

Reporting on diversity in New Zealand: The case of “Asian Angst”

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Abstract¹

Although New Zealand journalists are expected to report on ethnic diversity in a responsible and accurate manner, they sometimes fall short of their obligations. This paper considers a recent cause célèbre: “Asian Angst”, an article published by leading New Zealand magazine North & South.

“Asian Angst” painted a picture of rampant Chinese crime in New Zealand and questioned New Zealand’s Asian immigration policy. Self-regulatory agency the Press Council ruled that the article breached the Council’s codes with regard to accuracy and discrimination. The decision was widely reported and the magazine was obliged to publish the Council’s ruling.

This paper considers the issues surrounding the reporting on diversity in New Zealand and analyses in detail how “Asian Angst” breached the Press Council’s codes. North & South was apparently determined to portray Chinese immigrants to New Zealand in a poor light and lacked the ability to correctly interpret the relevant statistics.

Introduction

North & South is one of New Zealand’s leading magazines. Founded in 1986 by editor Robyn Langwell, in 2007 the magazine had an readership of 290,000, putting it among the top 20 magazines by readership in the country (AGB Nielsen Media Research, 2008).

¹ My thanks to Portia Mao and Ming Li for their assistance with the Chinese-language newspapers and websites. Many of the primary documents associated with the “Asian Angst” controversy can be downloaded from Tze Ming Mok’s website: www.tzemingmok.com/asian_angst/asianangst.htm

North & South is a highly regarded publication, regularly performing well at the Qantas Media Awards, the country's main print-journalism prizes. In 2007, the magazine was a finalist for best news-stand magazine, a category it won in 2006 (Qantas Media Awards, 2007). Sporting high production values, the magazine proudly proclaims under its masthead "Thinking New Zealand", a pun on the fact the magazine covers topics across New Zealand and presents itself as a forum for informed national debate.

Yet, despite this, in 2006 *North & South* ran a cover story on Chinese crime in New Zealand. Entitled "Asian Angst", the article unleashed a storm of controversy, and was denounced as racist and poorly researched. The magazine defiantly rejected the criticisms, and so complaints were lodged with the New Zealand Press Council, a self-regulatory body that monitors print-journalism standards. The Council ruled that the article was discriminatory and inaccurate. *North & South* was obliged to publish the Council's decision.

An American scholarly expert on diversity in the newsroom, Arlene Morgan of the Columbia Journalism School, has described "Asian Angst" as "probably the worst example of New Zealand journalism", which made her understand that in New Zealand there was "an anti-immigration bias about Asians" (Morgan, 2007, para. 6). Morgan went on to say:

As a reader new in your country, the story presented an image that New Zealand had been virtually crime proof with very little domestic abuse until the Asians started to arrive. Using statistics and negative antidotes [sic] in a rather haphazard way, the story created a portrait of an Asian immigrant who was little more than a criminal who disrupted "European" culture sensibilities.

I was relieved to find out I wasn't the only person who was upset by the tone and lack of facts in that article. Congratulations to your Press Council for ruling that the story crossed all of the boundaries of fair, accurate and ethical reporting (Morgan, 2007, para. 7).

I was one of those who complained to the Press Council and have taken a close interest in the case. How could a magazine of *North & South's* standing get it so wrong? This paper seeks to answer that question.

My involvement in the complaints against *North & South* may give rise to concerns about my suitability to conduct this research. I have at all times sought to maintain a scholarly detachment in conducting this research. It will be for the reader to determine whether I have achieved that aim.

Reporting diversity

Internationally, it has long been recognised that the press performs a gatekeeper role, deciding what is deemed worthy of reporting and whose voices will be heard (Tuchman, 1980). Critics argue that these voices will be those that own and serve the news media, such as proprietors, advertisers, and the main news-consuming market (Doyle, 2002). In Western nations, these powerful forces are typically taken to be white males—the dominant cultural voice—and various groups are held to have their voices excluded, including women and ethnic minorities (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004; Global Media Monitoring Project, 2005).

Critics charge that the media depicts minorities in stereotypical ways that conform to the preconceptions and interests of the dominant cultural voice (Wilson, Gutierrez & Chao, 2003). In doing so, the news media help set the agenda on race relations within societies. There have even been calls for regulation to encourage diversity of opinion in the highly concentrated news media industry (McChesney, 2001).

Following black American riots in the United States in the late 1960s, for instance, the government appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (popularly known as the Kerner Commission, after the commission's chairperson) to look into the causes of the riots. The commission concluded that black America was angry and frustrated by endemic racism in the country. The commission alleged that part of the problem was the news media, which “has too long basked in a White world, looking out of it, if at all, with White men's eyes and a White perspective” (Kerner Commission, 1968, p. 389).

Since then, much has been done to improve ethnic diversity and understanding in the news media. For example, the ranks of journalism recruits in America are increasingly

drawn from ethnic minorities and reporting on ethnic issues is undertaken by reporters from the same ethnic background. Further, multicultural sensitivity is taught in American journalism schools (Mencher, 2006; Morgan, Pifer & Woods, 2006).

But some commentators dismiss the changes as skin deep. In US newspapers positive stories about ethnic minorities may simply focus on soft-news pieces—such as Chinese New Year or Native American festivals. Success stories about minority individuals succeeding have been interpreted as actually confirming the stereotypes and emasculating the individual's ethnicity. In such stories, the individual leaves the traditional home of their minority group—Chinatown or the ghetto—by joining and adopting the mores of the dominant white culture (Benson, 2005).

Further, critics charge that minorities are still often depicted as a threat to the dominant culture. To help create this sense of ethnic threat, such journalism excludes commentary that challenges or balances this attitude. Minority groups may also be depicted in a confrontational way—an 'us and them' frame in which the ethnic minority is outside the dominant culture (Wilson, Gutierrez & Chao, 2003).

In New Zealand, journalism schools are required to teach their students how to report on diversity accurately and responsibly. The 10 journalism schools in the country teach a curriculum based on unit standards—a set of topics each journalism student must master. The unit-standards approach to the journalism curriculum has been in place since 1997 and was developed in response to industry concerns about the inconsistent nature of journalism training throughout New Zealand (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2003; Elsaka, 2004).

The standards are administered and periodically updated by the New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation, an industry training organisation, in consultation with the journalism industry and the journalism schools. The Journalists' Training Organisation moderates the journalism schools to ensure they are teaching the unit standards appropriately (New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation, 2008; New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2008a).

Unit standard 23119 covers reporting on diversity. Under the standard, each student must consider how the media portrays ethnic communities in New Zealand, taking into account such factors as perspective, balance and accuracy, and prepare two news stories about ethnic groups (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2008b). Reflecting the status of Māori as New Zealand's indigenous people, there is a separate unit standard covering responsible reporting on Māori issues (unit standard 23118).

There is no formal requirement for the journalism schools to have an ethnically diverse range of students in their classes. Seven of the 10 journalism school heads in New Zealand recently reported that their classes were not ethnically diverse enough, in that the classes lacked sufficient students of Māori, Pacific Island or Asian ethnicity (New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation, 2006a).

Such lack of diversity flows through into the journalism workforce. Looking at figures for 2006 and 2007 for the four main ethnic groups in New Zealand, the proportions of ethnic groups among both journalism students and working journalists largely do not mirror that of the general New Zealand population (Figure 1). Whereas 79 per cent of the New Zealand population was of European ethnicity, the figure for working journalists was higher (83 per cent) and for students was essentially the same (78 per cent). Clearly, journalists and journalism students were overwhelmingly from the dominant cultural voice.

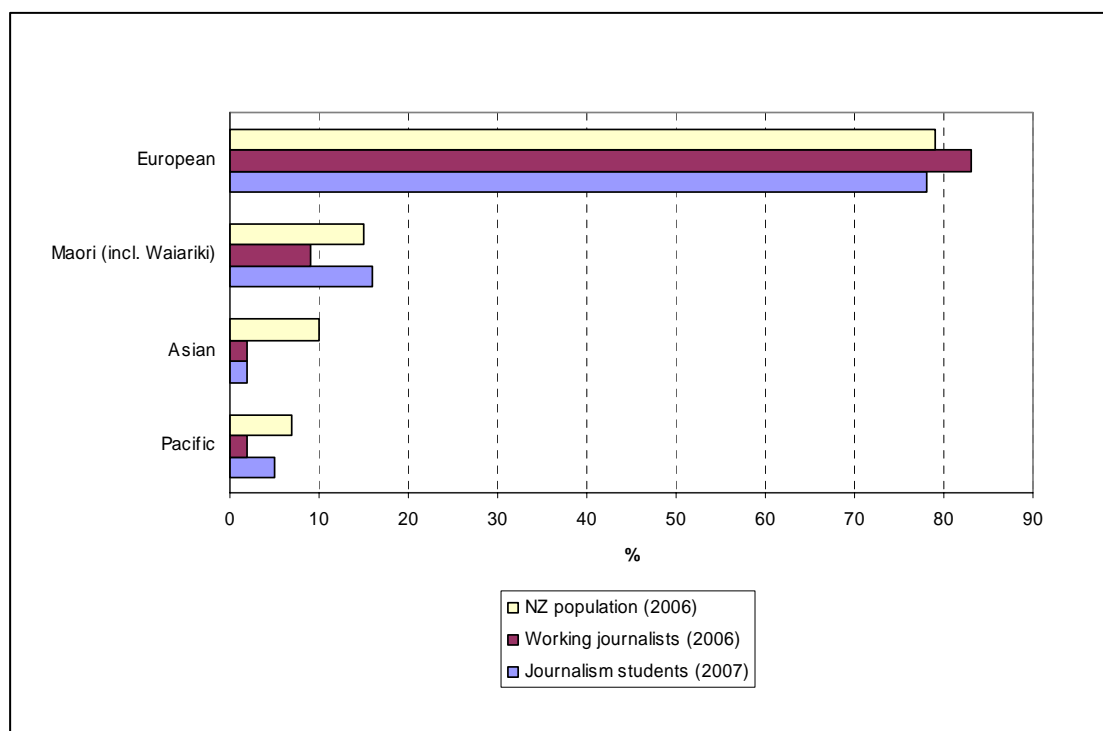


Figure 1: Percentage ethnic composition of the NZ population, journalism workforce, and total journalism students, 2006/2007. Sources: NZ Journalists’ Training Organisation (2007a); Statistics NZ (2008a).

In contrast, whereas 15 per cent of the general population was Māori, only nine per cent of journalists were Māori. Although the figure for journalism students was 16 per cent, fractionally higher than in the general population, this was largely due to the Waiariki Institute of Technology’s journalism school having a large number of Māori students. If that school is removed from the figures, the percentage of Māori drops to nine per cent.

There is a striking discrepancy in the Asian figures. Whereas 10 per cent of the general population was Asian, only two per cent of journalists and journalism students were of this ethnicity. Finally, whereas seven per cent of the population was of Pacific Island ethnicity, only five per cent of journalists and two per cent of journalism students were of this ethnic background.

So, although compared to the overall population the journalism workforce and journalism students generally had proportionately less people from the three main

non-European New Zealand ethnic groups, the discrepancy was most pronounced for Asians.

Many journalists are aware of the issue. About two-thirds of journalists in a 2006 survey said journalists from non-European New Zealand ethnic groups were under-represented in respondents' newsrooms. Not all were convinced, however. About 30 per cent of respondents said journalists from non-European New Zealand ethnic groups were over-represented in respondents' newsrooms (New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation, 2006b).

When asked how to increase the number of journalists from non-European New Zealand ethnic groups in newsrooms, the single largest proportion of respondents (19 per cent) said such people should be encouraged to train at journalism schools. This was followed by nine per cent saying there should be active recruitment of people from such ethnic groups and eight per cent saying there needed to be more Asian journalists. Again, there appears to be some resistance in newsrooms regarding this issue: 14 per cent of respondents apparently saw no need for such positive discrimination, saying that ability was more important than ethnicity.

Many respondents also noted resulting difficulties in covering non-European New Zealand ethnic group issues. Respondents were asked to rate their confidence in covering Māori, Asian and Pacific Island issues. Whereas a third said they were "a bit uncertain" or "out of my depth" when covering Māori issues, virtually half the respondents said the same for covering Pacific Island and Asian issues (49 and 48 per cent respectively).

Not all Asian journalists work in the mainstream media—there has been growth in Asian-specific media in New Zealand over recent years. In 2006, for instance, there were about 17 Chinese-language newspapers distributed as free newspapers in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. However, many of these newspapers do not employ journalists, relying instead on contributions from readers and reprinting Internet news from China. Those newspapers that do hire journalists may also require them to find advertising for the newspaper and/or design the paper (Tan, 2006).

In part to encourage greater diversity in the newsroom, major print news media organisation Fairfax recently launched the Fairfax Intern scheme, in tandem with several journalism schools around the country. Fairfax advertises the scheme and works with Fairfax-endorsed journalism schools to select the interns. Assuming an intern successfully completes a course, Fairfax will reimburse their fees and employ them at a Fairfax paper (Fairfax Media, 2007).

In the scheme's first year of operation, 2007, Fairfax advertised it in both the mainstream media and ethnic publications, such as Tongan, Korean and Chinese, and one of the 17 interns selected was Asian (Asia: New Zealand Foundation, 2008a). But the small number of interns suggests the effect of the scheme on ethnic diversity will be negligible. For instance, in 2007 there were 246 journalism students in New Zealand, of which 86 were taught at four Fairfax-endorsed journalism schools (New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation, 2007b). The total number of Fairfax Interns therefore accounted for seven per cent of the total number of journalism students and 21 per cent of students at Fairfax-endorsed journalism schools.

Several reasons have been identified as to why few Asian students enter journalism school, including the demanding English language requirements (including the unit-standard requirement that students master shorthand), high level of general knowledge required, few Asian role models in journalism, and a perception among Asians that journalism offers fewer career prospects compared to, say, law and medicine (Tan, 2006; Asia: New Zealand Foundation, 2008b). Possible solutions could include promoting journalism in Asian communities as a career, intensive English courses for Asian journalism students, and fostering links between Asian and mainstream media (Tan, 2006).

In the 2006 survey of New Zealand journalists, 78 per cent said they had received some form of workplace training since becoming a journalist (New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation, 2006b). However, most of this training was either short seminars or informal training, with 32 per cent saying they had attended training seminars staged by their news media organisation, 26 per cent saying they had received informal training or mentoring, 18 per cent saying they had attended training

seminars offered by the Journalists' Training Organisation, and 15 per cent attending other off-site courses. Only four per cent had attended formal training leading to a qualification. The most common forms of training the respondents received were writing and media law (both received by 14 per cent of respondents), followed by interviewing and sub-editing (both eight per cent) and ethics (seven per cent). Only one per cent of respondents received training in reporting diversity.

As to what training the respondents wanted, the two most common topics were writing and media law (both demanded by eight per cent of respondents), followed by web-based journalism, managerial skills, research skills, ethics, and feature writing (each seven per cent). Reporting on diversity was a low priority (three per cent). Again, despite the problems encountered by a lack of diversity in the newsroom, New Zealand journalists do not appear to perceive a great need for better reporting on diversity.

Efforts are being made to improve the level of workplace training in the industry. Fairfax recently announced it is developing a small workplace training scheme for recent graduates employed at its papers. The training will take place over three days twice a year (Fairfax Media, 2008). At present, reporting on diversity is not included in this training scheme, although it may be added in future (C. Lind, personal communication, April 11, 2008).

Further, the Journalists' Training Organisation recently said it will merge with another industry training provider, Print NZ (which covers the printing and packaging industries) by June 2008, with the intention of providing widespread, systematic journalism workplace training. In announcing the merger plan, Lincoln Gould, the chairman of the Journalists' Training Organisation said:

The JTO has concentrated in the past on the development of unit standards and the moderation of the post graduate qualification in journalism taught at a number of polytechnics and universities. The merger will allow the extension of training into structured workplace training – an area where Print NZ Training has considerable experience and strength of resource (New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation & Print NZ, 2008, p. 1).

Whether reporting diversity will be included in workplace training remains to be seen. However, when the Journalists' Training Organisation ran a pilot workplace training scheme in 2007 it did include reporting on diversity (New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation, 2007a).

The Asia: New Zealand Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation that promotes links between Asia and New Zealand, has also sought to promote better reporting of Asian issues in the mainstream media. Each year, the foundation offers a range of scholarships allowing journalism students and working journalists to travel and work in Asia. Asia: New Zealand Foundation's media adviser Charles Mabbett says the scholarships to journalism students are designed to address the increasing need for more New Zealand journalists with Asian experience:

Levels of general knowledge about Asia within newsrooms are low. This is one way to try to address that, by developing a pool of up-and-coming journalists who have spent time working in Asian countries (Mabbett, quoted in Hannis, 2007, para. 6).

The Asia: New Zealand Foundations says the grants to working journalists are:

intended to encourage interesting, considered, in-depth coverage of Asian issues that will give New Zealanders a context within which to develop greater understanding of the region, its economies, business environment, politics, cultures and peoples, and/or New Zealand's relations with countries in the region (Asia: New Zealand Foundation, 2008b, para. 4).

Codes of ethics

Another mechanism whereby ethnic diversity can be better represented in the media is by the use of codes of ethics, which can include that journalists cover non-European New Zealand ethnic group issues in a responsible, accurate manner. For instance, the journalists' union, part of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, has a code of ethics that its journalism members must adhere to. Clause (b) of the 10-clause code states that member journalists "shall not place unnecessary emphasis on gender,

race, sexual preference, religious belief, marital status or physical or mental disability” (Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, 2008, para. 3).

Clause (j) states that members “shall do their utmost to correct any published or broadcast information found to be harmfully inaccurate” (Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, 2008, para. 11).

Although the journalists’ union has had a code of ethics, in one form or another, since 1967 (Elsaka, 2002), it is unclear how potent the codes have been. It appears only about 30 per cent of New Zealand working journalists nationwide currently belong to the union (Barker & Evans, 2007), and although a journalist who breaches the EPMU’s code can be liable for disciplinary action, no case has ever been taken (Tully, 2008).

I am not aware of any recent research on New Zealand journalists’ awareness of codes of ethics, but one long-time reporter and editor recalled in the late 1990s that in her 20 years’ experience in New Zealand newsrooms, she could not recall codes of ethics ever being referred to when ethical issues arose. Instead, the journalists relied on intuition to solve ethical dilemmas (McGregor, 1997). The same point is made by Tully (1992), who noted that in an environment of tight deadlines journalists usually made ethical decisions on the basis of past behaviour rather than promulgated codes, an observation that “would come as no surprise to anyone who has worked in a newsroom” (Tully, 1992, p. 146).

Other codes of journalistic ethics exist in New Zealand. For instance, the Broadcasting Standards Authority, which hears complaints about broadcast items, administers several codes. Part of one such code, the free-to-air television code, states that broadcasters:

should avoid portraying persons in programmes in a manner that encourages denigration of, or discrimination against, sections of the community on account of sex, sexual orientation, race, age, disability, or occupational status, or as a consequence of legitimate expression of religious, cultural or political beliefs (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2008, para. 8).

Responsible reporting on diversity is also included in the 13 principles used by the print-journalism industry's self-regulatory body, the New Zealand Press Council. Established in 1972, the Press Council comprises equal representation from the print-journalism industry and laypeople, plus a retired High Court judge as its independent chairperson. It hears complaints about publications against newspapers, magazines and periodicals, often in light of its 13 principles. If it upholds a complaint, the Council requires the offending publication to print the substance of its decision. The Council also publicises its decisions, and these can be reported in other media. The Council cannot impose fines or award compensation (New Zealand Press Council, 2008a).

The Press Council established its 13 principles in 1999 (Price, 2007). For many years prior to that, the Council argued against having any such code, on the grounds that this allowed flexibility in its decision making and avoided making its regulation suppressive. However, when in the 1990s government officials and politicians began to question the effectiveness of self-regulation given the lack of a code, the Council responded by establishing its principles (Tully & Elsaka, 2002).

The Press Council's Principle 8 considers diversity:

Publications should not place gratuitous emphasis on gender, religion, minority groups, sexual orientation, age, race, colour or physical or mental disability. Nevertheless, where it is relevant and in the public interest, publications may report and express opinions in these areas (New Zealand Press Council, 2008b, para. 10).

Principle 1 emphasises the need for accuracy: "Publications (newspapers and magazines) should be guided at all times by accuracy, fairness and balance, and should not deliberately mislead or misinform readers by commission, or omission" (New Zealand Press Council, 2008b, para. 1).

The standard of the Council's ethical codes has been questioned. Tully (2008) describes the Press Council's principles as "arguably lightweight" (Tully, 2008, p. 322) and notes that they contain no definition or determining criteria for "the public interest", despite the fact the public interest can be invoked to justify gratuitous

emphasis on race. A recent independent review of the Press Council noted the vagueness of the principles and the relative lack of consultation that went into formulating and updating them. The review recommended that the statement of principles be reviewed and updated regularly, and that the first review “be conducted with urgency” (Barker & Evans, 2007, p. 5).

Despite such criticism, it would be wrong to conclude that the Press Council’s principles are wholly wanting. In the case of *North & South*’s “Asian Angst” article, for instance, principles 1 and 8 were invoked to successfully argue the article fell short of acceptable journalistic standards.

“Asian Angst”

Late in 2006 *North & South* published a cover story about Asian crime in New Zealand, “Asian Angst” (Coddington, 2006. Unless otherwise stated, all page references below refer to the article). The article was advertised on the front cover of the magazine as “Asian Angst: Is It Time To Send Some Back?”

The general tone of the article is evident in its standfirst (the large text at the start of the feature):

Sometime in December, with the release of the 2006 Census results, New Zealand’s Asian population will likely reach nearly 400,000, or just under 10 per cent of the population.

In the past 15 years we’ve opened our borders to people from North Asia and all they needed was money and a clean bill of health.

But, as DEBORAH CODDINGTON reports, they also brought murder, extortion, kidnapping, assassinations and disease.

Welcome to New Zealand, the new home of Asian drug runners, illegal suburban brothels, health cheats, student P pushers, business crooks and paua [shellfish] smugglers (p. 39).

Although the article uses the word “Asian” in its title and throughout the text, the article is primarily concerned with crimes committed by those with “a Chinese-sounding name” (p. 40). The terms “Asian” and “Chinese” are used interchangeably in the article.

Early in the article proper, figures are presented showing the positive impact Asian immigration and Asian international students have had on the New Zealand economy. This prompts the article to state: “We’ll say it loud and clear from the start, the vast majority of Asians making New Zealand their new home are hard-working, focussed on getting their children a well educated, and ensuring they’re not dependent on the state” (p. 40).

But these positive statements are soon overwhelmed by the article’s negative reportage. Table 1 presents a content analysis on the text of the article, to identify its dominant themes. The text was categorised as negative, positive and neutral tone (Neuendorf, 2002; Swoboda, 1995). A negative tone predominated, accounting for just over three-quarters of the column centimetres. Only eight per cent of the article was positive, with the rest neutral.

Table 1: Content analysis of "Asian Angst" text			
Category	Column cms	% of category	% of total
<i>Negative tone</i>			
- Asian crime stories	197.7	36.6	27.9
- Sources making negative comments	175.2	32.5	24.7
- Negative editorial	96.1	17.8	13.6
- Statistics portraying Asians in negative light	25.8	4.8	3.6
- Editorial criticising positive sources	23.1	4.3	3.3
- Other	21.6	4.0	3.1
Total negative	539.5	100.0	76.2
<i>Positive tone</i>			
- Sources making positive comments	42.8	80.6	6.0
- Positive editorial	5.3	10.0	0.7
- Statistics portraying Asians in positive light	5.0	9.4	0.7
Total positive	53.1	100.0	7.5
<i>Neutral tone</i>			
- Neutral editorial	75.1	65.1	10.6
- Statistics portraying Asians in neutral light	39.3	34.1	5.6
- Other	1.0	0.9	0.1
Total neutral	115.4	100.0	16.3
OVERALL TOTAL	708.0	NA	100.0

Looking in detail at the negative copy, just over a third is stories about crimes committed in New Zealand by those with Chinese-sounding names. These included murders, drug smuggling and retailers misleading consumers:

Tam was nearly killed by his then wife, Jai Fong Zhou, when she whacked him 10 times with his own meat cleaver... Wen, in New Zealand ostensibly to study English, was sentenced to 19 years' jail... Shan Eric Yan, director of Merric Apparel, had lived in Auckland for 11 years before he was fined \$26,000 (p. 41, p. 45)

Eighteen percent of the negative text is editorialising, often presenting Asians as a threat. The article speaks of “the gathering crime tide” (p. 40), the “Asian menace” (p. 41), “their brazen pursuit of big money” (p. 42), and the “monotonous regularity” of Asian crime (p. 47). The article describes local government councils “struggling to control illegal suburban brothels. Owned and managed by Asian gangs” (p. 41). New Zealand politician Winston Peters’ criticism of the country’s Asian immigration policy is applauded as “trenchant” (p. 47), and the article suggests that although recent changes to the immigration laws “appear to have quelled the number of Asian immigrants, this may prove to be temporary” (p. 47).

There is a confrontational tone evident in some of the negative text. Chinese crime is perceived from the vantage point of conventional New Zealanders. The article says that, because of Asian crime, “disquiet grows in heartland New Zealand about the quality of migrants we're letting through the door” (p. 40). The article describes how such crime affects “the average New Zealander” (p. 40), the “Frustration about Asians’ attitude to New Zealand law” (p. 41) and how Asians poach paua when “New Zealanders regard paua as a national treasure” (p. 47). To underscore this sense of middle New Zealand’s outrage, the article notes where the Chinese criminals have received legal aid, explaining that “New Zealand taxpayers are picking up the legal bills for many of the worst Asian criminals” (p. 40).

No statistical evidence is presented to support these contentions. In fact, independent survey research commissioned by the Asia: New Zealand Foundation found no evidence of New Zealanders’ “growing disquiet” regarding Asians. Between 2004 and 2006 the percentage of New Zealanders who held negative views of Asian

immigration remained static at 28 per cent. Likewise, the percentage of provincial New Zealanders (the people *North & South* were presumably referring to as “heartland New Zealand”) who held negative views on Asian immigration also remained static, at 31 per cent (Asia: New Zealand Foundation, 2004; 2006).

The article’s confrontational approach describes Asians generally as an ‘other’:

[Auckland suburb] Pakuranga’s plethora of ethnic restaurants fill each night with noisy, cackling families... Kiwi kids dropped off at school by mums in battered hatchbacks seethe with resentment as they watch Asian classmates arrive in their very own late model BMWs (p. 40)

Queen St’s Strand Arcade is crammed with fashion boutiques where Asian girls speaking minimum English sell glittery frilly frocks to equally tiny-sized Asian girls (p. 45)

A third of the negative text is sources speaking negatively about Asians. An Auckland district court judge is quoted declaring, “Hardly a week goes by in this court without a case involving the kidnap of a Chinese student and a ransom demand” (pp. 41-42). A police officer in the Auckland drug squad makes the positive comment that he does not have a problem with New Zealand’s immigration policies, but is quoted making many negative statements. He says “90 per cent” of major drug cases recently involved “foreign nationals and the large majority are Asian” (p. 42), adding that Asians “all look the same to us” so the squad cannot tell Asian gang members from law-abiding Asians: “We’ve got Asian cleaners and I look at them sometimes and wonder” (p. 43).

Only two Asian voices are heard in the article, and both are used to support the negative stance. Both are presented as success stories—Asians who have adopted conventional New Zealand lifestyles and attitudes. The article quotes a Chinese woman who has lived in New Zealand since emigrating from Hong Kong in 1966. She is “sad and angry at increasing criminality among recent Asian immigrants” (p. 46). The other Asian voice, a Chinese journalist in New Zealand, is quoted saying Asians regard New Zealand’s laws as “lax” (p. 42). This journalist later repudiated the

comments ascribed to him, saying he was misrepresented and he did not support the article's editorial stance (Tan, quoted in Kean, 2007, para. 4).

There is little positive comment from Coddington's sources, comprising only six percent of the article. Even then, the article frequently dismisses these positive comments. The government's immigration minister says he has "seen no evidence Asian crime rates are higher than any other ethnic groups" and the opposition party's immigration spokesperson was "surprised when told of the disproportionately high numbers of Asians involved in drug peddling". The article concludes that "two senior politicians from opposing parties are both ignorant of a major problem under their very noses" (p. 47). Quick to distance himself from the government, the opposition spokesperson then asks, "why the hell are taxpayers paying for these bastards[?]" (p. 47).

Ten per cent of the article is statistical analysis. The statistics are used to paint a picture of rising Asian crime and to demonstrate that Asians are more criminal than another ethnic group in New Zealand, Pacific Islanders. Noting that Asians have been immigrating to New Zealand in increasing numbers, the article says:

from 1996 to 2005, total offences committed by Asiatics (not including Indians) aged 17 to 50 rose 53 per cent, from 1791 to 2751. Compare that with offences committed by Pacific Islanders, who make up 6.5 per cent of the population. They certainly committed more offences – 11,292 in the same decade – but their increase was only 2.9 per cent (p. 44)

This is the only statistical evidence presented in the article to show that there is a gathering tide of Asian crime and that Asians have a greater propensity than other groups in society to commit crime. As this is the heart of the matter, let us analyse the point in more detail.

Asian crime statistics

To obtain a clear picture of the relative importance of Asian crime we need to calculate the crime rate, the standard statistical measure of the incidence of crime (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). It is calculated as the number of reported crimes

divided by the relevant population and then multiplied by some number, often 10,000. The crime rate did not appear in the article, so I have calculated the crime rate, using data for the time periods and populations used in the article.

The two time periods quoted in the article are 1996 and 2005. The Asian population *North & South* used was “Asiatics (not including Indians) aged 17 to 50” (p. 44), the population found in the original crime statistics supplied by Statistics New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2008b). That is the Asian population I quote here. Obtaining population statistics from Statistics New Zealand for 1996 was straightforward, as a census was conducted that year. There was no census in 2005, but by using census data from 2001 and 2006 I interpolated a robust population estimate for 2005.

As the article noted, in 1996 the number of Asian apprehensions (that is, arrests of Asians) was 1791. The total population of Asians that year was 78,513. The Asian crime rate in 1996 was therefore 228.1 crimes per 10,000 Asians. In 2005 the number of crime apprehensions for Asians was 2752 (the article said 2751, presumably a typographical error). The estimated total population of Asians that year was 142,527. The crime rate was therefore 193.1 crimes per 10,000 Asians.

So the Asian crime rate *fell* by 15 per cent between 1996 and 2005 - the gathering tide of Asian crime that *North & South* identified did not exist. The number of arrests rose by 54 per cent, but the Asian population rose by 82 per cent. Asians were committing proportionately less crime, not more.

The article also claimed that the rise in Asian crime was somehow greater than for Pacific Islanders. But the crime rate was 1091.2 per 10,000 Pacific Islanders aged 17 to 50 in 1996, and 1041.3 in 2005. That is, in 2005 the Pacific Island crime rate was more than five times that for Asians. The Pacific Island crime rate did fall across the period, but by only five per cent. The Asian crime rate fell by three times that. Again, the facts directly contradict the article.

Indeed, for the entire New Zealand population, the crime rate was 801.9 per 10,000 New Zealanders aged 17 to 50 in 1996, and 772.4 in 2005. In other words, in 2005 the

crime rate for all New Zealanders was four times that for Asians. Clearly, Asians are far more law-abiding than is the general population. The relative crime rates are depicted in Figure 2.

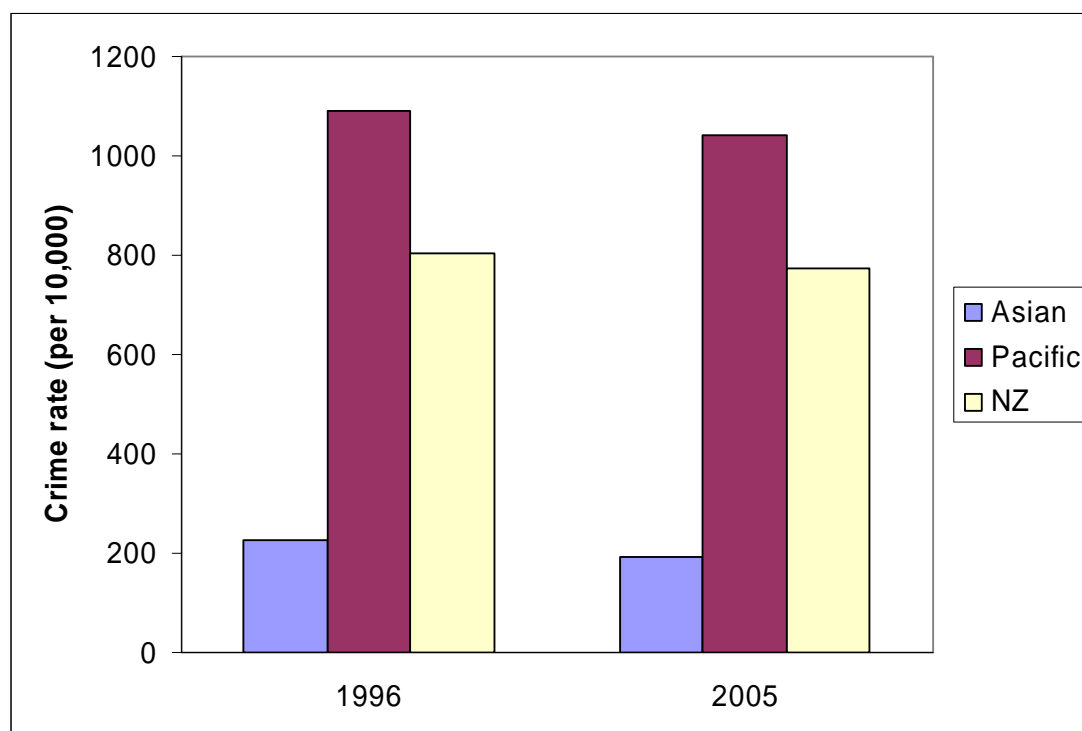


Figure 2: Asian, Pacific Island and NZ crime rates, 1996 and 2005. Source: Derived by author from Statistics NZ data

The article’s author rejected this analysis. Coddington explained that she did not simultaneously compare the rise in the Asian population with the rise in the crime apprehension statistics because she “did not intend to insult the intelligence of my readers” (Coddington, 2007a, p. 1). She also asserted that I was “not comparing like with like”, but provided no evidence to support this (Coddington, 2007a, p. 2).

Reaction to the article

The article created a storm of controversy, with *North & South* publishing 23 letters in the three months following publication. Eight letters supported the article, describing it, for example, as “a valuable insight into an underworld the public needs to be alert to”, “putting in print what a sizeable proportion of the rest of New Zealand say around their dinner tables”, and “BRILLIANT” (*North & South*, January, 2007, p. 13;

February, 2007, p. 20; March, 2007, p. 17). The other 15 letters decried the article, describing it, for instance, as “damaging”, “racist, xenophobic”, “the creation of mistrust”, “inflammatory”, “Intellectually lazy”, and “biased, superficial and prejudiced” (*North & South*, January 2007, p. 12, p. 14; February 2007, p. 16, p. 19; March 2007, p. 14). Another magazine, *New Zealand Listener*, published a critique of the article (Ng, 2006).

North & South was unrepentant. Langwell declared that the article was an example of the magazine’s desire to “highlight issues many New Zealanders are talking and anguishing about privately” (Langwell, 2007, p. 14). When one critic pointed to the rise in the Asian population and the pro rata fall in Asian crime, Coddington replied that he had not used populations and time periods that matched those used in the article and “should compare like with like if he wants to discredit my article” (Coddington, 2007b, p. 13).

In fact, the critic in question had used the same time periods as Coddington’s, but had used the general Asian population, rather than the population used by Coddington. But as this paper demonstrates, using the same population and time periods as Coddington, it is clear that the Asian crime rate did decrease. The substance of the letter writer’s criticism was valid.

Frustrated by the magazine’s intransigence, three complainants took the matter to the Press Council, a self-regulatory agency. The complainants were: a consortium of mostly Chinese academics, journalists and community leaders led by Chinese social commentator Tze Ming Mok; the Asia: New Zealand Foundation; and the current author (New Zealand Press Council, 2007a). During the complaints process, Coddington described her journalism training. She had undertaken the one-year journalism programme at the then Wellington Polytechnic course in 1972 (Coddington, 2007c). This was many years before unit standards were introduced.

The Press Council issued its decisions on “Asian Angst” in June 2007. The Council issued three decisions, one for each complainant, but the text of all three decisions was identical and are treated as one here (New Zealand Press Council, 2007a, 2007b,

2007c). The Council found the article breached the principles of accuracy and discrimination. In terms of accuracy, the Council found that the Asian crime rate had decreased over the period and so to “talk of a gathering crime tide is therefore wrong” (New Zealand Press Council, 2007a, para. 27). Regarding discrimination, the Council found that the article’s language was “emotionally loaded” and its failure to place the crime stories and negative commentary in the context “both of other sectors of New Zealand society and of the Asian communities as a whole, cannot but stigmatise a whole group” (New Zealand Press Council, 2007a, paras. 30 and 31).

North & South was obliged to run the Council’s decision (*North & South*, July 2007, p. 15). The Council’s decision was widely reported in the mainstream news media (for instance, *The New Zealand Herald*, June 11, 2007 p. A4; *The Press*, June 11, 2007, p. 7; Radio New Zealand news broadcasts, June 10, 2007; Close-Up television programme, 11 June, 2007) and the Asian news media (for instance, *Chinese Herald*, June 14, 2007, p. 1; *Oriental Times*, June 12, 2007, p. 1; *The Global Indian*, August 2007, p. 15).

Several commentators called on the magazine to apologise, including the Asia: New Zealand Foundation and a Chinese newspaper (Asia: New Zealand Foundation, 2007; *Home Voice Chinese Weekly News*, June 15, 2007, p. 1). But rather than apologising, Debra Millar, group manager at *North & South*’s publisher, ACP Magazines, said the magazine and Coddington stood by the article (Radio New Zealand news broadcast, June 10, 2007). Debra Millar added that *North & South* had always been a provocative magazine and the Press Council decision was “igniting interest in the magazine” (quoted in Cunliffe, 2007, p. 10).

As well as writing for *North & South*, Coddington also wrote a weekly column for the *Herald on Sunday*, a primarily Auckland-based Sunday newspaper. Coddington used her column to reject the Press Council’s decision, stating that the Press Council was not a group of her peers and that there should be nothing wrong in using emotionally loaded language. Coddington also claimed that:

The council totally ignored the main complaint – that my statistics were wrong. From this omission, I can only conclude that I was correct all along, and the complainants – as I argued – wilfully used different statistics (Coddington, 2007d, p. 36).

I was obliged to publish a letter in the *Herald on Sunday* to correct this misrepresentation (*Herald on Sunday*, June 17, 2007, p. 40).

By coincidence, both Langwell and Coddington left *North & South* soon after. Langwell's departure was shrouded in secrecy, but it seems it was due to *North & South*'s failure to attract a younger readership and was unrelated to the Press Council decision (Drinnan, 2007). Langwell joined the *Herald on Sunday* as its associate editor (*Herald on Sunday*, September 2, 2007, p. 2). Coddington chose not to renew her contract with *North & South*, severed all ties with the magazine, and effectively left journalism. She later declared she had left *North & South* because she wished to do new things in life and that this decision had nothing to do with the "Asian Angst" controversy, which she described as "tiresome" (*The Dominion Post*, December 8, 2007, p. E5).

Conclusions

Journalism schools are expected to teach responsible, accurate reporting on diversity. While journalism teachers no doubt do their best to inculcate their students with appropriate multicultural values, the ethnic composition of journalism students, who ultimately become the journalism workforce, continues to reflect the dominant cultural voice. Asians are particularly under-represented in the journalistic workforce. It is no wonder, therefore, that many journalists regard non-European New Zealand ethnic groups to be under-represented in the workplace.

Although many journalists are aware of the resulting difficulties this causes, they do not appear to regard improving the quality of reporting on diversity as a priority. Whether recent moves to enhance workplace journalism training in the workplace will address this remains to be seen. Although the Fairfax Intern scheme is an attempt to make Fairfax newsrooms more representative of the ethnic composition of the population, the small numbers of students involved make it seem unlikely that this

goal will be achieved. It seems a far more concerted effort and considerable resources will be required to increase the number of Asians pursuing journalism as a career.

Judging by the codes of ethics they administer, journalism regulators regard as important the responsible and accurate reporting on diversity. As a leading New Zealand magazine that portrays itself as a magazine for the thinking person, one might expect *North & South* to exhibit similar values. Yet the magazine published and steadfastly defended a poorly researched article on Chinese crime. As a result, the magazine suffered the ignominy of having to publish a widely reported Press Council decision that its article was discriminatory and inaccurate. Even then the magazine would not concede it was mistaken. Why?

One reason was the magazine's apparent determination to portray Chinese in a poor light. Rather than presenting a balanced and informed piece on Chinese immigration and crime, the article was primarily negative. "Asian Angst" portrayed Chinese as a threat confronting New Zealand's conventional way of life. Contrary voices are excluded or belittled. The only two Chinese voices heard in the article are presented as success stories—Chinese who have adopted the white culture's mores and values, at least as perceived by the magazine.

A second reason was the magazine's inability to correctly use the crime statistics. The article focussed on the rise in the Asian apprehension statistics, but made no allowance for the much larger rise in the Asian population. When this was repeatedly pointed out to the article's author, she was unable to see the point. If the magazine had had the ability to analyse the crime statistics correctly (or sought out those with that ability), it should have soon realised that the facts simply did not support the article's argument.

It seems fitting to give a voice from New Zealand's Chinese community the last word on the matter. A Chinese New Zealand news website welcomed the Press Council's decision with these words:

in the future, any New Zealand journalist will have to be very, very careful to respect facts and truth when they report events relating to

other ethnic groups. They will understand that if they selectively chose the stories without any balance, with the intention to instigate racial hatred, the result could be, “We’ve got you”, because there will always be people who will make them apologise, people who will complain to the Press Council (Mao, 2007, para. 5).

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