed or charged with murder, under the law, if you can’t get one policeman, you get another (Townsville Bulletin 1 December 2004, 1).

The Queensland Opposition has referred the airfares matter to the Crime and Mismanagement Commission (the same body charged with investigating Mr Doomadgee’s death) and has consistently demanded the minister be stood down. Her alleged ‘crime’ is to have offered to fund two Indigenous people whose comments have deeply offended police and politicians. Allegations of a suspicious death in custody, of criminal assaults on unarmed and innocent people, and of an institutionalised regime of over-policing in direct contradiction to the recommendations of the RCIADIC are sidelined. The temptation to use incendiary language to ensure being reported is ignored. Other indigenous opinion is ignored. Efforts to set up a respectful dialogue are ignored.

The end result is the Opposition and the media daring the Premier to visit Palm Island and open a much-needed Youth Centre that is to be run by the police, contrary to the wishes of the Council and many residents. Inevitably Mr Beattie attended, relations between the Council and the government were further strained to the extent that the Premier threatened to abolish the PIAC and referred to the CMC allegations that he had attempted to bribe the Council to participate in the Centre opening (Courier Mail 20 -25 February 2004). The Council meanwhile has petitioned the Coalition Federal minister to call a Royal Commission, adding further to the partisan polarisation that threatens to destroy any chance of meaningful dialogue on the issues. The political gamesmanship appears to have diverted attention away from the issues being raised by those most directly affected by the conflict and most desperate for meaningful engagement.

Alternative media

Media coverage in the 21st century includes a myriad of independent web-based postings, lists, blogs and other alternative media. Web searches provide hundreds of
versions of events that differ radically in terms of news values, language, presumed audiences, sources and motivations. While this proliferation is a mixed blessing with hundreds of race-hate sites and racist video games (HREOC, 2003), Indigenous communities and anti-racist support groups use the net to critique mainstream media and government accounts. A Google search for Mr Doomadgee provides hundreds of hits from activist sites, most of which rely on Indigenous sources, in particular Mr Brad Foster, CEO of the Carpentaria Land Council appointed as spokesperson by the family and the Palm Island Council. Similar sites record the efforts by the families of many Indigenous people who have previously died in custody for comprehensive inquiries and apologies.

Alongside electronic media, Indigenous people have established Indigenous print, radio and television media as an alternative to mass media often seen as hostile or uninterested (Meadows and Molnar 2002). Important examples include for print the Murri Views, Koori Mail and local stations, and Imparja TV. These community outlets cover stories usually ignored by mainstream media and allow better access for Indigenous viewpoints. The recently abolished Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission had a significant media affairs unit as have many of the larger indigenous community organizations.

The HREOC Race Discrimination and ATSI Social Justice Commissioners’ offices have also played a critical role in disseminating accurate information and challenging racist and assimilationist positions of governments and other stakeholders. However, the reach of these indigenous media (even allowing for their dissemination through reconciliation supporter lists) remains restricted, vastly outweighed by the mainstream media especially television, talkback and tabloids.

Representations can kill

Racial discourses have material effects. Media representations can kill people, or at least contribute to their deaths. Some of those whose deaths were investigated by the RCIADIC were placed in custody because they were presumed to be drunk when in fact they were in medical crisis. Others died as the result of violent confrontations between police or custodial officers and indigenous prisoners.

Media reports typically inflame such tragic situations due to unexamined frameworks that routinely sensationalise indigenous affairs as well as imbalances in resources and media access. Such representations prevent meaningful understanding through omissions and distortions and make serious and thoughtful responses by the parties more difficult. Indigenous voices often have to exploit existing negative imagery to be heard, with ambiguous results. The need for responsible and well-informed journalism has never been higher.

References

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Endnotes

1 Family of the deceased have asked that his first name not be used and he be referred to by his ‘bush’ name, Mulrunji. Most of the media coverage has not observed this request.

2 Individual journalists frequently seek to achieve informed and balanced reportage despite editorial and commercial pressures and the heavy influence of institutional and discursive racism. In the Palm Island case, the efforts of The Australian’s Tony Koch in particular should be recognised.

3 Copies of these documents are available from independent journalist Christine Howes, email to chowes@hotkey.net.au

4 In 1996 Yanner was by far the most reported indigenous person in Australian media, even outstripping Cathy Freeman, see Hartley and McKee (2000, 222).

5 Key recommendations included decriminalisation of drunkenness, diversionary programs to sobering-up facilities, warrants and cautions rather than arrest, imprisonment as a last resort, and enhanced duty of care including strict attention to medical needs and close surveillance of persons in custody especially if intoxicated. Autopsy reports indicate Mr Doomadgee had a blood alcohol level of 0.29% as well as his extensive, rapidly fatal, injuries. What many of the media reports fail to recognise is that regardless of the precise circumstances leading to Mr Doomadgee’s death, he should not have been arrested for singing while drunk, he should have been safety removed when detained, he should have been closely monitored, and he should have received medical attention for his injuries.

6 With respect to their families and friends, the cases of John Pat, David Gundy, Eddie Murray, Mark Quayle, and Robbie Walker in the 1980s and last year in Redfern, T. J. Hickey, among others have been widely covered.


Bio

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