

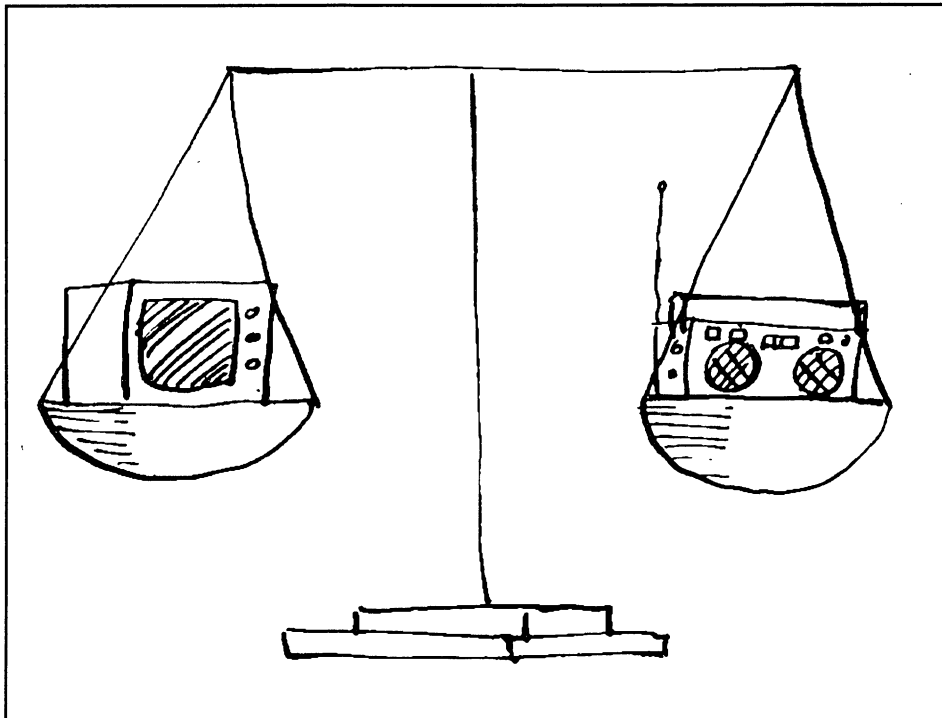


All there in black and white?

A recent seminar surveyed the representation of Aboriginal issues in the Australian media

On Thursday July 10, the Communications Law Centre, the Victoria University of Technology Faculty of Arts and the Koori Development and Support Unit conducted a seminar entitled *Representation of Aboriginal People in the Australian Media*. Gary Foley, a long time Koori activist and James Button, a journalist with the *Age* newspaper, were the speakers.

Foley commenced his address by looking at the history of the representation of Aboriginal people in the Australian media. The 1938 sesquicentenary was described as a nationalistic event which, not surprisingly for its time, was covered with little regard for the contribution of indigenous people. By the time of the 1988 bicentenary there was much general media coverage of Aboriginal affairs, but the level of analysis remained fairly simple.



nal land rights, that caught national and even worldwide attention. A legal loophole in Canberra law meant that anything under 11 tents was legal as being less than a statutory camping ground, so the embassy stayed and so did its symbolic protest.

Foley found in his years as a political activist that coming from only about 1% of the population, the groups he was part of needed the media in order to get their message across. He believes that the 1967 referendum was the only valid public opinion poll that has ever been gathered concerning the rights of Aboriginal people in Australia. Foley noted that it wasn't until

the election of the Whitlam government that the federal government took up its new responsibility for Aboriginal affairs.

Visibility

The ability of Aboriginal people to attract the quantity of general media coverage that they did by 1988 was remarked on by black American visitors who were amazed by the extent of coverage, considering the small percentage of the population that Aboriginal people made up.

It was indigenous people who were responsible for this. Charles Perkins with his freedom rides in the 1960's grabbed headlines, as did the naming of Australia Day as 'Invasion Day' and the 'Day of Mourning'. It was the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on Australia Day in 1972, following a pronouncement by Prime Minister McMahon that the Australian government would not grant Aborigi-

The 'Aboriginal industry'

Foley talked of the creation of an 'Aboriginal Industry' in the 1980s which he claimed resulted in the creation of a black bourgeoisie. It is on this point and no other that he is in agreement with Pauline Hanson. He said that while the self-righteous types in the media think they are doing well to publicise aboriginal issues, Australians as a whole remain ignorant of contentious issues such as the 'Aboriginal Industry', which the media is largely afraid to touch.

Most Australian people don't know or understand Koori people and the media has not helped to improve this situation. Newspapers seek the views of historians to write about Aboriginal people and history, when there



are many capable indigenous people who are not being given the chance to tell their own story. There are virtually no Aboriginal journalists.

Foley has found that journalists writing about Aboriginal affairs are generally very inexperienced and have to be educated by activists such as himself. Just as they are beginning to learn, a new inexperienced journalist is given the role. He feels that the next wave of communications using the Internet will break down many of the media barriers that have existed in the past. Aboriginal web sites will tell it like it is.

Foley concluded his address by saying that there was still a long way to go to establish quality debate on Aboriginal issues in the Australian media.

James Button

Button commenced his talk by also looking at the 1967 referendum. The *Age's* front page focused on other referendum questions rather than those concerning Aboriginal people. Bill Onus was the only indigenous person actually quoted. On the following Monday there was still no quotes from Aboriginal people in the front page lead, but on page 1 there was a quote, and on page 11 a small article concerning Aboriginal views.

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On the 30th anniversary in 1997, the Reconciliation Convention was broadcast live. It was a major story with much coverage of a range of views from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The letters page contained a lively and democratic range of views on the event. Despite this coverage, Button noted that quiet voices often get lost. For example, Pat Dodson was asking not for guilt, but for responsibility from the Australian community.

Optimism

The change in Aboriginal people, from invisibility to active presence, is certainly a basis for optimism. The creation of NIMA (National Indigenous Media Association) and CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association) are examples of the growing representation of indigenous people. At the same time, in 1993, only 2 of 1068 journalists were Aboriginal people. It should also be said that all non-Anglo groups are underrepresented amongst journalists.

Button went on to discuss what steps could be taken to introduce more indigenous people into the Australian media. He mentioned that both the ABC and SBS had employed Aboriginal journalists, but that in general the journalistic culture lacked connection with Aboriginal people.

While in the southern states there has generally been better coverage of indigenous people in the media, it has often been of a more distant and pious nature. While the Northern Territory news is not known for its sensitive stance on Aboriginal issues, it staunchly defended Mandawuy Yunipingu when Alan Jones criticised his appointment as Australian of the Year. Shirley Firebrace has suggested setting up informal meetings between indigenous people and journalists to break down hostilities and misrepresentations that have developed.

In defence of the media, Button spoke of the significant role played by the media in publicising the issues concerning the *Deaths in Custody* and the *Stolen Children* Inquiries. However, the media fail to explore the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal culture, by not providing sufficient resources to this area. The Brisbane *Courier Mail* does have a specialist Aboriginal affairs reporter, but the *Age* and other Australian newspapers leave this area to generalist reporters who are unable to stick with the stories very long.

Unpopular stories

Button agreed with Foley that much of the media shies away from stories concerning Aboriginal internal conflicts such as the Century Mine project, the Redfern Housing Development or the misuse of public resources. He said it also failed to cover the goodwill, character, humour, resilience and lack of bitterness displayed by so many indigenous people. This is lost in the big stories and the big headlines. The massive presence of overseas media at the Sydney Olympics may lead to much embarrassment for the Australian government as the eyes of the world turn to human rights in Australia.

Concentration of media ownership in Australia into the hands of fewer and fewer players, in conjunction with the ABC's reduced funding and coverage, means that the media consumer is likely to have more and more streamlined media with less diversity of overall views and coverage.

Button concluded by saying that Aboriginal people had a lot more friends in the media than they think they have.

At the completion of the seminar, musicians Carol Fraser and Ruby Hunter performed for the audience.

Bruce Shearer