

# Seen but unseen: Missing visible Indigenous women in the media and what it means for leadership in Indigenous Australia

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*This paper reports on an investigation of media representation of Indigenous women's leadership in Australia. A plethora of strong Indigenous women are currently involved in leading roles, affecting policy and contributing in the areas of health, education, science and communication spheres. However, this paper contends that contemporary mainstream media seem oblivious to or ignore this fact, and only seem to report on a few select individuals. Conversely, the sphere of digital and social media is saturated with a number of highly visible Indigenous women. Why is there a disconnection between what journalists report on and what is happening for Indigenous women, and why does there appear a disconnection within commercial outlets when a picture is emerging in social media full of fascinating, influential Indigenous women? This paper investigates, from an Indigenous standpoint, the role of leading Indigenous women who are currently affecting change within Australian society. It also investigates why there is a lack of media coverage of these women, why reporting is steeped in negativity, and why the few that are reported on seem so appealing to news agencies. The paper concludes that influential Indigenous women in leadership roles are not given positive coverage in mainstream media, and this thereby inhibits their further contribution to the Australian media sphere.*

## Introduction

Indigenous Australian women are prolific in their endeavours to create change for their people in Australian society. Historically, these women have lead from the shadows, in background roles with great responsibility and integrity towards making conditions better and simply getting things done.

The literature supporting this paper builds on foundational and established bodies of work on leadership, media and Indigenous studies, through to more recent examples of discussion around Indigenous women, the media and leadership.

This paper draws on research conducted for a project that is exploring Indigenous women and leadership. My project seeks to investigate leadership through interviewing twenty Indigenous women from various areas of industry about leading. Using qualitative analyses from an Indigenous theoretical perspective, I use conversational analysis and draw themes from this endeavour to highlight the many-faceted forms that leadership takes for Indigenous women. An Indigenist construct enables the researcher and the participants a degree of mutual relatedness to culture, and a similar way of being, knowing and doing (Martin, 2003). Indigenous Standpoint theory is heavily utilised when Indigenous researchers perform investigations on their communities in connection with individual perspectives on politics and social and emotional wellbeing.

When defining or discussing leadership, one must make a distinction between leadership in the mainstream, and leadership as it has existed for Indigenous people both internationally and here in Australia. The many ways in which an individual may become a leader is even more complex in the context of Aboriginal people in Australia. Ivory explains:

There were two main thoughts on the issue of Aboriginal leadership: that Aboriginal people's notions of leadership clash with white concepts of leadership, and that conflict will always arise when Aboriginal people are expected to conform to the latter. Examples of this can be seen in communities like Walgett, where 'experts' in their fields cannot always act in accordance with the wishes of 'natural leaders' or elders, and vice versa. So they are faced with the impossible task of trying to take everyone's interests into account. Who becomes a leader is a highly vexing question, and being one is a laborious task (2009, p. 28).

From discussing issues related to leadership with Indigenous women working in the tertiary education sector, it was discovered that Indigenous women appear to have a strong level of representation in the academy, from entry level to Chancellor level, yet these women are not regularly used as spokeswomen by commercial news outlets.

It is apparent that the issue of a cultural blindness in media agencies is current yet overlooked in the overall conversations regarding diversity in Australian media. Speaking to National Indigenous Television (NITV)'s Natalie Ahmat (2014), commercial television host Karl Stefanovic highlighted the inability for Indigenous individuals to be seen and heralded as contributing to public life, therefore adding to the overall discourse about Indigenous Australia. Furthermore, media coverage of Indigenous Australians has been largely of disadvantage and deficit, and Indigenous women are regularly portrayed within negative parameters that are difficult to break through.

This paper seeks to investigate the apparent invisibility of Indigenous Australian women within commercial and institutional media agencies, and the impact that this invisibility has on Indigenous women and leadership. It will firstly review literature pertaining to the issues of Australian media agencies and both positive and negative coverage of Indigenous women. Specific circumstances will be discussed regarding Indigenous women and leadership, the public sphere and social media activity as an antidote to the absence of media content in the context of strong Indigenous women in leading roles within Australia. Initial findings of the current research project will be discussed, followed by a conclusion on the subject matter.

### **Indigenous women in popular and media discourse**

When Indigenous people are reported on in the media, it is regularly within a deficit model (Fforde et al, 2013). Kerin highlights discourse as:

Systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices that shape reality by systemically constructing the subjects and the worlds of which they speak. Discourse plays a role in wider social processes of legitimation and power; emphasising the constitution of current truths, how they are maintained and what power relations they carry with them (2012, p. 26).

A number of scholars have highlighted deficit discourse within an Aboriginal context as being connected to and encompassing representation, policy and expression. This discourse is occurring within non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australia (Fforde et al, 2013). Historically, Indigenous women have been principally represented through the frames of disadvantage—family violence, poor health and socio-economic conditions—and radical activism. There has also been a tendency from early colonialism, to “continually disseminate two common rhetorics on Aboriginal women and their sexuality; as powerless victims or lascivious prostitutes” (Humphreys, 2008, p. 2). This is often seen in media coverage of issues of sexual violence in Aboriginal communities. Further, Humphreys notes that, “Indigenous academics, like Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2002), argue that the penetration of victim and promiscuous discourses in media and academia ignores the active agency of Aboriginal women in owning their own future and power” (2008, p. 8).

In literature on whiteness, such as Dyer (1997), it is pointed out that white Europeans are viewed as the norm and not named as other races and ethnicities are named in public discourse. The political agenda involved in this colour-blind construct denies the link between socioeconomic privilege and whiteness. Dyer argues that:

The media, politics, education are still in the hands of white people, still speak for whites while claiming – and sometimes sincerely aiming – to speak for humanity. Against the flowering of a myriad postmodern voices, we must also see the countervailing tendency towards a homogenisation of world culture... Research into books, museums, the press, advertising, films, television, software – repeatedly shows that in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant (1997, p. 3).

For example, Said examined Flaubert's "widely influential model of the Oriental woman" and found that the "historical facts of domination" allowed him to "speak for" and represent the feminine "other" (1978, p. 6). He posits:

Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male and these were the historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was 'typically oriental' (Said, 1978, p. 6).

The concept of Oriental woman, or "other", can be applied to Aboriginal women in Australia as well. Like the scenario with Flaubert, foreign, white (and male) entities speak for the Aboriginal woman, and represent her in an embodiment that tells the audience what is "typically black," thereby missing a large portion of the story. Here, Humphreys suggests, "colonial discourses have persisted in the media, but for the same ideological purpose; to highlight their vulnerability and promiscuity" (2008, p. 33).

Recent examples of this point are varied, including former Labor minister Gary Johns' comments regarding Aboriginal women, welfare and "cash cows". When discussing statistics which stated that Indigenous women were 34 times more likely to be victims of domestic violence than non-Indigenous women, Mr. Johns, speaking on *The Bolt Report*, stated, "Look, a lot of poor women in this country, a large proportion of whom are Aboriginal, are used as cash cows, right? They are kept pregnant and producing children for the cash. Now that has to stop" (quoted in Whyte, 2015, no page).

In the eyes of many notable Indigenous Australians, Mr. Johns' comments were offensive and stereotypical, to say the least. Aboriginal academic Dr. Chelsea Bond wrote a piece for online magazine *New Matilda*, stating:

Aboriginal people have long been depicted as animalistic, not quite human, and accordingly were counted among the flora and fauna up until the 1960s. The depiction of Aboriginal women as cows more specifically suggests that we are not just animals, but that we are the most docile creature lacking agency over our own lives (2015, no page).

Perpetuating the belief that we, as Aboriginal women, are compliant victims, vulnerable to any form of abuse, exploitation or self-destruction, plays into the continual parentification by governments to fix the "Aboriginal problem" (Macoun, 2011). It also undermines any suggestion that Aboriginal women may lead—forcefully, collaboratively or with any tangible impact on Australian society.

To clarify, there is little doubt that problems exist for Aboriginal Australia. One cannot deny statistical information relating to mortality, employment and health issues within our communities. But as Langton highlights in the *Griffith Review*, the song and dance surrounding mixed messages of reporting deficit and ignoring excellence deviates from the matters at hand, and leaves one feeling derailed in their attempt to effect some form of change within the issue:

The crisis in Aboriginal society is a public spectacle, played out in a vast reality show through the media, parliaments, public service and the Aboriginal world. This obscene and pornographic spectacle shifts attention away from everyday lived crisis that many Aboriginal people endure—or do not, dying as they do at excessive rates. This spectacle is not a new phenomenon in Australian public life (2008, p.145).

The Australian media has continually represented Aboriginal women as vulnerable, disempowered and promiscuous. Moreton-Robinson's arguments on deviance and the sexualisation of Aboriginal women highlight how the media focus on sex reflects historical representations of the "black female body... as an icon of sexual deviance" (2000, pp. 25,169). Beyondblue highlights that "Indigenous Australians overwhelmingly see the media as racist and reported the consequences of media racism as being highly negative" (beyondblue, 2015, no page).

More than two decades ago, Jakubowicz et al (1994) discovered that reporting of Indigenous issues was dominated by negative, stereotypical representations of Indigenous people. These representations focused on conflict, crisis and sensationalism, denying Indigenous people an authoritative voice, relied on police and other privileged authorities as sources and typically were presented within established, negative frameworks of interpretation (Jakubowicz et al, 1994, p. 86). I posit that little has changed for the better in the years that have passed since.

### **The Australian media landscape**

The Australian media is currently metamorphosing, as is happening in other parts of the world, from the dominance of mainstream commercial agencies and broadsheets, towards a new realm of online news, activist blogs and campaigning style reportage which are gaining great momentum. Chadwick (2013) has provided discussion on various forms of media that exist today. Together with the 24-hour news cycle and issues relating to cost efficiency and new business models, the media landscape as we know it has changed vastly. With this new wave, new challenges and opportunities have risen.

One challenge highlighted in this era is, how does a particular media agency (newspapers, television news, current affairs or online news forums) reflect the true diversity of its audiences? How do agencies decide what is more important in what they report? And in connection with Indigenous Australia, how do we, as a population, fit in?

Schudson argues that “Journalism is an event-centred discourse, more responsive to accidents and explosions to the external world than to fashions in ideas among cultural elites” (2008, p. 55). It is with this statement that we can better understand why there is little substantive cultural and political discourse from many of the news agencies that report on cultural issues. Further, the general public are also time poor and more interested in grabbing the story that can be digested quickly over the story that contains ongoing analysis.

Conversely, the opportunities of this era lie in new social media and the utilisation of this media by Indigenous people, both here in Australia and internationally (Sweet et al, 2013; Waller et al, 2015). While there may be reluctance for Indigenous people to be included in stories in mainstream and commercial media, there are a growing number of Indigenous communication specialists, including journalists and social media activists, who are creating a new discourse for Indigenous Australia online. Luke Pearson created IndigenousX as a Twitter account discussing media and Indigenous issues and now runs a regular blog of the same name that has risen to national prominence. Celeste Liddle’s blog *Rantings of an Aboriginal Feminist* is gaining popular attention amongst Aboriginal women seeking political information with a distinct Aboriginal female leaning. Using alternative media as a way of disrupting the white dominant frame has been an innovative way of dispersing information and influencing the views of those in Australian society who may not see the reality of Aboriginal life. It appears this is not an unusual occurrence, and many young and upcoming Indigenous players are rising through the ranks to create their own space within the public sphere. Avison and Meadows state:

Aboriginal communication systems existed on the North American and Australian continents for tens of thousands of years before white invasion. As the power and influence of non-Aboriginal media has transformed the wider public sphere, Aboriginal people have continued to seek access to their own media for political, educational, and cultural reasons (2000, p. 352).

While the social media sphere is definitely growing in terms of authenticity (Carlson, 2016) and some of the players in this sphere seem to be making inroads into other more traditional forms of media coverage, there are many critics who attempt to question the legitimacy of this sphere when discussing matters of journalistic integrity and impact on the greater public.

In the lead up to the 2013 Federal Election, very little was heard in mainstream media from Indigenous women regarding political issues relating to Indigenous Australia. What was missing from the conversation were the voices of women discussing Indigenous issues that needed to be addressed in this

era of the Northern Territory intervention. Taylor, writing for online media outlet *The Guardian*, highlights:

Noel Pearson. Warren Mundine. Mick Gooda. Mick Dodson. Patrick Dodson. Where are the women? When Rudd and Abbott speak of their Indigenous 'mates,' they always name men. There are many competent and capable Indigenous women who are thinking innovatively and deeply about solutions for their communities. Do we see or hear from them? (2013, p. 5).

The need to encourage strong female leadership in Aboriginal Australia is further highlighted by Indigenous academic Michelle DeShong, calling on more Indigenous women to become involved in politics, thereby influencing the public sphere towards more diversity and gender equality:

Research obviously shows that women's issues are put on the agenda much more prominently when there are actually women prominent in these roles... particularly I think as a nation we need to be encouraging formal representation of Indigenous people across a whole range of spectrums (quoted in Stevenson, 2013, p. 3).

In New South Wales, Linda Burney MP has been working in public policy for a number of years, and in her current position as the Deputy Opposition Leader for the New South Wales Labor party. Nova Peris, a former Olympian, has long shouldered the responsibility of inspiring and motivating as a leader in sport, and recently retired in her position as a member of the Australian Senate. In contrast to DeShong's argument, the disconnection between these women holding strong roles yet not being seen is that these women are there, leading the way and contributing towards public life in a manner that is constructive and should be recognised more readily in the media. Within public office, there has been an insurgence of Indigenous women holding valuable roles and leading not just as representatives of their own culture, but also representing those within the mainstream. The discrepancy lies in these women not being acknowledged or recognised as being pertinent to the discourse on Aboriginal Australia.

The differences that often occur between mainstream opinions on leadership and that of leading Indigenous people is a debate between individualism and collectivism, as Maddison notes:

Mainstream political culture understands leadership and success in individual terms. Many Aboriginal people, however, have a very different world view. Aboriginal value systems are often at odds with liberal democratic philosophy, creating tension between those assimilated to ideas of individual political equality and those who maintain that the foundation unit of society is the Aboriginal group or community (2009, p. 83).

It appears not much has changed in the outward representation of Aboriginal women. And in political life scandal sells papers while also fulfilling a stereotype that Indigenous individuals are quick to corrupt the white mainstream for their own ends.

In 2014, Senator Nova Peris was involved in a media report regarding a rumoured past relationship and suggestion of misuse of funds while she was an Olympian. This story focused largely on Ms Peris allegedly using a position she held with Athletics Australia to secure funding for an overseas athlete to come to Australia in the pursuit of an affair between the two. These allegations were immediately stated to have been false by the two parties involved, yet the damage had already been done to a Senator who had worked passionately in her position, and the real story of her work as a politician had been largely overshadowed by this news story. This reporting of rumoured scandal is not unusual within the corridors of power; however in matters of Indigenous representation the impact it can have on the reinforcement of stereotypes can have lasting repercussions on Indigenous leadership within Australia.

While there are strong females in community leadership roles, who are quiet achievers and fighters for justice and in keeping with a strong cultural identity, they are not covered by media agencies regularly, nor are their styles of leadership discussed. Helen Corbet, a Noongar/Yamitji Aboriginal adult education specialist, states:

If you don't hear the voices of the women, you're only getting half the story. It is imperative to the survival of Aboriginal societies that we be heard. We are at the front line of preserving and promoting the Indigenous world view by our nature as the primary caregivers for our young people (2008, p. 1).

### **Preliminary Findings**

Indigenous women in this study discussed their motivations for leading as having a passion and drive to do something, suggesting that intrinsic value was a prerequisite to them working towards strong leadership roles.

What is intriguing about the results from my research project is the issues related to followership, resonance and aspiration. The experiences of Aboriginal communities show that leading can be fraught with complexities; however, the following of Indigenous female leaders begins at the micro level—some Aboriginal women I interviewed spoke of family heroes and bearing witness to other Aboriginal women in their own communities who mentored them and shepherded them towards more education or self-belief that enabled them to take up leadership roles. Participant Katrina Fanning highlights, “When you hear someone and you're inspired by their story, the rest you see through their own individual lenses for some people it's just their ability to stay focused and strong in the face of whether its poor health or life just not being fair sometimes” (Fanning, 2015, no page).

The aspirations of these women began from these connections to others in community, and grew as they continued to higher aspiration levels of those that were in greater positions of influence.

One young woman I interviewed came from small beginnings and grew within the education sector to a position as a youth ambassador for the United Nations. The pathway towards this role was one of familial mentorship, seeing examples of those around her gaining confidence and pushing themselves to achieve more, and culminated in her travelling to UN headquarters in New York with Malala Yousafzai, the young Muslim advocate shot by extremists for her views on women and education in Pakistan. Ms. Yousafzai has gone on to advocate strongly for the education of women, and the parallels with my participant's story would have been of enormous benefit to women, and the wider community in Australia. Agencies such as NITV highlighted her attendance at the UN; however, other more mainstream agencies failed to do so. It would appear that Indigenous women's powerful stories of change do not fit with the dominant narrative of the mainstream. Indigenous issues are framed in narrow and predictable ways that perpetuate a dominant racist ideology (Meadows, 2001, 2004).

Representatives in areas of politics, government, and business, referred to a strong sense of identity and family responsibility when mentioning the beginnings of their pathways to leadership. The majority of participants did not think of themselves necessarily as leaders, but rather these women invariably saw issues that needed attention and filled the gap when others would not. One participant works in the social media sphere, discussing matters relating to social justice concerns for Aboriginal Australians and gender issues. The participant's motivations were specifically that these matters were not openly discussed in mainstream media agencies, and she wanted to use her voice to promote what was absent. Another participant explained that being able to connect on issues relating to Indigeneity through digital means is one way of gaining knowledge and mobilising power when avenues for such action elsewhere are closed, stating, “I'm not sure why that happens. I think it's just the influence of the internet and globalisation and all the social media outlets, it's just an easier way to connect with like-minded people” (Hurst, 2015, no page).

Women explained that this lack of visibility creates a sense of injustice for them in their efforts to lead and change. To only see part of the story through the eyes of the media creates a major discrepancy regarding the wider community's acceptance, and it also disempowers younger black women as it prevents them from seeing a healthy example of leadership which they can aspire to.

There is a blindness in Australian communications and media that needs to be addressed. Indigenous women are less visible in reporting about Indigenous issues, even though many of these women are in high-level roles within important areas of industry—the very areas that are being reported on. The reconciliation debate is one example. Kirstie Parker, Co-Chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, is heavily involved in Reconciliation Australia. From a journalistic background herself, it is rare

that Ms Parker's face is seen on television, or her commentary read in newspapers. Dr Jackie Huggins, another Co-Chair, is a strong advocate of matters relating to the health and well-being of Indigenous Australians, and was recently present at the 2016 Closing the Gap Report announcement at Canberra's Parliament House, yet there was no coverage regarding her input by major Australian media.

### **Voice and leadership**

Indigenous women vocalising the needs of their community is nothing new. In 2014, a group of Indigenous grandmothers banded together to form the group "Grandmothers Against Removals" to focus attention on the issue of Indigenous child removals through the child protection system. Due to there being an over-representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system, this group of women has actively been campaigning for change regarding the removal of children through agencies such as The Department of Community Services so that Indigenous families have more opportunities to have their children returned, and to avoid another stolen generation. Once again, this has received little media attention. I suggest that this is partly due to the complexity of the issue.

There is scope for further research regarding female leadership within Indigenous and mainstream communities, including those women who lead from within their community roles, as Ivory posits:

Bell (1983, p. 23) argued that it was not just a man's world that women also were able to maintain 'gender-specific power bases'. Strong women within community lead by nurturing and teaching the children, including the young boys before initiation. In more contemporary times, women grew to hold more positions of leadership in areas of social and political justice and areas of health and education (2009, p. 18).

While there is much to be proud of in terms of the work being done in Indigenous society, the silence outside of the Indigenous arena is deafening. This silence seems incongruous to the amount of grassroots and frontline work many Aboriginal women perform every day, and is simply not being highlighted or further encouraged. Be it in overcoming disadvantage in community, creating a sounding board for other Indigenous women or shepherding non-Indigenous audiences towards better understanding, a stronger comprehension of Indigenous women and how they lead can be further used to encourage greater dialogue within Australia. The research also contributes to a mainstream arena by allowing non-Indigenous Australians an insight into individuals and groups in terms of best practices for working with Indigenous Australians as a whole.

The initial findings of this research suggest that Aboriginal women hold strong voices, and strong positions, when discussing leadership and visibility. They have also continued on their pathways to build capacity and success, regardless of the lack of examples of Indigenous female leadership within media reportage. They have found their own ways—listened to elders and asked for assistance and mentorship from other Aboriginal women that have shown strong leadership—without having much reported on in commercial news agencies.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to investigate the apparent lack of representation of Indigenous women in the Australian media sphere, or rather the inability for these women to be seen and celebrated. The research finds that in the context of Indigenous women, representation has particular meaning regarding active voices and strong participants in society, creating agency and empowerment for both themselves and community. Focusing on leadership, this paper examined the perils of the absence of media reportage on Indigenous women and how this impacts on Indigenous female leadership in Australia. The negative images of Indigenous women within media reports further emphasises the deficit discourse of Aboriginality as a problem issue, and ignores the expanses of Indigenous women in strong and influential leading roles within Australia. Whilst an initial standpoint of Indigenous disadvantage is something that cannot be overlooked when reporting on Indigenous issues, the need for more strengths-based discourse

around Indigenous women is important to the general representation of Indigenous people in Australian society.

There are many Indigenous women working in roles that contribute overall to Australian life, including parliamentary representatives, lobby group members and women working within media agencies. In the recent Federal Election, it was apparent that these women were not being reported on, despite the growing number of these women putting themselves up for candidature. Reportage of such women has been once again limited, with more focus on policy issues of family violence, remote community visits and constitutional recognition, thereby further promoting the Aboriginal problem rather than the burgeoning strength and enduring resilience of Indigenous Australians as a whole.

In the absence of positive media reportage, there is a growing insurgence of Indigenous people within the social media sphere, actively discussing issues of relevance for Indigenous Australia and highlighting the need for greater representation of and discourse by Indigenous people within contemporary society. These individuals are essentially creating space where there was none, and whilst the debate over social media legitimacy continues, the degree of strengths based discourse is further cultivated in this arena. Perhaps it is time for the mainstream media to take notice?

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