INTERPELLATING AUDIENCES: “THE PUBLIC”, THE MEDIA AND PAULINE HANSON

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Abstract

Public discussions have frequently linked the popularity of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party to the publicity she received. However, the nature of this connection was often left unexplored in public and academic debates in which one (or both) of two assumptions tended to operate. These were, respectively, that the attention Hanson received reflected a pre-existent sympathy for her views amongst the general public; or alternatively that the media was itself responsible for producing “Hansonism.” Drawing on work which has critically analysed the Hanson coverage, this study considers how these assumptions may themselves be seen as related to practices of media representation and to the contradictory conceptions of “the public” both embodied in and generated through those practices.

Introduction

Following Pauline Hanson’s much-publicised statements in September 1996 on Asian immigration, special funding for Aboriginal social security programs, and multiculturalism, strong criticism was directed at Australia’s prime minister for his refusal to publicly rebut Hanson’s claims.¹ Not only did John Howard initially refuse to do this, but he further suggested that Hanson’s claims embodied a new era of free speech as a result of the removal of “the pall of censorship on certain issues” (quoted in Newman 1). While such remarks were interpreted as having provided a legitimacy and a tacit approval for Hanson’s views, Howard and his supporters argued that his initial decision not to respond to the “Hanson debate” was a principled one designed to deny Hanson publicity. This response not only sidestepped accusations that Howard was responsible for Hanson’s emergence as an influential public figure, but also turned the tables on his critics by suggesting that it was the inflated degree of coverage which Hanson received that had enabled her success. Indeed, the suggestion that the news media themselves were responsible for Hanson’s emergence as a celebrated and influential figure in Australian politics was also a prominent aspect of the public debate surrounding the Hanson

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phenomenon, a debate carried out within the news media itself, in academic and political journals, and in books devoted to the Hanson phenomenon.

This debate was clearly provoked by the extraordinary level of media coverage which Hanson received in the media, particularly following her parliamentary “maiden speech” of 10 September 1996. In a content analysis of newspaper stories for 1996 that mentioned Hanson and Howard, Deutchman and Ellison (42) found that not only did Hanson attain approximately 40% of the coverage given the prime minister — unprecedented for an independent MP — but in October-November of that year Hanson’s coverage had roughly matched that of Howard. Michael Meadows (86) has also noted that, at various points during 1996, Hanson received more media attention than the Australian economy. In the majority of cases, however, discussions of the role of the media in producing what I shall refer to as the “Hanson phenomenon” presumed to already know why this was the case. Thus, commentaries that were critical of the Hanson coverage and those which defended it both tended to judge the media according to one (or both) of two general criteria. These were, on the one hand, the degree to which it was perceived to be representative or unrepresentative of a public opinion assumed to be quantifiable, or at the very least recognised as the majority or commonsense view; or, on the other, the degree to which coverage fulfilled a demand that the media provide representation in its role as a “fourth estate,” as both an advocate of the public interest and as a conduit or forum for debate which might enable the public to reach some form of consensus around questions of politics, social morality and government. The first section of this paper presents examples of such commentaries drawn from both media coverage and academic analysis. These examples serve to demonstrate two fundamental problems with such approaches: firstly, that they share an idealist and/or empiricist understanding of journalism which is fundamentally inadequate to addressing the complexity of media practice; and, secondly, that by foreclosing any analysis of the actual practices and rationalities through which journalism operates, such commentaries in themselves provided little insight into the media’s role in producing the Hanson phenomenon.

More interesting, however, is what can be seen to emerge from an analysis of such commentaries: that the normative idea of the public operative in media criticism is not singular, but is bifurcated in terms of its usage to represent both an ideal and an actual category, which is in turn marked by both unity and division. Barry Hindess has argued that while “considerable attention ... has been paid to the genealogy of modern conceptions of the human individual, the same can hardly be said of our understandings of the community to which that individual belongs” (158). Given the centrality of ideas of “the public” to journalism, a consideration of different ways in which “the public” operates as an interpellative category within this field may provide a useful
starting point for such an undertaking. In using the term "interpellative" here, I am drawing upon Hall’s definition of interpellation as the process by which, as individuals, we are each “positioned or situated in different ways, at different moments throughout our existence” (104) as subjects of multiple discourses that frequently “contest one another, often drawing upon a common, shared repertoire of concepts, rearticulating and disarticulating them within different systems of difference or equivalence” (102). What Hindess’ point emphasises, however, is a need to focus not only on how individuals are interrelated through discourses of gender, race, sexuality and so on, but equally on how they are also addressed as part of a broader “public” that, at least in theory, both encompasses and transcends such particularity. The second and third sections of the article, consequently, draw on analyses of journalistic practices of representation to consider how the public, as an interpellative category, has been defined in relation to Hanson and her supporters. Finally, it considers what insights the Hanson phenomenon may provide for an understanding of journalism as a cultural practice, and how these might provide grounds for further research.

**Journalism: Producing the People or Peoples’ Product?**

For many, what appeared extraordinary about the level of publicity Hanson received for her claims — that immigration levels were too high, that Australia was in danger of being “swamped by Asians,” and that government spending targeting Aboriginal people and policies promoting multiculturalism were unfair and divisive — was that, apart from being inaccurate, these were neither original nor particularly remarkable. This led John Schausle to remark that his fellow journalists had mistaken “old ideas borne of ignorance and bigotry” for a “debate of some substance,”2 while Virginia Trioli similarly argued that “we [journalists] sought her out way beyond her influence and ability” (quoted in Deutchman & Ellison 41). While in these cases journalists were criticised for giving any attention to Hanson at all, for others it was the type of coverage which Hanson received that was problematic. For example, in the wake of One Nation’s success in the 1998 Queensland state election Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett publicly stated that journalists had given Hanson a “dream run” by giving her opportunities for publicity without subjecting her policies and background to critical scrutiny.3 While these remarks may be read as an attempt to deflect criticisms of the Liberal Party after many of its Queensland branches had directed voting preferences to One Nation, their subsequent inclusion within an ABC Radio “Media Report” investigating whether One Nation was a “media creation” testifies that such criticisms were taken seriously by journalists and academics alike.

In each of these cases, the implied criticism was that journalists were guilty of sensationalised reporting that enabled Hanson to
achieve an inflated public profile. Deutchman and Ellison also took this view, arguing that Hanson’s popularity “is a result of deliberate journalistic decisions which spread her message and helped her generate interest in her agenda” (35), and that “stories are not chosen for their contribution to public interest, but rather for what will sell” (48).

Adopting a similar view, Glen Lewis argued that this is more broadly indicative of the degree to which the “New Media” of commercial television, talkback radio and the daily tabloid press actually set the agenda for the “Hanson debate”. Hanson’s subsequent popularity, he suggests, was an illustration of the dangers of coverage designed to generate an emotional rather than a reasoned response to events dominating the news agenda. The crux of this argument is that the commercial imperative of journalism not only makes it prone to a manipulative and cynical form of reportage, “going for the jugular” (13) in a bid to snare audiences, but that it has been responsible for a more general corruption in journalistic values. Such a reading of the media coverage of Hanson is also supported by Jakubowicz, who connects the coverage of Hanson more generally to the media’s treatment of race:

The populist media see in Hanson a source of continuing entertainment: racism can be fun and her fundamental morality may be skewed but it speaks, as we do, for/to the great unwashed ... And our readers get off on her — she’s not bright (neither are they) but she’s tough, she’s been through the mill and she’ll let no one run her over. (85)

While Jakubowicz satirises the suggestion that the journalistic focus was justified because Hanson genuinely represented a “voice of the people,” many within the news media seriously defended its coverage in just these terms. Errol Simper, writing in the Australian, argued that “Hanson, by virtue of opinion surveys and imminent elections, has graduated into the mainstream of the democratic process. She’s become a legitimate political story, not just a Pauline Hanson story” (13). Simper takes the view that a democratic defence of free speech is only meaningful if the views held by citizens have the chance to gain representation in public debates. Elsewhere, the suggestion that Hanson’s popularity was boosted by media coverage was simultaneously claimed by some media as proof of the representative status of news as a commodity emerging from the free market of ideas. Thus, for example, the Australian’s “Media” section showed a picture of Hanson accompanied by the words, “Whether or not you agree with her policies, Pauline Hanson was one of the most successful new brand launches ever.” In this sense, while journalists were criticised for irresponsibly beating up Hanson stories in order to attract larger audiences, the suggestion that media coverage enabled Hanson’s emergence as a popular politician could also be cited as proof that media coverage is ultimately democratic, since it enables previously unacknowledged elements of public opinion to gain representation.
It may be seen that the possibility for ideas of public opinion and public interest to play off one another in this manner in each case relies on a reductive understanding of the basis of media representation. Criticisms of irresponsible journalism pandering to public opinion for commercial gain rely upon an idealist understanding of journalistic representation as the product of journalists’ (good or bad) intentions. On the other hand, viewing coverage as being simply the product of an actually existing public opinion simply refuses any consideration of how journalism practices work to shape journalistic representations, invoking a romantic view of the latter as the “voice of the people.” Moreover, this tendency to view journalism as either representing the mass or the product of individuals did not simply divide along the lines of those working within the media and those criticising it from an academic perspective. For example, both views may be seen to inform the half-apologetic explanation of the Hanson coverage proposed by Paul Kelly, international editor of the Australian:

Hanson received an exaggerated coverage because the media, profoundly hostile to her views, felt that exposure was the prelude to extinquishment. The unintended consequence was different. Hanson’s support and importance rose to reflect the coverage she had received. A cruel irony and a miscalculation by the quality media. (Kelly 97)

For Kelly, it was the failure or refusal of many journalists, in their desire to act as representatives of the public, to recognise the degree to which Hanson’s views resonated with elements of it that enabled her rise to celebrity. Paul Barry also publicly argued that while they were justified in their negative reaction to Hanson’s views, “journalists have not appreciated the level of support she had among ordinary people, or the reasons for that support.”

Several other critics have also noted that much of the commentary devoted to Hanson was generally hostile to her views, and that this was not merely confined to the “quality” or “old media” (Bainbridge; Louw & Loo; Goot “Hanson and Media”). Like Kelly, McKenzie Wark and Catharine Lumby have both argued that such denunciations of Hanson not only played into the hands of populist claims that the media were part of an elitist conspiracy against the interests of ordinary people, but failed to recognise the degree to which Hanson spoke for and to a significant minority of Australians resentful at their marginalised socio-economic status. However, in contrast to Kelly’s suggestion that this confirms the responsibility of the “quality media,” both argue that much of the popular media coverage which focused on Hanson as a celebrity and a personality was actually more responsible. Lumby goes as far as to suggest that not only was the emotional appeal of Hanson’s rhetoric to those sympathetic to her views more effective than rationalist attempts to debunk her arguments, but that Hanson’s success signifies a shift in contemporary politics which many journalists have failed to adequately appreciate:
Hanson stands for the politics of feeling — on one level, she’s the political face of talkback radio, American talk shows and tabloid TV. Her appeal lies in her rawness, her hyperbole, and her ability to tap into visceral instincts and primal fears. When bearded sociologists attack her with logic, or clever-dick reporters start quoting figures at her, they simply confirm her allure. (Lumby 240).

While Lumby articulates here an idealist view of "quality" media with a romantic view of the popular, such a view of Hanson’s popularity has further limitations. Fiona Probyn has strongly criticised a tendency to portray Hanson as an "uncivilized savage" and a "primal force" in Australian politics (163), since such terms are drawn from the same racist discourses with which Hanson’s own views resonate. In addition, the suggestion that Hanson stands for a politics of emotion rather than reason may, apart from its reliance on a gender stereotype, also provides an overly romantic account of Hanson’s appeal. For, as journalist Debra Jopson has argued, while Hanson’s appeals did indeed cause problems for media workers, the reason for this was precisely because of a recognition that the emotions Hanson appealed to were connected to a racist form of common sense: this creates a particular difficulty for journalists who themselves need to simplify complexities but also to do their job of explaining what her policies mean. It has been left to them to fill in the fact gaps she leaves and she then denies the facts they have used. Her messages often seem to carry the core of some truth, but the flaws need more than a news grab to reveal. (Jopson 116)

Jopson’s remarks may be read as a tacit acknowledgment of the limitations of media formats when faced with complex social issues. However, these remarks also suggest that for some if not most journalists, Hanson’s presence engendered a genuine ethical dilemma.

Representing the Public

Discussions which regard media discourse as either instinctively succeeding or manifestly failing to reflect public opinion are of interest because they may, to a considerable extent, have worked to influence the discursive frameworks through which Hanson’s political and social significance was understood by both journalists and their readers. However, it should be remembered that such discussions not only tend to be rather speculative, but they also fail to consider the implications of how conceptions of public opinion and public interest are actually embodied within journalistic practice. Goot, for example, demonstrates the importance of such factors by examining how opinion polls were read within news texts as providing evidence that Hanson had considerable popular support ("Polling"). He argues that the evidential status of polls was often exaggerated, pointing to
problems with both the polling procedures and their interpretation. For example, he examines two polls conducted for the Fairfax press which attempted to measure the public response to Hanson's maiden speech. The first of these told respondents that Hanson's speech had "called for an end to immigration, the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, and for compulsory military service to counter threats from the North," and asked whether they supported or opposed the views outlined in this speech. The poll found that 48% of respondents supported Hanson. Goot criticises this interpretation because it was unclear to which elements of Hanson's speech respondents had offered their assent; because the question had only touched on certain elements of Hanson's speech; and because even if respondents had offered assent to the propositions detailed in the question, it provided no mechanism for ascertaining whether they had assented to all or just some of them.

While Goot makes these criticisms in relation to specific polls and their interpretation, it may be argued that the problem is not simply one of local inaccuracies, but the very understanding of public opinion embodied in the process of polling. For example, the second poll discussed, which asked respondents whether they agreed with particular elements of Hanson's speech, is criticised for making a range of unwarranted assumptions: that each issue could be addressed in a single question; that respondents' views were consistent and well thought out; and that if respondents gave support for a position, they would automatically be opposed to its contrary ("Polling" 12). While Goot is concerned that the questionable means of measuring public opinion in some polls may tend to impact upon the way in which public opinion is conceptualised by journalists, it may be argued that such means are themselves the product of an a priori understanding of public opinion embodied in the practice of polling itself. This issue is highlighted by Blood and Lee, who provide a critique of the news story that accompanied this second poll in the Sydney Morning Herald, that inferred from the level of assent which Hanson's statements had received that Hanson's agenda had "split the nation." This reading is extrapolated from the poll results which, in addition to asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with Hanson's statements, also found that support for independent MPs was rising, that Coalition support was steady, and that support for Labor and the Democrats had fallen. These distinct sets of findings were presented as a demonstration that Hanson was gaining public support at the expense of the latter parties. Questioning the assumptions of this reading, Blood and Lee conducted an alternative poll which cross-tabulated expressions of party support with support for positions advocated by Hanson. As might have been anticipated, division over issues articulated by Hanson were far more apparent among Liberal and National Party supporters than among Labor and Democrat supporters. As they suggest, this is "a finding in strong contrast to the
Sydney Morning Herald’s assertion that the nation is divided!” (Blood & Lee 102).

Yet while such criticisms are cogent ones, they do not address a key question: why, despite clear evidence that such practices are conceptually faulty, do they continue to be relied upon in news practice? While this is clearly a complex issue, a consideration of the practices of polling may be suggestive. In running a poll based on Hanson’s statements, the pollster is commissioned to provide evidence of the degree to which those statements attract popular support. As we have previously seen, the results of such polls may not only be taken as evidence of Hanson’s newsworthiness as a significant and legitimate public figure, but may also be mobilised to justify the degree of coverage devoted to such controversial figures. Yet it is on the basis of their anticipated news value, and because of their relation to prior news events, that such polls are conducted in the first place. As a consequence, while poll results are not entirely predictable, the news event which emerges from them is nonetheless something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is precisely because Hanson’s views are already seen as controversial, in that they do not conform to a perceived consensus regarding how a particular set of issues may be publicly discussed, and therefore may potentially place that consensus under threat, that they are regarded as newsworthy. Yet the very notion of national consensus depends upon the idea that public opinion may be, and indeed has already been, brought to representation — an idea which, not coincidentally, is also central to a belief in the reliability of opinion polls. At the same time, the need to continually measure public opinion also suggests that any consensus is potentially precarious, and may contain the seeds of its own negation. Thus, the newsworthiness of a poll which allegedly reveals that Hanson’s agenda has split the nation may itself be seen as the contradictory product of an assumption that the nation is normally, or at least normatively, united.

It is from such a perspective that Peter Putnis has argued that Hanson’s visibility was promoted by the very journalistic practices which define news as such. While careful to avoid the suggestion that Hanson’s prominence may be simply regarded as a media invention, Putnis argues that the organisational basis of media production is nonetheless crucial to its content and editorial stance:

While beginning in real events [the Hanson phenomenon] has been sustained by a proactive media which helps produce the very phenomena (the “race debate,” the “Hanson phenomenon,” “public reaction” and, arguably, actual racial vilification) upon which it reports. Conveniently, it has a central symbolic figure around whom issues which are otherwise difficult to handle within the limitations of journalistic genres, such as racism and multiculturalism, can be focused and simplified and rendered into journalistic “commonsense.” (Putnis 91).
These arguments all implicitly draw upon a tradition of sociological research into "news values," the often taken-for-granted rules applied by media workers in their daily work of news-gathering and dissemination. This work has produced considerable evidence which suggests that journalistic representations are not simply the result of the attitudes of individual producers, but rather depend upon pre-established frames of meaning inherent in the conventional organisational and textual practices of media institutions. Putnis draws particularly upon Ericson et al.'s thesis that such practices themselves reflect an implicit set of normative cultural values, against which particular occurrences and individuals appear unexpected, unusual, deviant, or any combination of the three. Putnis uses this theoretical framework to argue that Hanson, as a female politician with a working-class background, whose political views on race and immigration were widely regarded as "intolerant," personified an ideal instance of an unusual, deviant and therefore newsworthy figure. He also follows Ericson et al.'s argument further by suggesting that, in doing so, the media is simply doing its job "in the ongoing articulation and mapping of the moral contours of our society" (Putnis 93).

This rather functionalist conclusion, which appears to suggest that media practice simply performs the public task of reflecting social morality, appears strangely disjunct with Putnis' prior argument that media representations actively shaped the Hanson phenomenon itself. Several critics have opposed this tendency to exonerate the media, and have focused on the Hanson phenomenon as providing further evidence of the media's systemic tendency to frame issues through class, gender and racial stereotypes. Such criticism, moreover, has not been limited to academic discussions of Hanson's treatment in the news media, but also emerged in media discussions themselves. One feature article in the Australian, for example, focused on the suggestion that Hanson's public notoriety, reflected in abusive popular nicknames like the "Okseymoron" and "the Witch of Ipswich," was the result of a media demonisation which other female politicians have also experienced. Hanson had received an unusual level of media coverage, it was suggested, because of the particular fascination she provoked as a "deviant" working-class woman in Canberra. Other critics have also focused on gender as a central aspect of the media representation of Hanson. Milligan has discussed how both television features and newspaper articles explicitly referred to Hanson's sexual allure, while several critics have noted that coverage of Hanson not only explicitly focused on her appearance and details of her personal life, but demonised Hanson as a "monstrous feminine" (Lake; Curthoys & Johnston; Kingston).

While Hanson's gender identity may be regarded as an important aspect of her political celebrity it is nonetheless the case, as Jon Stratton points out, that it is the "criticisms of non-discriminatory migration, official multiculturalism and special aid for indigenous Australians which have spearheaded [her] party's success so far" (Stratton 24).
might expect, therefore, for Hanson’s racial identity to also feature prominently in her representation in the media. Probyn has argued that in the media’s articulation of a political crisis around Hanson, both gender and racial discourses were central, since she presented a figure who was simultaneously racially privileged and disadvantaged by her gender. She suggests that, as both a racist and a woman in public life, Hanson’s emergent popularity appeared a dire threat to white, masculine characterisations of Australian national identity, a view for which she finds support in journalist Paul Kelly’s statement that “Australian society is being feminised and the image of a strong but sincere woman is the perfect positioning” (quoted in Probyn 162).

In contrast to Jakubowicz’s suggestion that the media deliberately and overtly exploits racism, Probyn approaches the racial and gender discourses that informed media representations as cultural effects rather than the product of any individual or collective intention. Indeed, it may be argued that the idea Hanson represented a divisive element within Australian politics relied upon an interpretation that she was an emergent popular figure that was itself a product of the media’s own technologies of understanding public opinion. Meadows has written about this commonsense acceptance within news media that Hanson’s support represented a significant element within mainstream public opinion. He has linked this accepted view to the extraordinary degree of attention devoted to Hanson’s persona. However, several other critics have also noted how coverage of both Hanson and Howard’s personalities and backgrounds linked these to discourses on national identity and values (Bell; Probyn; Perera & Pugliese). In the case of Hanson, her working-class credentials as a “battler” running a small business, and her calls for equality and a “fair go,” were both crucial signifiers of her identity. Bell argues that this recognition of Hanson as a representative of the mainstream worked to naturalise the idea that race was an inevitable source of social discord:

These ways of representing race issues constructed the personalities of Hanson and Howard as authentic “Aussies,” each representing a real concern (anger, fear) which the media accepted as those of ordinary Australians who were not themselves racist or xenophobic. (81)

This, Bell suggests, was a strategy which enabled the media to construct a “mainstream” public which it claimed to represent, a public which could be distinguished from both racist individuals and cosmopolitan elites. In the process, not only was the problem of racism reduced to the most overt forms of physical or verbal abuse, but race itself becomes a signifier of class conflict. A consequence of this process is that journalists do not adequately consider the historical grounds of racism, but instead assume that racial conflict is natural and inevitable. For Meadows, it is because this assumption is embodied in news stories that the racial politics of the mainstream media are effectively aligned with Hanson’s position.
In presenting this argument, Meadows is careful to avoid the suggestion that all individual journalists sympathised with Hanson. The problem, he suggests, is less an individual than an institutional one, noting that the Australian Press Council has tended to support journalists as long as they quote their sources correctly, regardless of the accuracy or inaccuracy of their statements. In this respect, the idea of free speech upheld by John Howard in his initial refusal to speak out against Hanson’s views aligns with that operative in everyday media practice. It is as a result of this alignment, Meadows suggests, that the media generally failed to highlight the hypocrisy of Hanson’s careful management of which media representatives she would speak to in what circumstances. While Meadows concludes that it is vital for journalists to address the overt, inferential and institutional racism of their own practices, he maintains a belief that an alternative form of media practice might represent public opinion in all its diversity:

Journalists are in a very sensitive and powerful position. Many have argued that applying different techniques to Indigenous affairs is time-consuming — it gets in the way of a good story — in the way of free speech. But free speech is threatened unless all sides of the story are able to be debated intelligently and freely. It is precisely free speech which is threatened unless all sides are able to be presented in context.

(Meadows 90)

What this analysis has argued, however, is that it was the very techniques through which journalists attempted to fulfil their role in “representing the public” that led to their recognition of Hanson as a popular rather than a marginal figure. This is to say that it was in relation to this figure of “the public” that, to a large extent, the story itself was defined. Bearing this in mind, in the final part of this paper I wish to consider some of the possible implications the “Hanson phenomenon” raises for journalism studies.

The Subject and Object of “Mainstream” Journalism

In his contribution to the recent “media wars” debate surrounding journalism education in Australia, R. Warwick Blood has disputed Keith Windschuttle’s suggestion that what defines journalism is a realist and empirical methodology, a paramount ethical obligation to audiences, and a commitment to good writing. Warning of the dangers of essentialising the field of journalism, Blood pointedly observes that “[this] definition of media theory may dominate journalism teaching and research but actual practice often reveals a different picture” (101). Blood proposes an alternative research agenda which focuses on method as the embodiment of journalism theory:

By method I mean first, how do journalists plan for, gather, select and present news, and what does that tell them about journalism and the societies in which they work. Even surface
understandings of these complex processes will always, by
definition, involve cultural questions. By method I also mean
how do researchers, scholars, commentators, politicians and
various publics, arrive at judgements about journalists and
their institutions? Again, by definition, such examinations
involve cultural questions. (Blood 102)

While broadly sympathetic to this view, I would argue further that if
the principal reason for such a focus is that it might enable journalists
and journalism theorists to develop a critical and reflexive approach to
their work, both must maintain an awareness that this is a means to
the end of improving the quality of journalism produced. While this
may seem self-evident, it points to the importance of maintaining a
strong qualitative research focus on media representations, perhaps
more than ever at a time when "rationalisation" of news is so fre-
quently viewed in terms of a purely quantitative bottom line.

An example of how these issues of journalistic method and media
representation implicate one another is highlighted by Louw and
Loo's analysis of newspaper representations of Hanson ("Constructing
Hansonism"). Drawing on a content analysis of media coverage in the
Australian and the Sydney Morning Herald, they note that Hanson
tended to be portrayed as a simple-minded extremist, while her sup-
porters tended to be portrayed as either backward and poorly edu-
cated, or as fearful battlers forgotten by the major parties. In addition,
their analysis shows that not only were these dominant interpretations
presented as factual, but they also subsequently became a source for
further stories, stemming from both speculation on the possible impact
of the rise of Hansonism, and a tendency to frame other issues about
which Hanson had made statements in relation to the "social phe-
omenon" of Hansonism (in particular, stories on multiculturalism,
Aboriginal affairs, the socio-economic difficulties facing rural and
outback communities, and Australia's political and economic relations
with Asia). Like both Bell and Meadows, they argue that it was the
journalistic perception of this phenomenon, rather than any particular
originality or significance in Hanson's statements, that led to her
regaining an exaggerated media profile. Thus, they argue, Hanson came
to be seen as

a manifestation of bigotry and xenophobia presumably
inherent in the national consciousness ... constructed by the
media to be a fundamental conflict between right-wing el-
ements and supporters of "multiculturalism" in the centre.
(Louw and Loo 6)

In this way, Louw and Loo again highlight a point made by other
critics discussed above: that Hanson, representative of a "deviant"
public opinion, was used by journalists as a counter-example to define
a morally acceptable position which was presumed to be shared by the
majority of its audience. In their conclusion, they argue that such prac-
tices are a cause for concern, and stress a need for journalism educa-
tion to highlight problems inherent within them. These include the potential problems of using one’s position to promote a consensual worldview; the dangers of an over-reliance on sources’ interpretations of news events; and a lack of self-reflexivity among journalists about their own assumptions and cognitive maps of issues. In addition, they suggest that journalism educators may need to further engage with their students about the role of journalism within a democracy, since the tendency to both assume and promote a social consensus in relation to “Hansonism” produced a discourse-closure, when “Hanson’s views [had] offered the possibility of generating a REAL multi-perspectival debate” (Louw and Loo 23).

This conclusion emerges from the critical approach which informs the conceptual framework of their study:

that there is no escaping from subjective perspectives in creating meaning in the world as phenomena are explained through some form of “cognitive maps” — in the case of journalists, events and issues are gauged by a ritualised process of selection and reconstruction based on acculturated values and assumptions of popular tastes. (Louw & Loo 5)

While an emphasis is placed here on journalistic representations as being, to a large degree, culturally rather than individually determined, it remains unclear how this process of acculturation is understood to take place. In particular, what remains ambiguous is whether they are referring to the subject positions produced by the culture and practices of journalism itself, or the broader cultural context within which individual journalists develop their subjective viewpoints. This is a crucial question, since Louw and Loo go on to argue that by constructing Hanson as the signifier of Hansonism, media coverage worked to reinforce the dominant norms and values of “mainstream” Australian society. In doing so, they explicitly define their usage of the term “mainstream” thus:

The term “mainstream” refers to a collective group of people who are numerically, socially, economically, culturally and politically central to the media reporting of public issues and events. It applies specifically to people who constitute part of the ruling elite which does not preclude Hanson and her constituencies. From a historical context, “mainstream” Australians, seen by the media and Hanson thus refers to white Anglo Australians. (Louw and Loo 29)

A paradox emerges, however, since the coverage Hanson received not only denigrated her and her supporters as bigots and xenophobes as Louw and Loo suggest. It also both constructed and celebrated Hanson’s identity as a traditional, working-class “Aussie” battler, as several commentators have discussed (see, for example, Bell; Perera & Pugliese; Probyn; Wark). In this sense the “mainstream,” understood as applying to a specific ethnically defined group (“Anglo Australians”), appears in media representations to have both included
and been defined against Hanson and her supporters. While this may itself be instructive, it suggests that Louw and Loo’s definition of the ‘mainstream’ may face limitations, for even if such a group could be identified in terms of ethnicity, it remains socially and ideologically divided in many other respects. While the category of the “mainstream” is thus employed as a means of classifying a “general public,” it is no more an empirically precise category than the latter, and may in practice be defined in quite contradictory ways. This raises the important methodological issue of whether the categories used within the media themselves are adequate to develop a critique of processes of media representation. Another of Loo’s articles, about journalistic representation of ethnicity, focuses this issue.

Here, Loo again uses the term “mainstream” in defining his use of the term “ethnic minorities” as identifying “a community of people who share cultural traditions, customs, religious beliefs, language, historical background and observable social and behaviour traits that set them apart from the mainstream Anglo-Australians, at least in the eyes of the media” (Loo 223–24). While this provides a pragmatic definition for the purposes of analysis, he also notes that “in common media usage, ‘ethnicity’ is taken to be an umbrella description of ‘foreignness’, ‘nationality’, ‘race’, ‘religious affiliation’ or a mixture of all these terms” (Loo 221). Thus, a problem with using such a definition is that it tends to reproduce the sort of marginalisation it seeks to criticise, in so far as it avowedly relies upon a definition of minority groups which depends upon its contrast with a “mainstream” majority, when the latter may only maintain its “non-ethnic” Australian identity by virtue of that same contrast. Indeed, it is the tendency of news stories to stereotype “ethnic minorities” precisely as “threatening others” which Loo criticises. Furthermore, he raises the question of whether such representations persist despite or because of journalistic aspirations to report impartially and objectively, allied to a system of “news values” which work to define a normative “centre” and a deviant “periphery” simultaneously in identifying and communicating news. Yet Loo remains rather equivocal on this point since he also cites John Henningham who argues that, compared to past practices, “reflecting the changes in white Australian attitudes with regard to the equality and dignity of all human races and cultures, modern media are no longer guilty of blatant racist slurs or incitement to racial hatred” (quoted in Loo 227).

It is questionable whether these two positions are ultimately reconcilable, since what Loo initially identifies as problematic about journalistic representations is that they tend to construct ethnicity in negative terms, precisely because its “non-mainstream” status is taken to be an objective fact, rather than a socially constructed one. Thus, to put it bluntly, journalistic claims that “news values” represent either a basis for establishing “facts” or civic-minded principles for identifying important, “newsworthy” information serve to mask
an ethnocentrism embodied in journalism as a cultural practice. For Henningham, on the other hand, this problem is seen as merely reflecting a certain outlook derived from the racial and class identity of journalists. It would follow from this argument that the problem of white, middle class cultural bias in the news is that it simply reflects the fact that white people remain in a position of numerical dominance and class advantage at this point in time. However, Henningham also suggests that the cause of an abandonment of the blatant racism of the past is not an increased diversity in the media workplace, but "the changes in white Australian attitudes." In this way, while acknowledging that journalism may often remain ethnocentric in practice, he also claims that such ethnocentrism is gradually becoming dissipated as a result of changes within white culture. In this way, while Henningham defends journalism as an ultimately progressive practice, he relates both its virtues and its faults to those of a mainstream, "white" Australian culture. Thus, where the case for the responsibility of journalists runs into difficulty when faced with the negative and stereotyped representations of "ethnicity," the journalist may fall back on the claim that the faults of journalism are representative of those of mainstream Australian culture. As a consequence, any suggestion that problems in the representation of ethnicity are a product of journalism are disallowed; rather, they are regarded as a product of faults of individual journalists who unconsciously represent remnant reactionary elements within mainstream culture. For those whose position of social disadvantage is both perpetuated and reinforced by such representations, this bifurcation of the mainstream presents a double bind, in so far as it is understood as the source of marginalisation on the one hand, and offers the possibility of inclusion on the other.

Alternatively, however, this bifurcation may itself be seen as a characteristic product of an a priori understanding of the public which informs journalism practices. Mitchell Dean (125) refers to such an understanding providing the "thought-space" of a liberal conception of society as a "fractured totality" or, in a term proposed by Foucault, a "self-rending unity." If such a model of the public may be seen to inform representations as a fundamental and contradictory aspect of journalism as a cultural practice, Hanson's simultaneous status as a representative of "the mainstream" (a term which, notably, she also mobilised herself) and as its demonic other is far more comprehensible than idealist and realist approaches, which seek to discover the fundamental source of Hanson's (mis)representation in either the media, the public, or both. If Hanson's views only attained the prominence they did as a result of a continuing ethnocentrism, racism and sexism resulting from such a view of the public being embodied in journalistic practices, moreover, it appears doubtful Hanson's views could ever have provided a catalyst for a democratic debate.
Such an approach may also be useful in that it enables us to consider how, despite a tendency of news media to discuss Hanson as a right-wing extremist by contrast to a multiculturalist centre, it was possible to see a shift of this "mainstream" centre during this period, evident in both political and media discourse. More generally, a view of journalism practices as products of a contradictory rather than a unified field raises further questions for research, particularly with regard to the historical basis upon which its fundamental understanding of a simultaneously united and divided public is grounded. Such inquiry is vital to the development of approaches to contemporary journalism as an object of study which do not simply rely upon this pre-given conceptualisation of what journalism is and does. For, as Foucault points out:

Conceptualization should not be founded on a theory of the object — the conceptualized object is not the single criterion of a good conceptualization. We have to know the historical conditions which motivate our conceptualization. We need a historical awareness of our present circumstance. (Foucault 209)

1 For examples of criticism directed at Howard see Cox, Cope & Kalantzis, Grattan, Newman.
2 John Schaubie, "Hate Fills the Vacuum", Sunday Age 20 October 1996, quoted in Goot "Hanson and Media" 117.
3 Quoted on the Media Report 18 June 1998, transcript available online at http://www.abc.net.au/m
4 Australian 8 April 1999.
5 Quoted on the Media Report 18 June 1998, transcript available online at http://www.abc.net.au/m
6 The idea that Hanson proved able to actively exploit shortcomings of the media for her own ends has also been posited as a factor in her success by Brett, Lake and Curthoys & Johnson.
7 Sydney Morning Herald 8 October 1996, quoted in Goot "Polling."
9 See, for example, Tuchman, Gans, Fishman.
11 This is despite the fact that, as Perera and Pugliese (10) have noted, at this point in time "Hanson's assets include[d] properties worth around $300,000, while the business she owns is worth an estimated $200,000 and she also runs a cross-Arabian horse farm, which has an estimated resale value of $500,000."
12 See the special issue of Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy, "Media Wars" no. 90 (February 1999).
WORKS CITED


