

# 'Weighing in': *The Australian's* reporting of child sexual abuse in Northern Territory Indigenous communities

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## Abstract

*This paper reports on a comparative frame analysis of the 2007 Little Children are Sacred (LCAS) report into child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory (NT), its representation in The Australian newspaper, and the subsequent announcement of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER). Research findings are set against the backdrop of Australia's rapidly changing news media landscape and the role of Rupert Murdoch's News Limited's flagship newspaper, The Australian, in Indigenous affairs reporting and policy. The news framing approach analysed the main themes of the LCAS and compared this to The Australian's use of prominent and recurring frames to explore the meaning and consequences of the report. The research found that there was a disproportionate focus on factors of 'Individual Responsibility', such as alcoholism, substance abuse and pornography, and the deliberate omission of 'Policy Failure' and 'Mutual Obligations' influences. This article contends that not only did the framing of the LCAS in The Australian deploy predictable and enduring frames for the reporting of Indigenous people and issues, but that The Australian used the LCAS to actively campaign for policy intervention. Through a range of editorial devices, The Australian went beyond its editorial charter to actively campaign in support of the NTER. This paper provides evidence of The Australian's agenda-setting style of journalism and the intensity of the relationship between news media reporting and Indigenous affairs policymaking in Australia.*

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## Introduction

The Inquiry believes that the general effect of this misrepresentation... has been that the voices of Aboriginal men and women have been negated by powerful media and political forces. This has hampered the important development of systems, structures and methods that have a genuine chance of reducing violence and child sexual abuse. (Anderson and Wild, 2007)

On 8 August 2006, the NT Government of Australia launched a landmark inquiry into allegations of the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children in rural Indigenous communities. The inquiry was aimed at 'assisting the Government to successfully tackle the most serious issue of Aboriginal child abuse' (Anderson and Wild, 2007). Travelling across the NT, the inquiry gathered feedback from 260 meetings with individuals, agencies and organisations, talked with 45 local communities and received over 65 written submissions (Anderson and Wild, 2007). This information provided the basis for the NT Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: Little children are Sacred* report (LCAS). The LCAS was made available to the public on 15 June, 2007.

On 21 June, six days after the release of the LCAS, the prime minister of Australia, John Howard, employed constitutional authority for the federal government to override the direction of the NT Government. Acting on the advice of Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, Howard declared the situation in the NT a 'national emergency' (Howard and Brough, 2007) and the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was passed into legislation on 16 August, 2007. Under the NTER, the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) of Australia was suspended so that racially-exclusive regulations could be implemented in Indigenous communities (Cox, 2008). Of the 97 recommendations made in the LCAS report, only two were adopted. Five years later, the NTER remains in force, with contested evidence of its impact on the lives of the children in remote NT Indigenous communities (FaCSIA, 2011; Shaw and d'Abbs, 2011; Altman, 2011).

This paper argues that the release of the LCAS and the subsequent announcement of the NTER is a key moment in recent Australian Indigenous policymaking, and that Australia's news media played an important role in framing the report for audiences and policymakers. The research was conducted for The Australian News Media and Indigenous Policymaking 1988–2008 project, examining the relationships between news reporting and policymaking in Indigenous affairs. The project team has conducted interviews with journalists, bureaucrats and Indigenous policy advocates about their media practices and local understandings of the mediated nature of Indigenous policymaking. We have analysed policy documents in the areas of health, bi-lingual education and Indigenous broadcasting and, drawing on a database of over 4,000 media reports, we have conducted analyses of news media reporting on these issues. The research is providing valuable data to explore the way journalism and policymaking practices have intersected over a twenty-year period.

Our paper argues that is at particular policy moments, such as the release of the LCAS, that journalism can have its most potent impacts on the policymaking process. The nature of news media reporting is explored through a comparative frame analysis of the main themes in the LCAS and its reporting in *The Australian* newspaper (Reid, 2010). As Australia's only national daily broadsheet newspaper and the flagship of Rupert Murdoch's News Limited stable, *The Australian* has considerable political influence and is considered the opinion-leading newspaper for Australia's political elite (Manne, 2011; McKnight, 2012; Conley and Lamble, 2007). Over the past two decades, the newspaper has made Indigenous affairs one of its central campaigning themes, holding governments to account on issues such as land rights and remote Indigenous disadvantage (Rothwell, 2011; Manne, 2011; McCallum, 2010). McCallum's (2007) study concerning the depiction of Indigenous violence in Australian media found that over a six-year period, *The Australian* produced more than three times the amount of relevant Indigenous reporting than any other Australian newspaper. It is for these reasons that *The Australian* can be considered not only a primary agenda-setter for political decision-makers but the leading source of print media information concerning Indigenous affairs for the wider Australian public, a reputation that arguably adds to the ethical responsibility of the newspaper when reporting Indigenous issues. This paper explores the way in which *The Australian* exercised that responsibility over a two-week period following the release of the Little Children are Sacred report in 2007.

## **News framing and reporting of Australian Indigenous affairs**

Very few non-Indigenous Australians have regular contact with Indigenous people, relying instead on news and fictional media portrayals to inform their construction of what it means to

be 'Aboriginal' (Langton, 1993; Bullimore, 1999; Conley and Lambie, 2007). As a consequence, information conveyed by the media about Indigenous people and their communities – such as that concerning alcoholism, substance abuse and pornography – becomes a key element in the perception of Indigenous people in both public understanding and policymaking practice (McCallum, 2010). This correlation highlights the necessity of adherence to strict ethical guidelines by journalists in the reporting of Indigenous affairs.

The Australian print media industry is regulated under two primary tiers; under Commonwealth legislation and in accountability systems that operate independently from media organisations (MEAA, 2002). Despite legalities designed to protect the interests of minority groups, a substantial volume of research in the 1980s and 1990s identified that institutional if not overt racism operated in the media reporting of Indigenous issues (Jakubowicz et al., 1992; Meadows, 2001; APC, 2006). Whilst the media may have an obligation to 'present all people in a fair and honest light, devoid of prejudice' (HREOC, 1996), the legal protections attributed to individuals are few, and retribution for non-compliance by publications infrequent. The Australian print media industry is thus widely understood as self-regulatory, whereby independent bodies assume responsibility for the conduct of journalists and publications through a range of ethical codes of practice (MEAA, 2002; Bacon, 2005). In addition, specific guidelines, such as The Australian Press Council's (2001) 'Reporting Race', have been developed to advise the print media on reporting matters related to race, nationality and ethnicity.

Beyond its obligations for fair and accurate reporting and protocols for the reporting of socially sensitive issues, any Australian newspaper has the right to editorial opinion. The ethical guidelines of The Australian Press Council, for example, state that, 'a newspaper which claims to provide a general news service has full freedom of editorial comment' (APC, 2006). However, on the topic of political bias, the APC contends that whilst 'a newspaper has the right to take any side on an issue... it has a public duty to provide fair news reports of matters of public controversy... [and] does not have the right to resort to distortion or dishonesty to advocate a cause' (APC, 2006). In effect, APC principles do not exclude a newspaper from being partisan, but reject the distortion of factual evidence to present a 'false' picture under the guise of objectivity (Simmons, 2006). A newspaper such as *The Australian* is therefore ethically within its rights to state its opinion on a particular issue, so long as it is clear that it is opinion being offered, rather than fact (Conley and Lambie, 2007). It has been argued that there is a tendency in *The Australian*: 'For issues to be conveyed in either positive or negative light by the broadsheet... [through] depth of coverage, selective sourcing, imagery... sometimes subtle, sometimes remarkably overt' (Conley and Lambie, 2007; see also Manne, 2011; McKnight, 2012).

Indigenous Australians have long held concerns over the ways in which they are reported upon in the media (Langton, 1993; Dodson, 1994). Yu (2001) argued that it is negative, stereotypical framing of Indigenous people that are dominant in news discourse, focusing on conflict, crisis and sensationalism:

Generally, there is not much media coverage on Indigenous people and their affairs in Australia's mainstream media. When there is, it is usually negative, stereotypical images... [with] Indigenous peoples more likely to be portrayed as criminals, welfare dependents, drug users, lazy, helpless and hopeless (Yu, 2001).

The portrayal of an Indigenous person as the racialised 'other', someone whom the non-Indigenous person may know only through the media, makes Indigenous individuals and

communities an easy target for stereotyping (MacArthur, 2007). Langton (1993) argues that the most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors (MacArthur, 2007). Similarly, Hollinsworth (1998) contends that racialised discourse '[n]aturalises itself so that it appears inevitable rather than socially constructed and historically specific. In other words, social constructions become solid facts'. Simmons (2006) identifies common ways in which the media can inject bias on the guise of objectivity, including imbalanced reporting, selective omission, lack of context, distortion of facts, and dualism, where a speaker from one side of the conflict merely ratifies the opposing viewpoint (Simmons, 2006). Essentially, it is '[t]he withholding of information... and a failure to contextualise information in terms of wider social, political and cultural environments that can create stereotypical, and primarily negative views of minority groups in the media' (Scott, 2006).

This paper's analysis of *The Australian's* framing of the LCAS supports previous research and literature on news framing. According to the framing paradigm, discourse on an issue can be guided by the routine use of particular news frames, which become recognisable and defining characteristics of issue discussion (Reese, 2001; Blood et al 2008). Reese's (2001) definition of news frames proposes that they are 'socially shared and persistent over time and work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world' (Reese, 2001). Drawing on the work of Blood et al (2008; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989), which recognises the frame as the central organising idea of an issue, this paper analyses how news frames of the LCAS appear and operate with varying degrees of prominence and availability (van Gorp, 2007). The research presented in this paper is grounded in the concept of strategic, enduring frames. Coined by Reese (2001), strategic frames organise not just one news story, but incite audiences to evoke cultural understandings that go beyond the story or event itself. Strategic frames are 'routinely used by editors and journalists in active transposition from one event to news events in order to make sense out of the current event' (Blood et al, 2008, p. 4). For minority cultures, strategic frames have the potential to influence an audience's perception of that culture. Enduring frames '[e]voke in journalists, editors and audiences consistent cultural meanings despite changed circumstances, events and immediate conditions' (Blood et al, 2008).

News framing research argues that the availability of alternative frames challenges the notion of journalistic 'bias'. Terkildsen et al (1998) argues that for every frame, there is a potential counter, or competing frame, and that contemporary journalism's desire to seek balance, fairness or impartiality means that news stories are structured to include opposing or counter-views (Terkildsen et al, 1998). Building on the work of Jakubowicz et al (1994), Meadows (2001) Brough (1999) and McCallum (2007; 2011) have identified the following enduring and competing frames of Indigenous Australians in the Australian media: a source of risk, crisis and conflict; authentic, available for cultural appropriation and a source of pride for all Australians; privileged compared with 'mainstream' Australians; individual responsibility and failure; Australia's shame; victims of policy failure; non-Indigenous Australians as simultaneously racist and tolerant.

The research conclusions outlined in this paper are based on the evaluation of framing by 'looking at the end product – the content produced by journalists – and examining how adequately it reflects and responds to sources, events and audiences beyond the media itself' (Bacon, 2005). In this way, news framing research can shed light on journalistic practice.

## Methodology – Comparative news framing

We argue that analysis of *The Australian's* reporting is necessary to better understand the news practices, agenda-setting functions and reporting of Indigenous issues in the newspaper.

Through a close reading of the dominant, enduring and omitted frames at play in *The Australian's* reporting of the LCAS, we theorise the newspaper's role in establishing the discursive conditions in which the NTER was announced. This paper reports on the findings of a comparative framing analysis of the LCAS and its representation in *The Australian* (Reid, 2010). Findings are based on content and framing analysis of both the LCAS and news articles relating to child sexual abuse in *The Australian* newspaper in the fortnight following the release of the report.

The LCAS was analysed to identify the major themes concerning the causation of child sexual abuse in the NT. The paper then examines *The Australian's* reporting of the LCAS compared to the themes identified in the report. All articles in *The Australian* mentioning either the LCAS as its primary focus or as background information, contextualising the NTER, were selected for analysis. The sample included articles ranging from hard news, opinion pieces, editorials, analysis, comment and feature stories. Between 16 and 30 June 2007, a total of 92 newspaper articles concerning the LCAS were published in *The Australian*. Newspaper items were coded for date, length, news genre, primary spokesperson, Indigenous spokesperson and key areas of causation for child sexual abuse identified by the reporter or commentator. Hard news pieces were the most frequently appearing genre, accounting for over two-thirds of all articles (70%). This was followed by editorial and opinion pieces (20%), and feature, analysis and comment stories (10%). The relative prominence of editorial and opinion pieces throughout the data sample indicates that *The Australian* considered the LCAS highly newsworthy. Qualitative frame analysis was conducted to identify the dominant frames available to news audiences across the range of articles. *The Australian's* coverage was also analysed to identify the practices used by its editors to present the news, invited comment and editorial opinion about this significant news and policy event. This comparative data provides the basis for the following analysis.

## Major themes in the *Little Children are Sacred* report

The LCAS was commissioned following the airing of allegations of child sexual abuse on The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Lateline program in 2006 (ABC, 2006; Graham, 2012). The purpose of the inquiry was not simply to document the occurrence of sexual abuse in the NT, but to:

examine the extent, nature and factors contributing to the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children... [and] consider how the Government can help support communities to effectively tackle child sexual abuse (Anderson and Wild, 2007).

Accordingly, the report examined the nature of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities, and the factors that could contribute to its prevalence. Based on this information, the LCAS made a number of recommendations to the Chief Minister of the NT, addressing what the Inquirers considered to be contributing influences in the high incidence of child maltreatment in rural communities. The most significant findings outlined in the report were that:

Child sex abuse is serious, widespread and often unreported. Most Aboriginal people are willing and committed to solving this problem and helping their children. Aboriginal people are not the only perpetrators and victims of sexual

abuse... [and] much of the violence and sexual abuse is a reflection on the past, current and continuing problems which have developed over many decades (Anderson and Wild, 2007).

Anderson and Wild identified a number of common causal themes in the process of consultation with Indigenous communities and NT health workers. These themes were then condensed into twelve key areas to which recommendations were addressed: 'Alcoholism, Education, Poverty, Housing, Health, Substance Abuse, Gambling, Pornography, Unemployment, Responses to Government Agencies, Law and Justice and Rehabilitation' (Anderson and Wild, 2007). Thematic analysis of the report identified that these twelve key areas could be categorised according to three sub-themes: 'Individual responsibility', 'Failed social policy' and 'Mutual obligations'.

<b>Individual Responsibility</b>	<b>Failed Social Policy</b>	<b>Mutual Obligations</b>
Alcoholism	Education	Responses to Government Agencies
Substance Abuse	Housing	Law and Justice
Gambling	Health	Rehabilitation
Pornography	Poverty	
Unemployment		

**Figure 1:** Categorisation of 'Areas of Causation' in the LCAS report

Whilst the report presented a holistic approach to tackling the underlying causes of the child sexual abuse, it did not shy away from the effects of alcoholism, gambling and pornography as factors contributing to the prevalence of neglect, grouped by Reid (2010) as relating to 'individual responsibility'. The report documented in graphic detail acts of abuse and the impacts of those acts on children, but did not perceive child abuse as solely a matter of individual behaviour. Rather, it was framed as a result of past and present social policies, racism and disadvantage. The LCAS identified a range of factors that Reid (2010) grouped under the theme of 'failed social policy', including the failure of successive governments to provide basic infrastructure, such as housing, to remote communities and the devastating consequences of inadequate health care. The LCAS concluded that the cumulative effects of these factors in rural and remote Indigenous communities were inexorably linked to family violence and sexual abuse (Anderson and Wild, 2007). A third theme in the report's findings was the 'mutual obligations' of both governments and Indigenous communities alike to respond to issues in remote communities, such as the provision of and attending rehabilitation programs. The LCAS highlighted that 'it will be impossible to set communities on a strong path to recovery without dealing with basic services and social evils' (Anderson and Wild, 2007). Anderson and Wild concluded that 'child sexual abuse is therefore seen as arising from multiple causes, many of which relate to cultural disintegration, unresolved family trauma and racial abuse' (Anderson and Wild, 2007). They presented 97 recommendations, spanning spheres of individual, community and Government responsibilities.

## **The framing of the LCAS in *The Australian***

The release of the LCAS on 15 June 2007 generated intense national media coverage. Over the following fortnight, the LCAS and subsequent government action was a major news story for *The Australian*, which published 92 articles spanning editorial, feature, news and opinion pieces. Reporting in first week of the study timeframe focused on the LCAS as a newsworthy topic in its

own right. Week two of the study period followed John Howard's announcement of the NTER on 22 June 2007, as focus shifted from the LCAS as the primary topic to a tool to contextualise and justify the government's actions. On 28 June, the first troops were deployed to the NT, and embedded journalists began reporting from Indigenous communities. This resulted in an increase in reporting that remained fairly constant until the end of the sampling period.

From the outset, *The Australian* rejected the holistic approach of the LCAS and, through its commentary and editorial, framed the issue of child sexual abuse as one of 'individual responsibility'. In *The Weekend Australian* of 16-17 June, the day following the report's release, *The Australian* outlined its editorial position on the LCAS. The newspaper contained a commentary piece, 'Report not for the faint hearted', by Nicolas Rothwell (2007a), and an editorial, 'Children are Sacred' (*The Weekend Australian*, 2007). Unlike the 'neutral' stance adopted by journalists in hard news stories, editorial and opinion pieces often outline the position of a newspaper on particular issues (APC, 2006). Rothwell appropriated the views of Cape York Indigenous leader Noel Pearson:

The agenda of personal responsibility sketched out by Noel Pearson of Cape York, and editorially supported by this newspaper, makes scant appearance in this document, which tends to view Aboriginal people as victims of a wide, all-encompassing social trap (Rothwell, 2007a)

Similarly, 'Children are Sacred' argued that the report failed to hold individual men accountable for their behaviour. The publication of these two articles under comment and opinion genres allowed *The Australian* to articulate its editorial position on the issue: personal responsibility in the issue of child sexual abuse cannot be overlooked, and the publication of the LCAS should lead to immediate and consequential action. However, this viewpoint was evident in not only in opinion and editorial pieces, but also in the framing of hard news stories, through the inclusion and omission of certain information, and the guise of dualism (Simmons, 2006).

The Inquirers of the LCAS identified twelve key areas that were problematic to the high instance of child sexual abuse in rural Indigenous communities in the NT, towards which their recommendations were directed. In contrast to the LCAS report, the causes of child sexual abuse in *The Australian* fell overwhelmingly into the area of alcohol abuse, drug abuse and pornography. Of the five key areas categorised as 'Individual Responsibility', pornography, alcohol and substance abuse became the most prominent reference in *The Australian's* reporting. The newspaper almost exclusively framed child sexual abuse as an issue of 'Individual Responsibility' compared to 'Failed Social Policy' and 'Mutual Obligations' factors.

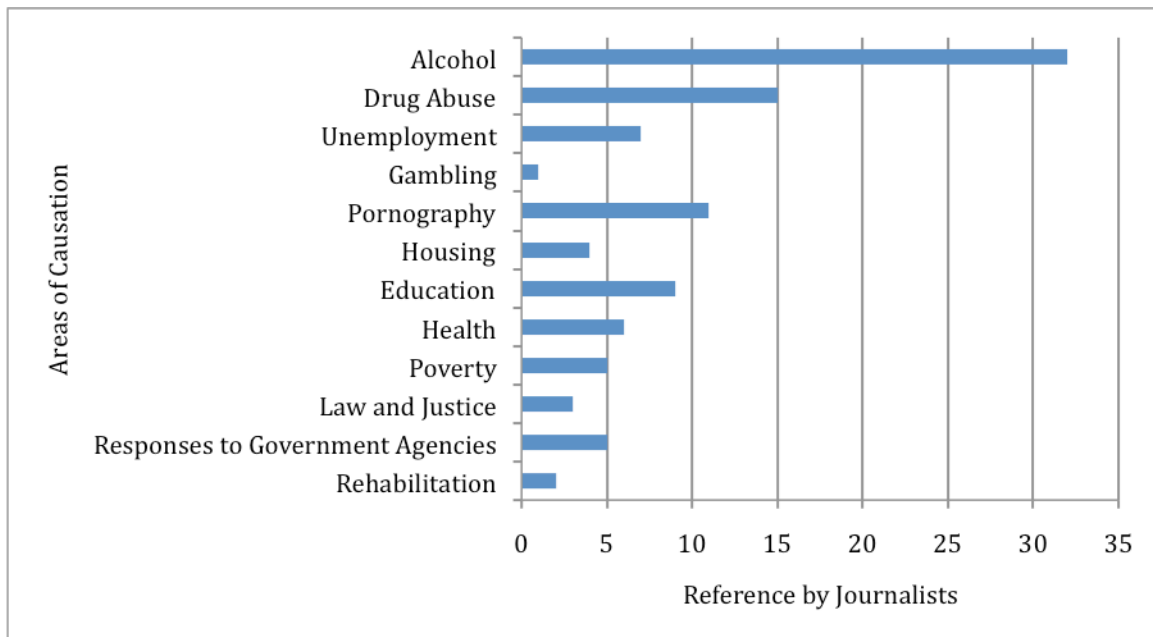


Figure 2: References to key areas of causation, 16–30 June 2007, expressed as a percentage of total areas referenced (128)

On 16-17 June 2007, the news article, ‘Nation’s child abuse shame: Grog-fuelled sex attacks in black communities’, introduced the LCAS as such:

Sexual abuse of Aboriginal children is widespread across the Northern Territory, fuelled by ‘rivers of grog’... A landmark report handed down in Darwin yesterday describes a world where degrading pornography circulates freely, and alcohol and marijuana are chronically abused; where sexualised behavior among young children is widely seen; where many people remain unsure about the age of consent (Rothwell, 2007b).

The reporting of the LCAS was continued throughout *The Weekend Australian*. ‘Aboriginal abuse should shock all’, a news piece written by Stuart Rintoul and Kevin Meade, gauged the reactions of Indigenous ‘spokespeople’ and Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough:

Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough said the report was ‘A damning indictment into the failure to protect children. The findings of the report are nothing short of shocking and appalling. That there are sex trades and juvenile prostitution occurring is something that should sicken all Australians’ (Rintoul and Meade, 2007).

The reporting of the LCAS on 16–17 June 2007 presented two competing frames of child sexual abuse: in terms of ‘Individual Responsibility’, as indicated in ‘Nation’s child abuse shame: grog-fuelled sex attacks in black communities’, with comment from Indigenous ‘spokespeople’, and in terms of ‘Failed Social Policy’, as indicated in excerpts from the LCAS. For example, ‘Nation’s child abuse shame’ also included a direct excerpt from the report:

‘Government programs to help Aboriginal people break the cycle of poverty and violence need to work better’, the report says. ‘There is not enough co-ordination and communication between Government departments and agencies and this is



causing a breakdown in services and poor crisis intervention. Improvement in health and social services are desperately needed' (Rothwell, 2007b).

This is consistent with Terkildsen's et al (1998) argument that for every frame, there is a potential counter, or competing frame, and that contemporary journalism's desire to seek balance, fairness or impartiality means that news stories are structured to include opposing views (Terkildsen et al, 1998). Beyond the first weekend of reporting, however, 'Individual Responsibility' became the dominant frame while the 'Failed Social Policy' and 'Mutual Obligations' frames were largely omitted.

The announcement of the NTER marked a change in the representation of the LCAS in The Australian. As political responses began to emerge, focus shifted from the report to those in positions of power and influence. 'Crusade to save Aboriginal kids: Howard declares "national emergency" to end abuse' (Karvelas, 2007), was published on 22 June 2007, on the front page of *The Australian*. The article outlined Prime Minister Howard's intentions for Federal Government intervention in the NT, including linking family welfare payments to school attendance, banning alcohol in certain regions, and deploying extra police:

John Howard will seize control of Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory, banning alcohol and pornography and using the military to attack the 'national emergency' of alcohol-fuelled sexual abuse of children (Karvelas, 2007).

On the same day, *The Australian* launched 'Howard's Blueprint' as a special section of the newspaper. This focused section sought to remind readers of the newspaper's position as a leading source of Indigenous current affairs, and its journalists' record in reporting Indigenous affairs. This is important in the consideration of the quality of journalism produced by *The Australian*, as it is its perceived role, held by consumers and the newspaper alike, which lends weight to its obligation to present minority groups in a fair and balanced light (Scott, 2006).

While the LCAS remained integral to the debate after the Intervention announcement, reporting in *The Australian* was no longer an exploration of the report, but used as a stepping stone, or 'justification', for wider political and social discourse:

The unprecedented power grab comes a week after the release of a report that revealed rampant and often-unreported child sexual abuse in NT indigenous communities, with children as young as three exposed to hard-core pornography. It described frequent attacks on children by family members and their friends after parties featuring drug use and binge-drinking (Karvelas, 2007).

This trend saw the condensation of the LCAS into a one or two paragraph synopsis, in which the report was referred to as a factor in wider social or political implications:

Canberra said the Northern Territory Government would be expected to develop a comprehensive strategy to tackle the 'rivers of grog' and a rampant pornography trade (Karvelas, 2007).

It is this assumed link made by journalists of *The Australian* that enforced the idea that alcoholism, pornography and substance abuse were at the heart of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities:

The sale of legal X-rated pornography will be dramatically restricted under a plan being negotiated by the Federal and Northern Territory Government as part of

efforts to stamp of child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities (Marley and Marris, 2007)

Despite the influence of political action on the reporting of the LCAS in *The Australian*, the failure of the newspaper to counter the focus on 'Individual Responsibility' by the NTER policy response does invite criticism. The policies of the NTER, such as alcohol and pornography restrictions, aligned with *The Australian's* fixation on 'Individual Responsibility', but there existed the possibility for other factors to be explored through a critique of the Intervention, and the incorporation of voices, both Indigenous and otherwise, to highlight the potential for different approaches to the issue. It is also important to note that whilst criticism from both Government and Indigenous people was considered newsworthy in other media publications, there was a marked lack of balance in the Australian's reporting, creating a false impression of widespread acquiescence for the policy initiative. Indeed, this paper argues that Australia's only national daily newspaper omitted to report fully on the widespread community debate over the Intervention measures.

## Conclusions

Through an analysis of the framing of the LCAS in *The Australian*, this paper contends that the newspaper framed the report in a way that supported its agenda to galvanise support of government intervention policy. There was a range of news frames available to the editors and journalists employed by *The Australian* newspaper to report the LCAS and subsequent policy developments. However, rather than telling the story of child sexual abuse through the frames of 'Failed Social Policy' or 'Mutual Obligations', *The Australian* chose to report the LCAS through the narrow lens of 'Individual Responsibility'. The paper concludes that the overwhelming dominance of 'Individual Responsibility' factors in reporting of the LCAS can be positively linked to *The Australian's* editorial stance on the issue. *The Australian* used a range of journalistic devices to support its editorial position toward the LCAS and to strongly support government intervention into NT Indigenous communities. The newspaper also chose to ignore many of the criticisms of the NTER that were an integral part of the public discourse at the time. The paper concludes that *The Australian* used the 'Individual Responsibility' frame as part of its strategy to influence government policy in favour of the NTER.

The failure of *The Australian* to provide a balanced representation of the NTER debate has deep implications for the objectivity of its reporting. Drawing on the work of Simmons (2006), it can be argued that *The Australian* 'skewed' the picture of the LCAS by presenting only one side of the story. This was achieved by creating a guise of dualism, incorporating a range of Indigenous sources that merely ratified opposing viewpoints. It can also be argued that the failure of *The Australian* to attribute a proportionate emphasis on factors not falling under the 'Individual Responsibility' category was an example of selective omission. News framing analysis has supported the arguments by Manne (2011) that, on issues regarding Indigenous policy, *The Australian* operates outside of The Australian Press Council (APC, 2006) and MEAA reporting guidelines.

This paper does not examine the role of Indigenous and non-Indigenous political leaders in framing news stories or influencing public discourse, notably the status afforded to Noel Pearson. This is an important part of the story to be addressed in The Australian News Media and Indigenous Policymaking 1988-2008 project, brought into vivid relief through our interviews with

Indigenous policy actors and journalists. This paper's analysis of news reports over a two-week period following the release of the *Little Children are Sacred* report does, however, demonstrate *The Australian's* role as a policy agenda-setter in Indigenous affairs. It concludes that *The Australian* spoke directly and strategically to the federal government in order to influence Indigenous policy, negating the voices of those most closely involved in the issues and ultimately hampering the 'development of systems, structures and methods that have a genuine chance of reducing violence and child sexual abuse' (Anderson and Wild, 2007).

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