

# Blackout: The mediated silencing of Aboriginal public opinion about the Australian Government's Northern Territory Emergency Response 2007

Michelle Dunne Breen – University of Canberra

Michelle.Dunne.Breen@canberra.edu.au

*In June 2007, the Australian Federal Government declared a crisis of child sexual abuse in remote Northern Territory (NT) Aboriginal communities and launched the unprecedented and far-reaching Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), which was enacted by Parliament two months later. Within days of its announcement, soldiers began entering the communities followed by teams of doctors and bureaucrats. The Race Discrimination Act was suspended, and residents were subject to welfare quarantining, whereby half their welfare payments were only accessible via a store card to ensure money was spent on food and other necessities. The haste and some of the elements of the NTER's roll-out was questioned by many Aboriginal people and their supporters. In an attempt to engage in the mainstream debate, 140 groups – Aboriginal bodies, social justice organisations, churches – came together to publish an open letter to the Prime Minister and the Indigenous Affairs Minister, expressing concerns about aspects of the intervention policy. Furthermore, representatives of more than forty NT Aboriginal groups gathered together to produce an alternative intervention strategy document.*

*This paper explores how this opposition was mediated by the press – what voices were heard, and indeed listened to, and how they were represented. Employing the critical discourse analysis methodology of Norman Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach, this paper explores the role of mediated communication in the presentation of public opinion, specifically that of NT Aboriginal people and their supporters, in the discussion regarding how to cope with this declared national crisis. It explores the social context of journalistic discursive practices, and the cultural context of journalists' and governments' handling of Aboriginal affairs and the NTER, as analytical contexts to the textual analysis of news reports. It finds that organised oppositional voices were largely absent from the Australian print media's news reports considering the NTER. This paper contributes to the literature on the representation of Aboriginal Australians' public opinion in the Australian media, provides evidence of silencing, exclusion and misrepresentation, and identifies the particular discursive practices that enable this.*

*This paper points to practices that are common in the newsroom but indiscernible from the examination of online news sites. These discursive practices have been captured from analysis of the print editions of newspapers. The methodology to adequately excavate them from online newspaper sites has not yet been developed (for example, the retrospective examination of a news story's development across edition changes over time). This paper argues that analysis and discussion of these practices is vital to our understanding of how news is shaped. Our discussion of social inclusion is incomplete without an understanding of routine journalism discursive practices that serve to exclude and their implication for communication and media.*

In June 2007, following the publication of the *Little Children Are Sacred* report of a year-long inquiry (Anderson and Wild, 2007), the Australian Federal Government declared a crisis of child sexual abuse in remote Northern Territory (NT) Aboriginal communities and launched the unprecedented and far-reaching Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), which was enacted by parliament two months later. Within days of its announcement, soldiers began to enter the Northern Territory's remote Aboriginal communities followed by teams of doctors and bureaucrats. The Racial Discrimination Act was suspended, and the permit system – whereby outsiders needed community permission to access Aboriginal land – was scrapped. Residents of the communities were subject to welfare quarantining, whereby half their welfare payments were only accessible via a store card to ensure money was spent on food and other necessities. The haste and some of the elements of the NTER's roll-out were questioned by many Aboriginal people and their supporters. In an attempt to engage in the mainstream debate, some 140 groups – Aboriginal bodies, social justice organisations and churches – came together to publish an open letter (referred

to in this paper as the Open Letter) to the Prime Minister and the Indigenous Affairs Minister, expressing concerns about aspects of the intervention policy. (This policy is variously referred to in the news reports and in this paper as the policy, the NTER and the Intervention.) During the fortnight following the Open Letter's publication, representatives of more than forty NT Aboriginal groups got together to produce an alternative intervention strategy document, referred to in this paper as the Alternative Plan. (The producers of both the Open Letter and the Alternative Plan are at times referred to as oppositional voices in this paper.)

This paper explores how this opposition to the NTER policy was mediated by the Australian press, in terms of what voices were heard and indeed listened to, and how they were represented in the newspaper news reports. Employing the critical discourse analysis methodology of Norman Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach, this paper explores the role of mediated communication in the representation of public opinion, specifically that of NT Aboriginal people and their supporters, in the public sphere discussion regarding how to counter this declared national crisis. This paper explores the social context of journalistic discursive practices and politicians' discursive practices. It also explores the cultural context of Australian journalists' and governments' handling of Aboriginal affairs in general and the NTER policy in particular, to provide, as per Fairclough's CDA methodology, analytical contexts to the critical textual analysis of the news reports.

The treatment by Australian newspapers of both the Open Letter and the Alternative Plan is illustrated through exemplars taken from two very different newspapers. The first, an exemplar set, explores the treatment of the Open Letter in Sydney's *The Daily Telegraph*. The second, a single exemplar, is from Melbourne's *The Age*. *The Daily Telegraph* is a daily tabloid published by News Corp Australia, or News Ltd as it was known in 2007, the dominant newspaper publisher in the Australian market. News Corp Australia, the local branch of Rupert Murdoch's international News Corporation, accounts for 65% of Australia's metropolitan and national newspaper circulation (Flew, 2013). Being a tabloid newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph* is aimed at a working-class readership: its tone is populist, its news story treatment brief, with typically 300-word page leads. Its editorial values are generally conservative and it serves the Sydney market. By contrast, Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper is a daily broadsheet published by Fairfax, the second-largest publisher in Australia's essentially duopolistic newspaper market (which accounts for 25% of the metropolitan and national newspaper circulation: Flew, 2013). Fairfax is a private company owned by shareholders. *The Age*, a broadsheet, is aimed at a middle-class readership: its tone is factual, its news story treatment ranges from 800-word page leads. Its editorial values are generally centrist. It serves the Melbourne market. Sydney and Melbourne are Australia's two largest cities, each having a population of roughly 4.5 million residents.

This paper (in line with findings from the wider research project from which it is drawn) finds that organised oppositional voices were largely absent from the Australian print media's news reports considering the Open Letter and the Alternative Plan. Indeed, this paper finds that the Alternative Plan was only covered by two news reports – one in *The Age* and one in its sister newspaper *The Sydney Morning Herald*. All other Australian metropolitan newspapers ignored it.

This paper contributes to the literature on the representation of Aboriginal Australians' public opinion in the Australian media, particularly at a time of crisis, and provides evidence of the enduring themes of silencing, exclusion and misrepresentation. It also explores how a more reflective journalistic practice could be more inclusive.

### Literature review

The literature pertaining to journalism's democratic watchdog role and its relationship with democratic participation is most pertinent here. The Habermasian concept of the public sphere, central to the notion of democracy, is a social realm in which citizens can gather to discuss and debate issues of importance in order to reach an agreement on how they would like society to be organised (Habermas, 1989). Also central to the notion of democracy is the concept of the Fourth Estate, whereby the press both acts as the watchdog on government and enables – some would argue now embodies – the public sphere. The result would be an informed citizenry and an accountable government (Economou and Tanner, 2008). Private opinions need to be subjected to the public sphere public opinion formation process, through reasoned

discussion and debate, before something approaching public opinion can be reached. Increasingly, the media is seen as providing this space, and increasingly, the mediated public sphere is seen as excluding people themselves from this deliberation process: Hartley and McKee (2000) argue that the conversation is now between the media and the government – that is, that the media has replaced the people as the site of the public sphere. There is some evidence emerging that the online realm in general and social media in particular are providing an alternative public sphere, wherein people are able to deliberate amongst themselves, circumventing mediatisation, but this paper is concerned with a series of events that occurred in mid-2007, before, for example, Facebook and Twitter became widely available.

The literature about the Australian media's representation of Indigenous issues and sources is also of central importance here. The Australian media has been shown to deal with Aboriginal issues in a consistently unsatisfactory, often clearly racist, way (Jakubowicz 1994; Meadows 2001; Bacon 2005; Waller, 2013). Indigenous issues are rarely given attention outside "crisis" situations (McCallum, 2011, 2013; Waller, 2013). Simmons and Lecouteur (2008) have shown through a CDA study that similar problems in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities are reported in very different ways – the former as intractable and attributable to the community as a whole, the latter as the responsibility of a small group of trouble-makers and holding out the possibility of change.

Aboriginal voices themselves have been found to be largely left out of news reports about issues that concern them, with reporters tending to go first and often only to official sources, such as police spokespeople and politicians: Jakubowicz (1994) found that, in news reports, "The exclusion of Aboriginal voices as authoritative is persistent" (Jakubowicz, 1994, p. 85). Indigenous voices are routinely omitted from reports on even contentious issues, which Aboriginal people themselves have said is worse than misrepresentation (Meadows, 2001, p. 7); and Bacon (2005) found that when Aboriginal sources are included in stories about an Aboriginal death in custody, they tend to be the only voice in the news report with no context provided and no one in authority called to account.

### *On collusion*

Teun van Dijk, in writing about critics of CDA's preoccupation with exposing power imbalances, asserts that the scholars who "discredit such partisanship... show how partisan they are in the first place, e.g. by ignoring, mitigating, excluding or denying inequality" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 253). Van Dijk goes on to say that it "is this collusion that is one of the major topics of critical discourse analysis" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 254). This concept of collusion provides a departure point to make a similar case regarding journalists and the journalistic practice of questing after "objectivity": as examined in this paper, in allowing asymmetrical "balance" in their news reports – for example, by allowing government ministers to reject criticism with an irrelevant and/or hypothetical anecdote – the journalist is essentially colluding discursively with the minister to exclude the oppositional voice from the news report. They are not allowing the oppositional voice to be heard. They are smothering it. They are not listening.

### *On listening*

The discussion around whose voice is heard can be and has been extended to explore the issue of "listening" (Dreher, 2009; Bickford, 1996). Listening puts the onus on the powerful to truly hear what the marginalised are saying:

If oppression happens partly through not hearing certain kinds of expressions from certain kinds of people – then perhaps the reverse is true as well: a particular kind of listening can serve to break up linguistic conventions and create a public realm where a plurality of voices... can be heard... (Bickford, 1996, p. 129).

This concept of listening can be applied productively to "consider the ways in which conventions of media and public debate serve to silence or to mute a whole array of differences" (Dreher, 2009, p. 445). This concept of listening provides a departure point for this paper: the journalists' and the Prime Minister John Howard's listening, as evidenced in their discursive practices, is explored via the conceptualisation of "asymmetrical rebuttal" which this paper offers.

## Methodology

Fairclough devises a framework for discourse analysis that has three levels of analysis – text, discourse practice and sociocultural context. The analysis on each level involves description, interpretation and explanation – with description and interpretation being at times indistinct (Fairclough 1992, p. 198). Fairclough recommends a data selection strategy which focuses on moments of crisis: “These are moments in the discourse where there is evidence that things are going wrong.” He recommends this because, “Such moments of crisis make visible aspects of practices which might normally be naturalized” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 230). Wodak (2001) wrote that “texts are often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance.” (Wodak, 2001, p. 11) These moments of crisis that Fairclough recommends focussing on are themselves sites of struggle.

The PhD project from which this paper arose is exploring how the Australian print media dealt with the NTER from when it was announced to when it was enacted by Parliament two months later. The Factiva database was used to identify newspaper stories on the NTER, also known as the Intervention into Aboriginal communities, between 15 June 2007 and 18 August 2007, generating a data set of some 1750 items. The line of inquiry for this particular paper was inspired by Olga Havnen, variously NT Indigenous activist, politician and bureaucrat, who said at the Media & Indigenous Policy Symposium at the University of Canberra on November 21, 2012 (the research team for which included this paper’s author, see McCallum et al, 2012), that in July 2007 a group of some forty Aboriginal organisations had devised an Alternative Plan to the Intervention, and that this plan – *A proposed Emergency Response and Development Plan to protect Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory: a preliminary response to the Australian Government’s proposals* (Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory, 2007) – received no media coverage. So in order to explore this, to find any newspaper coverage of the Alternative Plan in the data set, a search was carried out within the full data set using a number of search terms.

That search revealed that not only was there almost no coverage (see below) of the Alternative Plan’s launch on July 10 but that prior to the Alternative Plan’s launch, there was a press conference on June 26 announcing the publication of an Open Letter, signed by more than 140 groups – Indigenous, church, legal, housing – objecting to central aspects of the NTER policy. At this press conference, the Alternative Plan was foreshadowed. It was then developed in a deliberative process over the intervening fortnight by representatives of more than 40 Northern Territory Indigenous organisations. They referred to themselves collectively as the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory.

The data set text search revealed that the Open Letter was the subject (not always overtly) of a couple of dozen newspaper reports. The Alternative Plan was the subject of only two. This data subset was then read as a whole. In an inductive, iterative process, the texts were examined on a lexical and sentence level, including noting evidence of discursive practices as they arose. To illustrate, one discursive practice that was in evidence was the routine journalistic practice of striving for balance, whereby for example a criticism is put to the target of that criticism for the target’s comment on that criticism. In this case, when the oppositional voices raised a criticism of the NTER policy, and where the journalists did elicit comment (which was something rare in the reports) from the Indigenous Affairs minister or Prime Minister, this paper looks at what form that comment took – for example, did the comment answer the substance of the criticism, or was it saying something else entirely. This paper finds the latter to be the case, and conceptualises it as “asymmetrical rebuttal”.

The sociocultural context was then examined to further illuminate what was observed in the text, as per Fairclough’s CDA methodology. The themes that emerged are explored in detail via exemplars in the Findings & Discussion section below. For example, how the discursive practices of journalists and ministers in effect worked together to silence, exclude or misrepresent the oppositional voices in the news reports when the oppositional voices sought to present to the public, the press and the government the Open Letter and the Alternative Plan as embodiments of Indigenous public opinion on the policy.

## The Open Letter

When the Open Letter was published on June 26, a couple of dozen newspaper news reports the next day referred to it, not all overtly with some just alluding to it. The Open Letter was signed by Professor Mick

Dodson, a well-known Indigenous academic, and 140 organisations dealing variously with housing, social welfare, legal aid, social justice and other issues, representing doctors, lawyers, youth workers and other health professionals, church groups and women's shelters. (The news reports, however, varied in the number of signatories reported: "more than 60", "about 100", etc., suggesting that the reporters had not paid close attention to the Open Letter.) About a third of those signatory organisations were exclusively Indigenous-focused.

The Open Letter, addressed to Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough, called for three things: "greater investment in the services that support Indigenous families and communities, the active involvement of these communities in finding solutions to these problems and greater Federal Government engagement in delivering basic health, housing and education services to remote communities" (Dodson et al., 2007). The Open Letter said that the signatories "welcome your commitment to tackling violence and abuse in certain Indigenous communities" and that they "endorse the call in the *Little Children Are Sacred* report for the Australian and Territory Government to work together urgently to fill these gaps in services". It said that the problems required "sustainable solutions, which must be worked out with the communities, not prescribed from Canberra [the seat of the Australian Parliament]."

The Open Letter goes on to warn that the NTER proposals "go well beyond an 'emergency response', and will have profound effects on people's incomes, land ownership, and their ability to decide the kind of medical treatment they receive. Some of the measures will weaken communities and families by taking from them the ability to make basic decisions about their lives, thus removing responsibility instead of empowering them." It expresses the concern that an "over-reliance on top-down and punitive measures" and "insufficient indication that additional resources will be mobilised where they are urgently needed, to improve housing, child protection and domestic violence supports, schools, health services, alcohol and drug rehab programs", issues which have been "raised by many Indigenous leaders over many years", mean that "[i]n their present form the proposals miss the mark and are unlikely to be effective".

The Open Letter ends with an offer: "We offer our support to Indigenous communities and the Government in: developing programs that will strengthen families and communities to empower them to confront the problems they face; consulting adequately with the communities and the NT Government, and community services, health and education providers; developing a long-term plan to address and resolve the causes of child abuse including joblessness, poor housing, education and commit the necessary resources to this."

For the most part, the newspaper reports about the Open Letter give a very scant overview of its content, paraphrasing very briefly some of the content quoted above, providing no context to it and not asking anyone, including the Indigenous Affairs Minister or Prime Minister, for comment on the concerns expressed. Where comment was sought from anyone other than a signatory to the Open Letter, the tone was discernibly hostile. The most overtly hostile reporting on the Open Letter was seen in Sydney's tabloid newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, exemplars from which are discussed below.

### The Open Letter in *The Daily Telegraph*

On June 27, the day following the publication of the Open Letter, Sydney News Ltd tabloid *The Daily Telegraph* ran four articles about the NTER policy: two opinion pieces, an editorial/leader ("What nonsense?"), and a news report (Rehn, 2007). Of the two opinion pieces about opposition to the NTER (Quigley, 2007; Farr, 2007), neither mentioned the Open Letter nor the proposed Alternative Plan directly.

#### *The first opinion piece*

Under the headline "This is no place for the grubby hand of politics", among a piece largely based on issues that came before UK courts and not pertaining to Indigenous Australia, the opinion writer, staff journalist Anita Quigley, in defence of Howard's "radical blueprint to rid Aboriginal communities of the rampant sexual abuse of children" ("radical", "blueprint" and "rampant" all being terms used in other media, most notably News Ltd. national stable-mate *The Australian*), in a blatant belittling of concerns writes that the "detractors", "are, as my grandmother used to say, just being contrary – disagreeing purely because they can and because it is a [PM John] Howard initiative" (Quigley, 2007). The use of folksy sayings, such

as the grandmother anecdote above, can serve to silence debate (Tolton, 2013). In this extract, Quigley is maintaining that critics are complaining just for the sake of it (“purely because they can”) and therefore have no argument to make.

And in a less equivocal attempt at silencing the Oppositional Voices, Quigley finishes up by writing that “[c]ritics of Howard’s attempt to fix it [the NT] need to shut up, at least for the time being” (Quigley, 2007). Quigley does not elaborate what “the time being” might be, that is, how long the “critics” “need to shut up” for. This vague caveat can be seen as an insurance against her being criticised for the silencing. She was only saying that they should shut up just for “the time being”.

### *The second opinion piece*

In the same edition, another *Daily Telegraph* staff opinion writer, Malcolm Farr (under the headline “Not invaders: army are known and trusted friends”) without mentioning the Open Letter, rails against the “outraged fretting” of critics who are concerned about the military having a role in the Intervention. He writes that the army already has a role in remote communities, and that,

That means little to commentators who have looked through the reaction options and quickly punched the button marked ‘Over’.

These people include Pat Turner, an Aborigine and former senior federal bureaucrat who saw something worrying about the fact Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough has an army background – and step forward Anglicare chairman Dr Ray Cleary who said: “I’m yet to be convinced sending the police or the military into a community to tell them to behave is going to solve the problem.”

The military, as has been made clear, will be there for communications, logistics and health services, but Cleary seems to think they will be setting up stockades (Farr, 2007).

The reduction of Pat Turner to “an Aborigine” is problematic. This nominalising terminology is considered to be offensive in general to Indigenous Australians (Queensland Health, 2011; Flinders University, n.d.). Furthermore, Turner’s reduction to a “former senior federal bureaucrat” is noteworthy. She was the CEO of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission – the Indigenous representative body – from 1994-98, and Deputy Secretary in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 1991-92, among many other very senior public positions. Her legitimacy as a spokesperson is minimised here.

Regarding Dr Ray Cleary’s concern, the context to it is that military and police involvement in remote Indigenous communities has a very sad and traumatic history and an extremely sensitive legacy in Australia. The Stolen Generations as they are now known, the legacy of a policy whereby over a number of decades all mixed-race Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their parents and communities, to be raised in government-run homes in the “hope” that their Indigeneity could be bred out of them, is still very much an open wound today – so much so that there was a formal apology to the Stolen Generations in 2009 from the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, which is seen as a watershed moment in the Australian national journey to reconciliation. Cleary’s concern is decontextualised and ridiculed.

### *The editorial/leader*

Also in the *Daily Telegraph* on June 27, page 24, is a leader (or editorial) on the issue, which yet again does not explicitly mention the Open Letter or the Alternative Plan. Under the headline “What nonsense”, it reads, in total:

Prime Minister John Howard's strong intervention to tackle the appalling problem of child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory was never going to achieve unanimous endorsement.

But yesterday the criticism sprang from a somewhat surprising source – from the Australian Council of Social Services and from church groups meeting in Canberra to oppose the Howard plan on the basis that it was too “hard-line”.

Asked for their own alternative course of action, the so-called “activists” were obliged to concede – they had no plan.

So, they have no constructive plan of their own yet they are constrained to attack the Government's attempt to combat the sickening problem of Aboriginal child abuse. How helpful.

Then the most extraordinary claim – from former ATSIC commissioner Pat Turner who said the Government plan was a “Trojan Horse” to take over Aboriginal lands. What dreadful nonsense.

As a genre, a newspaper's editorial or leader is the de facto voice of the newspaper, which reflects its organisational values and its editorial stance on issues. A close look at this editorial is very revealing about *The Daily Telegraph's* stance on the Intervention and those who criticise it. The policy's target is described as “appalling” and “sickening”. Some critics are described as somewhat surprising (the “somewhat” mitigating the surprising, with the meaning conveyed that it is not entirely surprising that these critics are unhappy). Some criticism is characterised as extraordinary. Sarcastic, rhetorical put-downs are employed, such as “how helpful”, “what dreadful nonsense”, “so-called ‘activists’” (with the label “activists” deliberately in inverted commas to indicate it as questionable in the writer's eyes). The juxtaposition of the critics' apparently extraordinary, nonsensical concerns with the revelation that they have “no plan of their own” serves to undermine the critics' concerns. Crucially, the groups had declared that day that they were about to put a plan together – one that they went on to publish a fortnight later on July 10 – but the Telegraph does not mention this anywhere in its coverage on this day or subsequent days. This plan makes an opaque appearance in the news story (discussed below), but is in effect excised from it and the rest of the *Daily Telegraph's* coverage.

### *The news story*

Also in the Telegraph on June 27 is a news story on page 15, which does mention the Open Letter. The introductory paragraph reads:

A group of Indigenous leaders, churches and other community groups slammed John Howard's radical plan to combat rampant sexual abuse in indigenous communities as “unworkable” – but have no alternative plan themselves (Rehn, 2007).

Not only does this news report repeat the “radical” and “rampant” characterisations of the policy and its target problem, but it immediately silences the critics, indeed smothers them, by telling us that they have nothing constructive to offer in its place. (This echoes, or is echoed by, the leader on page 24 and also accords with the opinion piece on page 25, the page opposite the leader, that the critics “need to shut up”.)

The news report goes on to say:

Yesterday, the former head of the now defunct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Pat Turner said the Government was “using child sexual abuse as the Trojan horse to resume total control of our lands”.

“What the Prime Minister and his Minister Mal Brough are proposing is, in the view of the combined Aboriginal organisations in Alice Springs, is totally unworkable,” she said.

But when asked what the groups' alternative plan was, she replied, “We're working on that” (Rehn, 2007).

The abrupt transition “But when asked” here signifies the reporter's skepticism of the claim. Most notable, however, is that when asked for a plan, Turner said “We're working on that”. This is interpreted by the news reporter and the leader writer as the group not having a plan, and this apparent lack of a plan is used to undermine the oppositional voices – it is used to ridicule and silence them. However, the group was devising a plan. The NTER had only just been announced, so it could be seen as somewhat unfair to expect the group to have come up with a plan of their own immediately. It is most definitely unfair to represent, “we're working on it” as meaning the group does not have plans for a plan. What it is “working on”

is not explored by the newspaper, although other media reporting suggests that the CAO NT made known that day that they were planning on producing an Alternative Plan within days. “We’re working on it” means just that: that the group is working on a plan – the Alternative Plan that they produced a fortnight later.

Taken together, the four *Daily Telegraph* articles in the June 27 edition leave the reader in no doubt to what the Telegraph thinks of the oppositional voices: that they are talking nonsense, have nothing useful to add, and should just “shut up”. When the Alternative Plan was published a fortnight later, *The Daily Telegraph* did not report it.

### The Alternative Plan

On July 10, the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory published *A proposed Emergency Response and Development Plan to protect Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory: a preliminary response to the Australian Government’s proposals* (Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory, 2007). It is referred to in this paper as the Alternative Plan. The Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory (CAONT) represented Aboriginal organisations in Darwin, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine. It developed the plan with “community sector organisations from across the country” (CAONT, p. 3).

In short, the Alternative Plan,

puts forward a set of practical immediate measures and long-term reform proposals to address the problem. These draw upon the experience of Aboriginal communities and service providers on the ground, and some of the many reports detailing problems in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and elsewhere, including the *Little Children Are Sacred* report and reports from organisations such as the Secretariat of National Aboriginal Island Child Care (SNAICC), the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) (CAONT, p. 7).

The Alternative Plan, a 30-page document, agreed with and engaged with the need for an intervention to protect children in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities and proposed a two-stage response (CAONT: 3): Firstly, “An emergency response over the next 3-6 months on which agreement can be reached quickly between Governments and community leaders” and secondly,

A more comprehensive and costed... [plan] that addresses the underlying issues within specific time-frames... This would also involve thorough planning and negotiation to ensure that the correct strategies are adopted, the substantial resources required are efficiently used, and funding is stable and predictable... This plan should be developed and negotiated under a partnership approach with the targeted communities during the current emergency response phase and be implemented as soon as is practicable (CAONT, p. 3).

It said that,

The response must be informed and led by local Aboriginal communities. It is only by strengthening the capacity of families and communities to protect and nurture children that the problems will be resolved. Aboriginal ownership and control of land and access to communities are important in this regard (CAONT, p. 3).

It referred the Government back to the recommendations of the *Little Children Are Sacred* report (Anderson and Wild, 2007), which bear little resemblance to the NTER policy it inspired, as well as suggested 68 “Proposed actions”.

### **The Alternative Plan in *The Age* newspaper**

*The Age* in a 558-word report on page 8 of the July 11 edition written by senior journalist Michelle Grattan, reported on the Alternative Plan's launch with the headline "Aboriginal group lashes PM's plan", and the subhead "Land and permit measures under fire in report". *The Age's* report on the Alternative Plan of July 11 will hereafter be referred to as "the news report". The intro or lead paragraph of the news report reads:

The Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory group has blasted key parts of the Federal Government's intervention plans to protect children (Grattan, 2007).

The second paragraph of the news report reads:

But Prime Minister John Howard says the offers of support from the general community are overwhelming (Grattan, 2007).

### ***The NTER policy's representation***

The NTER policy is represented as "to protect children" and the recipient of "overwhelming" support from the "general community". This is reinforced later on in the report when the results of a Newspan public opinion poll are reported as showing "more than 6 in 10 Australians approve of the Intervention".

### ***The government's representation***

The Prime Minister is given immediate rebuttal, in the second paragraph. The rebuttal is introduced with "But" which overtly signifies a shift in perspective from the criticism to its rebuttal. The rebuttal is asymmetrical. The substance of the Prime Minister's rebuttal – "overwhelming" public support – does not address the substance of the criticism: that the policy is fundamentally flawed. There is asymmetry in the assumedly objectivity-oriented balance-seeking journalistic practice. This asymmetry – in that the two voices, the Oppositional and the Prime Minister's, are not aligned in substance – in effect serves to deny balance and obscure the actual lack of objectivity afforded the subject matter.

### ***The plan's representation***

The plan is referred to throughout the news report as a/the "report". However, it is much more than that. In the news report, there is no indication of the plan's comprehensiveness. Its content is not detailed. The news report, however, does report that the CAONT has concerns, contained in the Alternative Plan, that "the dismantling of the permit system... would make it easier for 'grog runners [alcohol peddlers] and shonky [dodgy] art dealers'" (The explanations in square brackets are to clarify some Australian English terms for those not familiar with them.) Indigenous art is a lucrative market and an important source of income for many communities. It is an ongoing battle to protect Indigenous artists from being ripped off by unscrupulous art dealers. Similarly, it is an ongoing battle to keep alcohol out of the predominantly "dry" communities. Two targets of the NTER were alcohol abuse and welfare dependency, so these concerns are very much pertinent to the official debate.

The news report also mentions other concerns that,

The [CAONT] report warns that if the Government's emergency measures are implemented without community consent and ownership, there is a risk that problems such as alcohol addiction "will be driven underground and that initiatives to help prevent child sexual abuse and family violence will be resisted" (Grattan, 2007).

However, although the news report mentions these concerns of the CAONT's, The Prime Minister is allowed in the news report (enabled by the journalistic discursive practice of seeking comment) to deflect these concerns by his discursive practice of asymmetrical rebuttal: he deflects the criticism by invoking an irrelevant claim of public support for the policy as a whole. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that "offers of support from the general community" was the substance of the Open Letter. It is as if the Open

Letter and the Alternative Plan are being played off against one another in this ‘discourse chain’ (Fairclough, 1992).

### *The oppositional voices’ representation*

In the news report, the CAONT is represented as “blasting” the Government’s plans, and is – via the Prime Minister’s immediate rebuttal – implicated as being other than/not part of and out of step with “the general community”. Olga Havnen “A co-ordinator for the group” is quoted as saying,

the Government’s approach “is not sustainable or effective. It doesn’t show a commitment to the long term.” What was needed was a well-thought-out, costed plan with a timetable, she said.

However, the CAONT’s Alternative Plan is not given oxygen here. Instead, the news report moves on to the Government policy coming “under fire” from “veteran Aboriginal leader Pat Dodson, who told the ABC...” that removing abusers from communities could be counterproductive. The Alternative Plan has been pushed aside in the news report by the reporting of another media outlet’s interview with a different oppositional voice talking about a hypothetical effect of the policy. The two oppositional voices – that of the CAONT and that of Pat Dodson – are conflated and, arguably, diluted by that conflation. Certainly, the Alternative Plan is diluted as there is no more space given in the news report to its discussion. The news report gives equal coverage to two different interventions by two different oppositional voices.

The news report, however, does go on to identify the following commonality (then goes back to Howard and finally refers to an opinion poll):

The organisation’s [CAONT] report and Mr Dodson both stressed the importance of dialogue and working with communities as well as the need for more resources.

But Mr Howard said yesterday: ‘We are very satisfied with the progress that is being made. The Government’s determination was receiving widespread support. Newspoll yesterday showed that more than six in 10 Australian approve of the intervention.

Again, immediately after this oppositional voices’ representation, the Prime Minister is given instant – and again, asymmetrical – rebuttal. The Prime Minister John Howard does not answer the criticism that is made about the manner of implementation and resourcing of the policy. The Oppositional Voices are diluted, then smothered. Furthermore, the Prime Minister’s stance is immediately legitimated with poll statistics. This poll’s reporting lacks several nuances: that it has not polled – discretely or perhaps at all – Indigenous Australians; that it does not include the questions that were asked of respondents to gauge what “approve” means; and that it fails to foreground that nearly 40% of Australians do not approve of the Intervention – or at least, of those polled: as Crikey reported on this poll, 16-17% of those polled answered “don’t know” to the question (Saulwick and Muller, 2007).

In any case, opinion polls are a contentious reflection of public opinion. For example, Blumer (1948) held that public opinion cannot be discerned by the polling and aggregating of private opinions. Those private opinions need to be subjected to the public sphere public opinion formation process, through reasoned discussion and debate, before something approaching public opinion can be reached. The large number of “don’t know” replies would point to the NTER policy being under-discussed in the public sphere. A large number of people felt that they did not have sufficient knowledge upon which to base a judgement of the policy. The inclusion of this poll, which was commissioned by a rival media company (News Ltd), is further evidence of the collusion between the journalistic and Prime Ministerial discursive practices.

### *The journalistic voice*

The journalistic voice in the news report serves as a consistent cohesive bind to the narrative. For example, in the militaristic language employed: The CAONT “has blasted” key parts of the NTER. Dodson is a “veteran” from whom the NTER comes “under fire”; in the portrayal of the policy and the Government’s action as mandated and decisive: The Government receives “overwhelming” “offers of support” from the

“general community”, the Government’s “determination” was “receiving widespread support”, “Canberra would go ahead with its tougher measures.” The haste of the policy’s implementation was defended in terms of actions versus bureaucratic inaction:

Mr Howard said that getting the intervention plan into action was not being delayed by the complexities of drafting legislation...

The journalistic voice, whether it is independently produced or utilising paraphrasing and indirect quotes, echoes the Prime Ministerial voice. The journalistic discursive practice of enabling the Prime Minister’s immediate rebuttal – at two points in the news report – with the linking phrases of “But” and “However” disguises the asymmetrical nature of the rebuttals. “But” and “However” suggest that what is to follow addresses that preceding in the news report. It does not. The Prime Minister’s discursive practice of offering rebuttals that do not rebut the criticism raised, but co-opt generalised widespread support from a nebulous “elsewhere” in the NTER discourse, is enabled by the journalistic discursive practice. There is collusion between the two which serves to silence, exclude and misrepresent oppositional voices to the NTER policy.

### Conclusion

The exemplars from *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Age* demonstrate that the newspapers silenced, excluded and misrepresented oppositional voices in general and Indigenous dissent in particular. Concerted, substantial and unified Indigenous public sphere activities were ignored or ridiculed, and concerns were silenced or smothered.

This outcome was in part arrived at when the journalists’ routine discursive practices colluded with the Prime Minister’s discursive practices. It is not argued nor demonstrable that this was deliberate: regardless, a more reflective journalistic practice, whereby journalists look for asymmetrical rebuttal and address it, would go some way to addressing this problem in representation. This paper offers the conceptualisation of asymmetrical rebuttal as an insight into the potential for this collusion and as a signal that an oppositional voice is not being listened to.

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