Are they making this up or what?

The role of the local newsprint media in constructing non-Indigenous understandings of Indigeneity in the Goulburn Valley.

September 1994 – December 2002

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction: The Mediation Sessions of 1994 – 95

To most of the audience this was a new story, an unknown aspect of the Aboriginal community beside whom they had lived for generations without ever really knowing them. It challenged their sense of reality. Are these people making up this story? Why have we not heard it before? We went to school with them but who are these people to be suddenly making demands that threaten our livelihood, our enjoyment of life? These thoughts would be echoed repeatedly by witnesses opposing the claim in the course of the legal proceedings...Most were not even prepared to recognise the Yorta Yorta as a cultural group, let alone acknowledge that their Native Title rights still exist.

Wayne Atkinson¹

The native title mediation sessions held in the Goulburn Valley between September 1994 and May 1995 and the media coverage of those sessions were the central impetus for this thesis. During mediation and the court proceedings that followed, many of the non-Indigenous respondents to the land claim expressed a lack of knowledge about who the Yorta Yorta were.² This was despite the fact that the respondents had, in many cases, lived their entire lives alongside the claimants, and, in some cases, counted members of the Indigenous community as friends. How is it that non-Indigenous people (the author included) who have grown up in the area aware of the presence of the Indigenous population can remain ignorant even of the most elementary information about this part of the community? This thesis, in exploring this question, contends that the lack of awareness of non-Indigenous Victorians of the existence of the Yorta Yorta as a cultural group evidences the extent to which the Indigenous population has been excluded from mainstream non-Indigenous discourses of identity, society and history. In particular, the present study will examine the ways in which the practices of the local media are shaped by, and perpetuate, this systematic exclusion.

On 22 February 1994 the Yorta Yorta lodged a native title claim. Their claim was the first application for land and compensation to be placed before the then newly established National Native Title Tribunal (NNTT). The claim was ultimately unsuccessful on appeal before the High Court of Australia eight years later on 12 December 2002. This long and, as one of the claimants Monica Morgan put it, often painful process was the eighteenth discrete action taken by the Yorta Yorta to secure rights to their land within the non-Indigenous system. The Mabo decision and the subsequent passing of the Native Title Act in late 1993 had offered a new avenue for Yorta Yorta land justice aspirations. The first step in the procedure was mediation under the NNTT between the Yorta Yorta and initially some 470 non-claimant parties who had an interest in the claim area. This mediation, begun on 27 September 1994 in the Shepparton Town Hall, lasted until May of the following year when Justice Peter Gray referred the claim to the Federal Court, deciding there was no prospect of reaching any agreement through mediation.

Throughout the proceedings, the Yorta Yorta claimants felt they constantly had to prove their existence. In mediation like this, as Wayne Atkinson put it, “…the proof requirement falls heavily on Indigenous applicants. The non-Indigenous parties who have usually been the prime beneficiaries of Indigenous land and resources are not required to prove their identity”. The Indigenous applicants were in a position of having to prove their identity and existence to the legal system, and of having to educate the local non-Indigenous community about aspects of their common history. Ignorance of local history in relation to the Indigenous community led many respondents to be skeptical of the claim, to in effect question the validity of Yorta Yorta claims that the land being claimed had been inhabited by them since time immemorial.

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8 ibid., p100.

9 ibid.


The editor-in-chief of McPherson Newspapers Proprietary Limited, Ross McPherson, was one of those who questioned the validity of the Yorta Yorta’s claim. McPherson Media is the major publisher of local newspapers in the regional centres of the claim area, owning nine local newspapers in the Goulburn Valley.\(^\text{12}\) Two of their largest publications are the *Shepparton News* and Echuca’s *Riverine Herald*, the local papers of the towns where much of the activity in relation to the claim took place. The role of McPherson Media in reporting on the native title claim, in particular of Ross McPherson and leading journalist Geoff Adams, was directly criticised during the mediation sessions by Justice Gray.\(^\text{13}\) Newspaper coverage was also taken up as an issue by the Yorta Yorta’s legal representation in the Federal Court during an examination of Ross McPherson.\(^\text{14}\) At this time Justice Olney also criticised McPherson for his inaccurate coverage of the native title process.\(^\text{15}\) As editor-in-chief, McPherson admitted in court that his personal opinions in relation to the claim were being given prominence in the *Shepparton News*.\(^\text{16}\) He also indicated that he saw the paper as being a service to the community, a community that, as is apparent from his comments in court, he saw as non-Indigenous.\(^\text{17}\) That a person who was officially opposed to the claim as a respondent to control the region’s local media outlets is remarkable; that that person was, by self-admission, willing to promote his own anti-claim opinions through newspaper content, is a stark demonstration of the political role of the media.

While this thesis focuses on the ways the media constructed information about the local Indigenous community throughout the claim process, it looks to understand these representations as part of a wider dynamic of identity construction. As Peter Read has explored in his text *Belonging*, the development of ideas about inclusion and exclusion in Australian society often sits uncomfortably with the fact that “Indigenous people remain dispossessed and their history unacknowledged”.\(^\text{18}\) Land rights and social justice for Indigenous Australians are fundamentally unresolved issues behind which lies a largely unarticulated politics of colonisation and control. Part of this political dynamic is the seeming lack of appreciation for the


\(^{13}\) National Native Title Tribunal, (27-29 September 1994), Transcript of Mediation…., pp239-40.


\(^{15}\) ibid., p10134.

\(^{16}\) ibid., pp10133-36.

\(^{17}\) ibid., p10130.

fact that ‘Australia’ is a construct and that colonisation is an ongoing project. Further, there is little
acknowledgement that the print media, as a part of the twin processes of identity formation and colonisation,
is inherently political. As will be shown below, ‘news’, as information and as cultural expression, plays a
significant part in perpetuating colonial understandings of who and what is Australian.

The literature examining Indigenous social justice issues often gets caught up in simplistic moralising
about the issues without attempting to examine more deeply the dynamic interplay of identity formation and
negotiation (and denial) and the role of knowledge through information production in the politics of these
negotiations. This research is an attempt to examine the representation of the local Indigenous community
in and around Shepparton and Echuca as a means for understanding the politics at play in the ignorance
expressed in the mediation sessions. While this study is framed by Indigenous dispossession and the native
title mediation process, it will look more broadly at representations relating to Indigenous Australians across
a broad spectrum of issues. This study will focus on the roles of the Shepparton News and the Riverine
Herald in representing Indigenous issues over the duration of the native title claim process. For practical
reasons the research will focus on the first nine months (the duration of mediation) and the last nine months
of the process leading up to the rejection of the claim on appeal by the High Court of Australia in December
2002.

An attempt has been made to both qualify and quantify the ways in which the two main newspapers in the
Goulburn Valley depict the Yorta Yorta and the Indigenous community in general. Methodologically, this
has meant employing the quantitative technique of content analysis alongside the qualitative insights of
‘discourse’ or ‘textual’ analysis. The newsprint media plays a part in constructing knowledge; one important
element of the multitude of ways people build understandings of themselves and their community. This
study is not an attempt to fully identify all the ways in which people, non-Indigenous and Indigenous alike,
understand themselves, but rather to examine the newsprint media in isolation to draw out the largely
unarticulated politics of representation in the construction and maintenance of societies.

The theoretical basis for this examination of the politics of representation is outlined in chapter one. Here
there is an attempt to take the depth of this research beyond an examination of the specifically negative
portrayals of the Indigenous community and the native title process that were criticised by members of the
judiciary, into an examination of the underlying ways in which language and the media maintain and
promote existing structures of power. Chapter two brings this general theoretical approach into direct contact with the Australian context through a reading of a number of recent texts that deal with issues of media representation of, and academic discourse on, Indigenous Australians. Chapter three is a targeted textual analysis of a number of articles and images published in these regional papers at the start and at the end of the research period. This is followed by a detailed outline of the methodology used to quantify a number of the issues raised through the textual analysis of the previous chapter. Chapter five details the results compiled through content analysis, while the penultimate chapter analyses these results, inferring a number of trends and anomalies that the research process has highlighted. The final chapter draws this analysis back into a discussion of the aims of the research and offers some insight into the politics of representation and identity in the Goulburn Valley.
Through my many trips out of Melbourne and up to Shepparton, either to head home—I come from a small town near Shepparton and went to school in that regional centre—or to conduct research for this thesis, it came to my attention that the evidence of the very ‘ongoingness’ of colonisation at the heart of this investigation is inscribed upon the landscape. Many of these trips were made on the Spencer Street to Shepparton train, which, in being predictable and reliable, gives a consistent frame of reference from which to view the spatial transition from city to country. As one leaves the city, where everything one can see is either manmade (buildings, roads, signs, power lines and railway lines) or has been planted or designed by people (gardens, landscaped areas and tree-lined nature-strips), it can be seen that this landscape is undeniably inscribed with the process of colonisation. As one moves further out, however, the roads become sparser and the houses fewer and further between. One starts to see trees and undergrowth that have not been put there by people, patches where land clearing has been incomplete, where manipulation of the land by people less absolute. By the time the train reaches Shepparton, it will have passed areas of floodway near the Goulburn river and old growth bushland on the Great Dividing Range. In these areas one can see that colonisation is a process not a single act. Moreover, when one looks at the new developments at Craigieburn, or the new freeway extension at Murchison East the contemporaneity of this process of constructing a nation is apparent.

This reading of the landscape as text may seem an unduly abstract way of starting an examination of the *Shepparton News* and the *Riverine Herald*, however, it is relevant as a text about colonisation in a number of ways. Firstly, it highlights that the physical landscape of this nation is inextricably linked with, yet paradoxically separate from, the idea behind the word ‘Australia’. Secondly, it opens up our understanding of the text and knowledge formation to include the way we travel the landscape within which we live, which to everyone has meaning, and which is as much a construct of society as a newspaper, or for that matter a thesis. Resultantly, this insight has implications for the relevance of an examination of the way newspapers
are constructed to include and exclude, to structure information, in that it highlights that those newspapers are part of a broader complex and ongoing dynamic. Without drawing too close an analogy and developing simplistic dichotomies of European manipulation versus nature and European traditions of epistemology versus the Indigenous person in a state of nature, this recognition that Australia is an idea that is separate from the land itself, and that it is an idea that is tied up with continuing colonisation, helps to articulate a politics of identity formation. News journalism, as part of that colonial process, is not a benign and objective pursuit, rather it is tied up in the construction of the identities that allow us to think of the land and ourselves as being Australian. As such, the ways in which the Indigenous community are depicted in the Goulburn Valley’s main newspapers are obviously political.

Before discussing the more general language of culture, society and identity as discourse, there is a need to look at language itself. Ferdinand de Saussure, in his discussion of semiology, argues that meaning comes solely from within a language system of speech, writing and thought. Part of this understanding is that words, as signs, have only an arbitrary relation to the objects they signify. Any word in one language, by way of illustration, may be given an appropriate equivalent in other languages; equivalents that may be said to refer to the same objects; these are not, however, absolute equivalents. For Saussure the meaning of a word as a sign comes not from what it signifies, but from the fact that a sign differs from all other signs within a particular system. As Roy Harris explains, however, “this can only presumably be so if the system as a whole is structured in such a way as to allocate to each sign its own semiological ‘space’”.

David Deacon, discussing the application of semiology to the analysis of the media, explains that the lack of equivalence between any two signs comes from words gaining ‘semantic value’ within the language system from which they derive their nuanced meaning. Thus, a sign’s ‘meaning’ is made up of a myriad of culturally specific associations. The arbitrariness of the sign to the signified, and the fact that meaning comes from the sign’s relationship to the language system and culture, finds obvious expression in the

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20 ibid., p220.
semantics of ethnicity and identity in this study. The labels ‘Indigenous’, ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Aborigine’ and
‘Yorta Yorta’ could all, in certain contexts, be said to have the same referent, yet they do not mean the same
thing; there are long political histories behind the use of each of these words.

The usefulness of semiology comes from drawing an analogy between the idea of language structure as
the source of meaning and the medium of the regional newspaper. This analogy brings into focus the
structures of media production rather than specific content, which helps articulate the subtle ways that
meanings develop within a system of representation. It is arguable that newspapers conform basically to a
system of representation that makes them ‘newspapers’ (as opposed to poetry anthologies). As such, the
meanings of their contents come not only from individual words’ or articles’ relations to the (English)
language system at large, but also from their relationships within the system of reporting and news
production. Namely, this includes the types of labeling schemes used for different groups, the positioning
and typesetting of headlines, use of images and a whole range of argumentative devices.

As Deacon [et al.] argues, the use of linguistics in critiquing “media texts has been most significant in
helping to show the various ways in which media language use embodies relations of power and authority in
society.” This point is an indirect reference to the work of Michel Foucault on power and discourse.
Importantly, as Deacon explains, Foucault’s work articulates the ways in which categories, labels,
knowledges and social practices are “constructed from and in the interests of a particular point of view, a
particular conception of social reality.” Foucault’s notion of discourse, as he himself describes it in The
Archaeology of Knowledge, is a useful tool for understanding power and politics in the regional Victorian
media. Indeed, it is a conceptual tool used by many writers in relation to Indigeneity and the media in
general. Discourse can be understood as a body of statements, ‘knowledges’ and authorised views, not
simply texts and theories, but the manner in which a body of thought can build up around medicine, pulp
fiction, science and so forth. As the result of this cultural embeddedness of knowledge, one cannot conceive
of a neutral statement or proposition—all statements have almost infinite levels of meaning associated with
them. Discursive analysis is, thus, the unpacking of this linguistic baggage, the deconstruction of the
formation of ‘knowledge’ and the processes by which that ‘knowledge’ came to be. The aim of such

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21 Deacon, D., [et al], (1999), Researching Communications: A practical guide to methods in media and cultural
22 ibid., p146.
deconstruction is to understand the “‘things said’: the condition of their emergence, the forms of their accumulation and connection, the rules of their transformation, the discontinuities that articulate them.”

Thus, part of the aim of this study is an attempt to track the production of legitimate knowledges, the exclusion of alternative voices, the promotion of a certain perspective and the maintenance of difference in the ways the Shepparton News and the Riverine Herald are constructed. Perhaps the most basic step in discourse analysis is to look at who is considered to be part of the audience; who is considered to be us and who is considered to be them. As the research outlined below suggests, it is remarkably easy to trace such acts of defining the non-Indigenous us vis-à-vis the Indigenous them in the article content of both of these regional papers.

Furthermore, Richard Dyer, in his text White, offers an insight into the ways inclusion and exclusion operate in the media more generally. Dyer highlights the politics of non-categories in an Anglo-Saxon dominated media industry. He argues that white people systematically remove themselves from mainstream media representations of race, and that this is a political act, in that “[t]here is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity.” In effect, then, to be a white person in the media, especially regional Victorian newspapers, is to simply be a person. Moreover, it is only when one is not white that one becomes ‘racialised’. Ross Chambers, writing in a similar vein, argues that this phenomenon “distribute[s] to unmarked-ness the privileges of normality and unexaminedness and…reserve[s] for markedness the characteristics of dirivedness, derivation, secondariness and examinability”. Thus, in analysing media representations of the community and Indigeneity it is helpful to consider who it is that possesses the privilege of inhabiting normative ‘semiological space’.

These ideas about discourse within and behind language are not restricted to the written word, but rather they have broader application to everyday life. Matters of inclusion and exclusion, as well as ownership and ‘development’ of the land, are influenced by who is considered to be us and who is considered to be them and by whose knowledges are given precedence. Before beginning to examine the News and the Herald in

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23 ibid.
24 Foucault, M., (1972), The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language, Panthenon, New York. ibid., p[back cover].
relation to these concepts, an attempt will be made to posit this task within the context of recent writings that have focussed on representations of Indigenous Australians in the mainstream media.
Australian Media and Indigeneity

The development of the theoretical standpoint for this research has drawn in part on the work of John Hartley and Alan McKee concerning media representations of Indigenous Australians. Their recent study, *The Indigenous Public Sphere*, is an interdisciplinary attempt to map the ‘Indigenous universe’ as it is constructed within the media. While their text focuses on the media, part of Hartley and McKee’s project has been to highlight areas of continuity between the ‘academic imagination’ and the media. Drawing, as they do, on media studies, cultural studies, journalism education and political theory, they have opened their study up to the “keenly contested debates about appropriate methods and purposes” in academic study itself. This, rather than taking the narrative position of the objective academic, posits academia within the field of analysis, opening up a necessary avenue of critique in the study of the representation of Indigenous Australians.

Hartley and McKee’s theoretical analysis is grounded on the idea of the ‘semiosphere’, which centres on the world of symbols and ideas in the public domain. This concept, in effect, expands on the work relating to semiology mentioned above. According to Hartley and McKee, focussing on the power of the semiosphere helps to better understand relations between “text and history, between narrative power and social power”. This relates directly to Foucauldian ideas about discourse and knowledge. Consequently, they identify the effect in the press of ‘theydom’ and ‘wedom’, “where Aboriginal people systematically appear as ‘they’ figures outside the imagined community of readers and audiences of the media.” Their search for an understanding of the symbolic, of the relationship between the power to depict and the power to control, is a theme that also speaks to the heart of Edward Said’s work on Western understandings of the

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29 ibid., p2.
30 ibid.
31 ibid., p3.
32 ibid.
Orient in *Orientalism*. This connection has been made by a number of writers on the representation of Indigeneity in Australian academia and public forums generally. Vijay Mishra and Robert Hodge, both writing articles for *Continuum* in the late 1980’s early 1990’s, made this link and developed the term ‘Aboriginalism’ in analogy with Said’s ‘Orientalism’. While admittedly they both left their analogies only partially explored in comparison with Said’s breadth of reading and depth of thought, they importantly identified a key component of colonial understandings of the Indigenous in highlighting the centrality of the idea of ‘primitivism’. As Hodge put it, “the foundation premise of Aboriginalism is the construction of Aboriginals as ‘primitive’, in a binary opposition to ‘civilised’”. By analogy with Said’s text, Indigenous people are seen by these authors as remaining the subject of the study of Aboriginality (that body of works, be they anthropological, historical, medical, fictional, journalistic, etc.), but as never being allowed a voice within the discourse of ‘Aboriginalism’. Indigenous people as ‘primitive’ are continually being spoken for by a knowledgeable non-Indigenous mediator, be that a journalist, an anthropologist, a lawyer, a government bureaucrat or a children’s author. Hodge, in particular, adds to this analysis by noting two seemingly contradictory tendencies within the history of ‘Aboriginalism’. The first is a sort of essentialising of the pan-Aboriginal subject, where Indigenous individuals become the repositories of a single ‘Savage Mind’. This is important in that this intellectual tendency functions to exclude the possibility of cultural differences between Indigenous peoples and language groups, differences which, as Hodge put it, “are important to Aboriginal people”. The second facet of ‘Aboriginalism’, Hodge argues, is a line of thinking that partitions Aboriginality off into innumerable “entities each as self-contained as Aboriginality itself”, nullifying any possibility of an authentic pan-Aboriginal grouping with a “common political and social culture”. These critiques of the development of non-Indigenous thought about Indigenous people are part of the thinking that frames this study about how the ways in which Indigeneity is depicted in local media have very real ramifications for the politics of Yorta Yorta self-assertion and land justice.

36 *ibid.*
37 *ibid.*
38 *ibid.*
The desire to articulate a politics of the ways in which Indigenous people are represented in these papers posits this study within the concerns of public policy commentator Michael Meadows, who, drawing also on Foucault’s notion of discourse, argues that despite any of these attempts to articulate a cultural politics of knowledge about Indigeneity, “the role of the media in this process of identity construction…has remained largely invisible.” As part of his text on journalism practices and the ways in which the media “have been and remain complicit in creating and sustaining particular images of indigenous people”, Meadows argues that central to a reflection on these processes must be a consideration of the ways in which “non-Indigenous peoples ‘determine’ or ‘imagine’ Indigenous peoples as well as Indigenous responses to this”. A number of authors have noted such a need to understand that the issues in question here are not simply examples of absolute colonial domination of passive Indigenous victims. Indigenous Australians do participate in, and make use of, the media to further their interests. This acknowledgement is important in that it makes it “possible to see the relationship between blacks and whites in Australia not simply as one of domination and subordination,…but as a power relation…where transformations are possible”. Likewise, while the focus of this study is on the politics of non-Indigenous representations, this must include a consideration of the ways in which Indigenous people are involved in these processes, either in terms of resistance or through complicity.

The academic project of applying political theory to the issues of Indigenous disadvantage has been criticised. In specific reference to the work of Hartley and McKee, Stephen Mueke, while ultimately praising their work in the field, argues that their project is an example of the situation whereby “whitefellas will continue to deliver the ‘theory’ and the Indigenous people will continue to try to fit into it.” To their credit, the authors of The Indigenous Public Sphere are aware of the dangers of simply fitting the local example into the universal theory. This can be seen when they claim their project is one of “seeking to contribute to the development of media studies, rather than simply applying established methods to a local example”.

40 ibid, p ix.
41 ibid, p9.
44 ibid., p387.
Similarly, there is a need to consciously not attempt to overlay Indigenous experiences in the Goulburn Valley with European (and north American) political theory. This theory, rather, can be opened up in dialogue with the ways that non-Indigenous people in north central Victoria understand themselves and their non-Indigenous counterparts. Through considering this dialogue an attempt can be made to try to articulate the form and nature of the silences in colonial discourse that have lead to, and perpetuate, a situation whereby much of the non-Indigenous community is altogether ignorant of aspects of their/our own history and of who the local Indigenous community see themselves as being. Gary Foley once bluntly advised; “rather than seeking to come into our communities and ‘help’ us, you have a much more important role in your own community…we can solve our own internal community problems. It is up to you to change your society, not ours.” While I would argue that society is not neatly segmented into discreet and unified groups, Foley’s sentiment speaks to the core of this project; this research is about owning colonisation, about not seeing these issues as just ‘Indigenous studies’ or as solely issues of Indigenous identity, but rather about reconfiguring these debates as issues of European colonialism.

\[\text{Heartley & McKee}, \text{op. cit.}, \text{p2}.\]
On Thursday the 29th of September 1994, the last day of the initial mediation sessions, Justice Gray began his closing remarks with: “...I must unfortunately start with something that presents itself to me as a negative today and that is what I see in the Shepparton News today”,\(^{47}\) to which he later adds, “...I am sure anyone who has spent the last 2½ days here would agree with this, it was not in any sense a balanced report”.\(^{48}\) The article to which he was referring was that morning’s front-page feature by Geoff Adams under the title “Native title fears”.\(^{49}\) The content and timing of this article offers a starting point for examining the subtleties of discursive techniques and exclusion, but it also exemplifies the latent hostility in some parts of the community toward the Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim, not to mention patently biased journalism.

The sub-heading “I thought the idea of a mediation was that it would be informal and the parties would be equal. There’s nothing equal about this”\(^{50}\) heads the article, setting the tone for the report that embattled honest country folk are being ganged up upon by the government and the Yorta Yorta. This rhetorical technique is exemplified when Adams writes that the Yorta Yorta were “represented with a battery of senior and junior lawyers and the state governments also had senior lawyers present, while many local land owners and other people with an interest in the claim were representing themselves.”\(^{51}\) Adams clearly draws the lines of engagement, to take up his militaristic metaphor of ‘batteries’, with the Shepparton News clearly on the side of the embattled local land owner and these ‘other people’ (the Yorta Yorta and the state governments) on the other. In fact, Adams seems to be deliberately stirring up the very ‘fears’ that he claims to be reporting. For instance, in a region that revolves around primary industries, the way that he opens the

\(^{47}\) National Native Title Tribunal, (27-29 September 1994), Transcripts of Mediation…, p239.
\(^{48}\) \textit{ibid.}, p240.
\(^{50}\) \textit{ibid.}
\(^{51}\) \textit{ibid.}
article with the misleading line “Yorta Yorta people want to end timber production and grazing on public lands”, can only have been designed to provoke opposition and fear.

It is interesting to look at whose opinions are given priority in this article. Six people are quoted directly; a grazier, a Shepparton solicitor representing non-Indigenous respondents, ‘some people’, a landowner, a tourism operator, and an un-named respondent, all of whom are negative toward either the process or the claim itself. The only positive comment about the claim comes from the tribunal’s public relations officer who is indirectly quoted on the spill-over onto page two. The only voice that the Yorta Yorta are given is the reproduction of a confidential draft document that had been handed out in the mediation sessions to give participants an idea of what the Yorta Yorta hoped to achieve through negotiations. The reproduction of this document against the principles and specific instructions of the Tribunal is an act showing contempt for the mediation process. This summary document does not form part of the headline article, rather it is an un-editorialised addition to the bottom of page two under the separate title “Yorta Yorta outline policy on claimed areas”.

Notably, Adams’ article contains some great examples of what Dyer and Chambers were referring to in relation to the silences in media discourse in relation to whiteness as a racial category. In the “Native title fears” article the only actors identified with an ethnic label are the “Yorta Yorta people”. Everyone else is identified by their occupation, or they are not identified at all, just referred to as “some people with an interest in the claim” or alluded to by the line “…THE NEWS was told”. Seemingly, their ethnicity is irrelevant, as these people are part of the imagined readership to which Hartley and McKee referred. Adams says that “some people said they had been ‘alternatively seduced and badgered’ by legal council for the Yorta Yorta”, while five lines later writes “one farmer doubted the mediation process could succeed unless the Yorta Yorta people were prepared to compromise.” The use of the label ‘Yorta Yorta’ is quite significant in two ways. Firstly, if you remove ‘Yorta Yorta’ from the second quote it reads radically differently, a word play which demonstrates the power of identifying difference in this case. Secondly, it evidences the way in which the Yorta Yorta are placed outside the community of readers of the Shepparton News. By not finding it necessary to include the ethnicity of the people whose voices he uses Adams is at

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52 ibid.
54 Adams, G., loc. cit.
once attributing them with the quality of normalcy and is marginalising the Indigenous claimants as different or separate from the us of the community.

Turning to the Riverine Herald eleven days later, several of these issues are again notable. The article, “Further meeting called on claims”,57 carries the sub-heading “People should not be panicked into negotiating with the Yorta Yorta”, a quote from state National Party MP Noel Maughn. This comment sets the scene for another negative portrayal of the mediation process. In addition to playing on fears and advising against co-operation with the applicants in mediation, this article, like that of Geoff Adams, is constructed in a way that excludes Indigenous people’s voices and posits them outside the community. The article contains no Yorta Yorta views or opinions. It is presumably just a press release from Noel Maughn’s electorate office that has been used as cheap copy by a small regional newspaper. As such, it gives precedence to the presumed desires of Maughn’s voting demographic, namely that of landowners, who at best are skeptical about the claim. Once again the Yorta Yorta are the only people referred to by their ethnicity, and the non-Indigenous ‘people’ of the sub-heading are simply ‘people’ who remain unmarked.

In the article Maughn is quoted referring to a letter to the editor that had been published in the Herald the Friday previous that contained “historic information…[that]…highlighted evidence which refuted part of the claim”.58 The letter to which he refers, titled “Is the Yorta Yorta claim valid?”,59 was written by Peter Andrew, a regular contributor to the Herald and the News over the period of the claim process. Newspapers such as the Herald do carry disclaimers stating that “opinions published are not necessarily those of the newspaper”,60 however, the importance of this letter should not be understated. The power of the statements he makes, such that they get taken up by the local MP as definitive proof that part of the claim was invalid, comes through the way academic discourse gives Andrew a base from which to assume his authoritative standpoint. The evidence he refers to is “substantiated evidence from early explorers, pioneers, surveyors during the 1840’s”,61 which from the details he gives, seeing that he doesn’t reference these sources, presumably comes from the widely available writings of Edmund Curr, namely his Recollections of

55 ibid.
56 ibid. [author’s emphases]
57 Hoghton, S., “Further meeting called on claims”, Riverine Herald, Monday, 10 October 1994, p1.
58 ibid.
60 Riverine Herald, Friday, 7 October 1994, p4.
61 Andrew, P., loc. cit.
Squatting in Victoria, which was written 40 years after the fact. This evidence, which was also called upon in the Federal Court, may not be particularly reliable, but the fact that it is a written text, and that it possesses an academic style, lends it a powerful sense of legitimacy. Andrew picks up on this and uses it to create a sense of scientific objectivity. It is the claim to scientific rational argument that raises this letter to the status of truth in the eyes of Noel Maughn, and presumably much of the reading public. This historic evidence is unquestioningly taken as more authoritative than the oral traditions of the Yorta Yorta upon which the claim had been based. This speaks directly to the power of discourses of science and academia as well as the media to allocate legitimacy to certain (European) traditions of knowledge. In a way this ‘historic’ information has been used as a way of purporting to ‘know’ who the Yorta Yorta are better than they do themselves.

Photos make up an important aspect of the language of newspapers. It may also be said that images contain structural information that allows us to draw meaning from them through subjective interpretation. That is to say no two ‘readings’ of a photo will be the same, but that, nonetheless, readings may be said to be influenced by the structure of the photo by what has been included and what has not, by what has been emphasised or obscured. When talking about race and identity, appearance is central to understandings of significant difference. The inclusion and use of photos in accompanying articles about Indigenous issues is an essential point of analysis.

62 Curr, E., (1883), Recollections of squatting in Victoria, George Robinson, Melbourne.
The photo presented above is a remarkable one for the exaggerated way that it illustrates this point. The story accompanying the photo is a quite up-beat assessment of the opening of Victoria’s first Koori court in Shepparton. While local Indigenous community members’ voices are a notable omission from the report, Marion Hansen, the Victorian ATSIC commissioner, is quoted directly, albeit on the page-two spill-over and in a secondary fashion to Attorney General Rob Hulls. The photo, however, contains the real statement of subjugation. It offers up an image of the preeminence of non-Indigenous power in the justice system, with the members of the Koori community relegated to the background. With Rob Hulls in his formal attire alongside an apparently non-Indigenous police inspector in uniform taking up the foreground centre of the image and the unnamed representatives of the Indigenous community left in the back corner of the room, the reader is being presented with a clear expression of hierarchies of importance. Looking at the caption you would be forgiven for thinking that the local Koori community leaders were not in the photo at all. This figure illustrates a mode of depiction that arguably perpetuates disinterest in, and ignorance of, Indigenous parts of the community by the non-Indigenous. While this is just one photograph, albeit a very good example of the language of images, I am tempted to suggest that the relationship expressed in this image exemplifies the general attitude of the local press toward the Indigenous community.

In a final example, this time taken from the Herald the day before the High Court decision, 11 December 2002, the singling out of Indigenous actors for labeling is obvious. This article, unlike the earlier pieces in relation to the native title claim, is a positive piece reporting on a number of graduates from a new education program called Nyerna Studies for specialist Koori educators. Here is a case where a number of people have been mentioned but it is only the ‘Koori person’ who is specified and racialised. The non-Indigenous graduates are, by contrast,
normal and are one of the *us* of the *Herald’s* readership. The point is not so much that there is anything wrong with being identified as Koori, and in this case the relevance of a Koori person graduating from a course designed for educators specifically working with Koori students is obvious, rather it is that the author of the report takes it as commonsense that the other people are just people, that their ethnicity is irrelevant.

While these examples of the ways in which the construction of news acts to subjugate and marginalise Indigenous voices, further insight can be gained by quantifying the prevalence of these key discursive aspects through a content analysis of the periods in question. Namely; the way that non-Indigenous voices are given priority over Indigenous ones in relation to issues that can be seen to affect Indigenous people directly; the use of certain labels to identify Indigenous people; whether articles that relate to issues involving the Indigenous community are positive, negative or indifferent, and; whether this has any notable effect on what types of labels are used and whether Indigenous voices are included.
The textual analysis of the previous chapter leaves itself open to the charge of unrepresentative coverage. For this reason, content analysis has been employed to quantify the prevalence of these discursive traits in the papers being examined. This quantitative research will look at whose voices are being represented, which issues are being covered and how various actors are labeled. The research takes as its units of study the individual papers from two periods covering the first and last nine months of the native title claim process. It is hoped that by sampling periods at the beginning and end of the process, it may be possible to both analyse these periods as individual sets of data and to compare the two to infer how representation may have changed in the eight year period 1994-2002.

Content analysis as a quantitative method is only useful for making inferences in quite general terms; it misses the nuances of individual texts. It offers, however, a unique opportunity to identify trends and lend some support to the assertions made above about textual structures. Content analysis will only give answers to questions asked. In this study the findings will be thoroughly framed by a desire to locate trends in relation to labeling and voice exclusion of the Indigenous community. Hence, there should be no illusions about what may be gleaned from the results obtained. It should also be noted that a number of the categories that will be quantified require a value judgement on the part of the researcher, in particular, in relation to the attitude expressed in each article toward Indigenous interests. Therefore, the author makes no claims to detached scientific objectivity, but where certain difficulties have arisen in assessing the content of certain types of articles, this will be expanded upon in the analysis of the results (see chapter 6). Just as newspaper articles have been described as constructs rather than expressions of facts, so too are the statistics being compiled. By being aware of this, one is better equipped to assess the merit of the conclusions made from that data.
Methodological guidance has been drawn from David Deacon’s [et al] *Researching Communications*, where content analysis is broken down into a number of steps, 64 namely:

- Defining the central issues – having clearly spelt out goals and questions for the research and assessing whether quantitative analysis is best suited to achieving these goals.
- Sampling – defining the complete range of ‘content’ about which inferences will be made.
- Deciding on the sampling unit, i.e. individual articles, certain sections of a paper, the entire paper and so on.
- Deciding how much of the range of research needs to be assessed for a credible picture to be developed.
- Deciding what to count.
- Defining qualifying criteria – deciding what qualifies a unit of study as fitting within the parameters of the research, so that data collection may be conducted systematically.
- Coding – developing a set of values for each of the variables within the study, that is, the things being looked for.
- Developing a data collection form.
- Collecting data.
- Analysing data.

**Defining Central Issues**

Following the textual analysis, four key concerns emerged:

That the local media is a part of a process of community identity construction that excludes Indigenous actors by defining them as a special case, hence;

*Who is being labeled?*

That Indigenous voices are being excluded in favour of non-Indigenous viewpoints;

*Who are the main actors?*

In order to assess whether these two issues are related to the type of issues being reported in the press, or whether they represent underlying independent phenomenon, two additional questions arise:

63 Deacon, D, [et al.], (1999), *op. cit.*, p117.
64 *ibid.*, pp117-31.
What issues are being reported?

and;

What attitudes toward Indigenous interests can be identified?

These questions, while focussing on specific aspects of individual texts, also offer some scope for making statements about whether there have been any changes in focus and style of reporting over the eight year period.

Sampling

The sample will include the newspapers the Shepparton News and the Riverine Herald over two periods. The first, September 1994 to May 1995, covers the duration of the mediation sessions that took place in the Goulburn Valley at the start of the native title claim process. The second period extends from April 2002 up to December 2002, the month in which the High Court made its final rejection of the Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim. This second period has been selected to be a comparable nine-month duration of the first.

The unit of analysis will be the entire news content of these papers. This does not include advertising, classifieds, or the real estate sections, but does include the sport and art sections when they are published. The Country News insert for farmers is also included in the sample when it is encountered.

The Riverine Herald is published on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, while the Shepparton News is published five days a week. To obtain comparable sample sizes for both papers, only Monday, Wednesday and Friday editions of the News will be considered.

Qualifying Criteria

Within these units of analysis, the research is looking for articles that deal directly with Indigenous/non-Indigenous issues. There are two points to note about this focus. Firstly, it allows the study to concentrate on the dynamics of how these papers represent issues relating to Indigenous people and to quantify the types of voices, labels and issues that are offered up to the readership in obvious relation to Indigeneity. This is done on the presumption that this has a combined effect on readers’ understandings of the Indigenous community. Examining the extent of this effect, however, is beyond the scope of this study. The second
point is that this method of focusing on Indigenous related articles works on the assumption that these papers do use obvious labeling systematically in relation to Indigenous issues. This assumption has been largely corroborated, with a couple of notable exceptions, namely some sports articles referring to the Shepparton football/netball club Rumbalara.

**Defining What to Count**

The study will count; day, date, which newspaper the article appears in, size of article and page number for the purposes of identification, in addition to which, the research will also cover the more substantive aspects of;

1. What labels were used to identify Indigenous people if any, and, if no label was used, how was the article identifiably about Indigenous community issues?
2. Who are the main actors in the article, whose voice is given prominence? This variable will include an assessment of how this actor was labeled, either as Indigenous, non-Indigenous, or not stated.
3. What issues are being reported?
4. Attitude will also be assessed. This value judgement depends on the researcher to decide whether an article’s content is considered to be negative, positive or indifferent toward Indigenous people.

**Coding Schedule**

See appendix A.

**Collecting Data**

Data was collected at the State Library of Victoria by the author and a research assistant. To assess the consistency of our judgements in relation to both article identification as pertaining to Indigenous community issues, and our appraisal of the subjective categories relating to attitude and main actors, ten newspapers were randomly selected from the sample and were assessed independently by both researchers according to the above criteria. The results from these pilot tests were compared to identify any obvious divergences of opinion. While the assessments almost completely agreed, this process did identify a need to fine-tune the categories relating to attitude which resulted in the introduction of categories 4, 5 and 6 under Attitude (see Appendix A).
Analysis of data

The assessment phase of the process was assisted by the use of Microsoft Access to collate, compare and sort the data as a database.
Below is an outline of the data gathered from examining 476 newspapers, 238 editions each of the *Shepparton News* and the *Riverine Herald* that were published on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays over two nine-month periods. The two sample periods worked out evenly, with 119 editions of both papers sourced from 1 September 1994 through to 31 May 1995 and from 1 April 2002 to 31 December 2002. In these papers 263 articles were identified as carrying content pertaining specifically to the local Indigenous community or to Indigenous Australians more generally; 131 in 2002 and 132 in 1994/95. This represents slightly more than one article in every second newspaper. The articles ranged in size from just a few lines to two page spreads, their average length, however, was 27cm (which equates to about 270-300 words). They were most commonly located on page three (49 articles), but there were significant numbers on pages one (36), two (34), four (27) and five (25); half of the front cover stories related to the native title claim.

Beyond this simple profile, the aim of the data collection was to examine the ways in which these two papers portrayed the local Indigenous community. The mediation sessions of 1994/95 and the subsequent legal battles over native title were the focal point for this examination. As the sample concentrates on periods associated with this process, the results are unlikely to provide an overview of how the Indigenous community are represented in general, but rather of how they were portrayed at times when there was substantial interest in issues of ownership and, to a lesser extent, Indigenous rights. It is expected that the results will be particularly demonstrative of this point in relation to the types of issues being covered by the press.

The *Country News*, which is published as an insert in the *Shepparton News* and the *Riverine Herald*, was originally to be included as a separate publication. Its inclusion in both papers on the days examined in the two samples, however, was sporadic. As such, articles contained within these publications have been subsumed under the statistics for the paper within which the insert was found.
There has been some incidence of syndication between papers, in particular over stories relating to the native title claim. While this is interesting in the way that a single journalist’s work has come to potentially inform the opinions of both papers’ readers on a number of occasions, this characteristic has not been recorded numerically, and each of these articles in question has been recorded separately.

The present study has focused on labeling systems and the privileging of certain voices within news items. The data collected here has, however, taken note of the types of issues being covered, from which a few interesting points can be drawn:

**Chart 1: Issues by period**

What can be noted here, as expected, is the prominence of the native title claim as a news item in 1994/95. In contrast, the nine months sampled in 2002 revealed a significantly lower level of coverage to the point where the number of articles concerning native title is less than that of those concerning culture, sport or community development. According to Hartley and McKee’s aforementioned research, the amount of coverage of native title issues in relation to Indigeneity in the Australian ‘mediasphere’ in 1994 and 1995
was less than that which related to sport, arts or culture by a substantial margin.\textsuperscript{65} While their categories are not entirely analogous to mine, this indicates that the interest in this native title claim was a particularly local phenomenon. Interestingly, as mentioned above, the number of articles relating directly to the Indigenous community was almost identical over the two sample periods, 131 in 1994/95 and 132 in 2002. Thus, it would seem that either news relating to the claim was published to the exclusion of other Indigenous community related stories, or there has been an increase in the amount of interest in stories about the Indigenous community by these papers since 1994/95.

Culture and sport both feature prominently, with the marked rise in stories relating to sport for 2002 in part no doubt related to the entrance of the Indigenous community’s Rumbalara Football/Netball Club into the local competition in the intervening period, and their outstanding success in the 2002 season.\textsuperscript{66} Community and social development were also reoccurring themes that featured more prominently in the 2002 sample.

**Labels**

Thirteen different labels were identified as being used to denote Indigenous people. On a number of occasions multiple labels were used to refer to the Indigenous community. On these occasions only the main label used was recorded. The major categories of ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Yorta Yorta’ and ‘Koori(e)’ were expected along with significant use of the word ‘Indigenous’. In the process of the research a category was adopted titled ‘Yorta Yorta (procedural)’ to denote the numerous instances where the reference was made not to Indigenous people themselves but solely to the native title claim made by the Yorta Yorta. An analogous category of ‘Aboriginal (procedural)’ also featured on one occasion. Rumbalara as a label referred to articles which dealt with the Rumbalara Aboriginal co-operative as a known Indigenous community organization, but which did not explicitly label participants according to their Indigeneity. Eleven articles over the two periods discussed issues relating directly to the Indigenous community without labeling any of the actors as being Indigenous. Two of these articles featured Indigenous main actors who were not labeled, both related to education and were found in the Riverine Herald. They were identified as relating to the

\textsuperscript{65} Hartley, J., & McKee, A., \textit{op. cit.}, p212.
\textsuperscript{66} Rumbalara won five of the seven premierships on offer that year; “Rumbalara reigns supreme”, Shepparton News, Monday, 16 September 2002. p16.
Indigenous community through the context of the article, a judgment that required the knowledge of the researcher to play a part in identifying the participants as Indigenous. The term ‘black’ was used on three occasions, two of which were seen as positive and one as indifferent toward Indigenous people. One of these instances included a direct juxtaposition of the labels ‘white’ and ‘black’, one of the few occasions where the author of an article found it necessary to label white actors as belonging to an ethnic group of any sort. The term ‘native’ was used once in a direct quote from a used car salesman in the Riverine Herald. In the same article two Indigenous Northern Territorians were referred to as ‘Kooris’.

Chart 2: Labels used

Main Actors

Indigenous people were the main actors in marginally over a third of the articles identified. Over half of the Indigenous related articles contained main actors who were clearly seen as non-Indigenous, but whose ethnicity or colour were not stated and were apparently not perceived to be essential to the story being related. In contrast, almost all main actors who were part of the Indigenous community were clearly labeled. The exception, in addition to the two articles mentioned above, could be seen where the labeling was not so

clear in that the author referred to the Rumbalara club as a group identity. It was only on five occasions that ‘white’ or ‘Anglo-Saxon’ were used as a label for a main actor.

Notably, the analysis of these two sample periods indicated a significant shift in the tendency to write articles about the Indigenous community from the perspective of unmarked non-Indigenous people, whereby in 2002 Indigenous people were the main voices being heard in approximately half of the articles codified, in contrast to the figures for 1994/95, which put the figure at closer to a quarter of the total. The privileging of un-racialised non-Indigenous voices was relatively uniform across the two papers, as was the shift toward a greater inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in 2002. That said, it is important to note that that shift only brought the level of Indigenous voices being given precedence to one half of the total, and that these voices were still almost always ethnically marked. It could quite convincingly be suggested that Indigenous voices should far outweigh non-Indigenous ones in relation to issues that directly affect Indigenous people. Indigenous voices were given precedence primarily in articles which related to

**Chart 3: Main actors and change**
sport and culture, while in relation to the native title claim non-Indigenous people’s perspectives were given precedence four to one.

**Attitude**

Four simple preliminary categories were developed to describe the types of attitudes presented in each article. Namely; ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ to Indigenous people, ‘indifferent’ and ‘tokenistic’, where tokenistic was used to describe those instances where an article was rhetorically positive toward an Indigenous person or people in general, yet exhibited little or no understanding of who that person or people might be. These are obviously subjective categories that relied as much on personal judgements as they did on the intentions of the articles’ authors. What the data collected suggests is that on the whole these papers were more often positive or indifferent toward Indigenous people than they were overtly negative. The small number of articles that were categorised as overtly negative toward Indigenous people should, however, be a concern. The statistics suggest that, contrary to the overall trend, articles that focussed on the native title claim were overwhelmingly either negative toward Indigenous people or to the claim process itself. In the entirety of the sample there was

**Chart 4: Attitude and change**
only one article that could be categorised as positive toward the claim itself.68 There was a marked increase in the number of positive or indifferent articles between the 1994/95 and 2002 samples along with a significant decrease in the number of negative articles. This perhaps signifies an attempt to avoid negative portrayals of Indigenous people, a finding that would undermine the strength of any claims to overt and systematic racist coverage by these media outlets. It is not overt racism that is in question in this research, however, but rather the ways in which information is constructed and presented.

In inferences, collected data remains inconclusive. For instance, attempting to assess change in newspaper structure only carries minimal weight due to the scope of the current samples. To make a solid assessment, a larger set of data would be needed, perhaps one that stretches back to eight years before the mediation sessions (prior to native title being on the national agenda) and which filled in the intervening years between 1994/95 and 2002. The magnitude of such an endeavor is beyond the scope of the present investigation, but the breadth of the data collected would allow more to be inferred about the ways in which the representations of the Indigenous community in general are changing, without the obvious effects of one-off events, like the mediation sessions that characterize the data presented above. Hence, the following will deal with the general trends in composition through labels, attitude and main actors, necessarily being framed by the native title claim and all the unease it fermented. The aim of the research was to help understand how it is possible for the non-Indigenous communities in Shepparton and Echuca to know so little about the Indigenous communities alongside whom they live, by tracing the ways in which Indigeneity is portrayed in the local media. This was not intended to be an all-encompassing search for a causal link between newspapers and non-Indigenous ignorance, rather it was meant to be a starting point from which to question some of the ideas surrounding information, belonging and communities.

Relating back to the earlier chapter analyzing language in individual articles, it was noted that Indigenous people were the only ones in the articles being ethnically labeled, while non-Indigenous actors were considered normal and were, thus, just ‘people’. As stated above, this discursive trait was almost universally noted in the 263 articles identified in the sample as relating to the Indigenous community. In over half the sample the main actors were non-Indigenous people whose ethnicity was not stated. They were either referred to by name, profession or were simple noted as ‘local’ or ‘some people’. In contrast, almost all of the Indigenous people who were prominent in a further third of the articles were labeled as ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Koori’, ‘Indigenous’, ‘Yorta Yorta’ and so forth. These figures lend substantial weight to the contention
that whiteness is considered a normative category, and that requiring non-white actors in news stories to be labeled marginalises them as outside the imagined readership of the paper.

It should be noted here that labeling difference is not necessarily a negative thing for the Indigenous community. Take, for instance, the labeling of the *Koori Mail*, an important appropriation of news journalism for Koori self-assertion and determination. Here, articulation of the Koori community’s identity through labeling is for the purpose of Indigenous community inclusion and non-Indigenous exclusion. This use of labeling is manifestly different, however, from that used in the *News* and the *Herald*, in that the *Koori Mail* makes no claims to universality. It is interesting, in contrast, to imagine how this labeling process would reconfigure the perception of the papers in this study. Why not the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ Shepparton News?: Precisely because it would take away the assumption of partiality and universality associated with news journalism that is necessary for these papers to claim to represent all of the community.

**Chart 5: Main actor by selected issues**

Another apparent trend to be gleaned from these figures is that non-Indigenous voices are privileged over Indigenous ones when discussing issues relating to the Indigenous community. As with the photo of Rob
Hulls, this data suggests the existence of a hierarchy of importance in who can speak for Indigenous people. In spite of any expressed ignorance about the Indigenous community, non-Indigenous people are constantly being called upon in these papers to speak for them. It should be noted that these articles often also relate just as much to the non-Indigenous community, as such, one would expect a certain amount of non-Indigenous input. Native title, for instance, is clearly as much a matter of colonial law as it is about Indigenous self-determination. If you look at the figures for articles relating to the claim, however, one would assume it was almost solely an issue for the non-Indigenous residents of the area.

What, it seems, is being shown here is a clear instance of the underlying loyalties of these regional papers coming to the fore. Despite any aspirations of objectivity, these papers are written for their imagined readership, of which non-Indigenous farmers and graziers form an important part. If we look at the main actors, excluding articles about the native title claim, the tendency to turn to a non-Indigenous person for perspective or comment on Indigenous community issues is less pronounced. However, one is still just as likely to hear from a non-Indigenous figure as from an Indigenous one in relation to Indigenous community development, health and education. It is only in sport and culture (art, heritage, spirituality) that Indigenous voices predominate.

It was a preliminary belief that part of the reason for the lack of knowledge about the Yorta Yorta was the way that labels are used to identify people. The term ‘Aboriginal’ is often used to infer commonality where there is very little across the many language groups and clans of Australian Indigenous peoples. For example, more than once in the sample I came across quotes like; “[c]ouncil yesterday agreed to name the park near the Boulevard Cudgee Park, an aboriginal phrase for ‘a very good place’”, 69 or; in relation to a primary school initiative to teach children about Aboriginal culture, where children took a “closer look at the Aboriginal culture”, and children completed a “questionnaire which covers the major aspects of the culture”70. In both cases the word ‘Aboriginal’ is misleading in that it refers to a unified pan-Aboriginal language or culture, erasing the individuality of the Yorta Yorta, Bangerang and other distinct Indigenous nations. In this fashion it was believed that many non-Indigenous people would have little idea who the

Yorta Yorta were, or any other clan groups for that matter, because these groups were almost always referred to as simply Aboriginal or, at best, as Koori. The data does not entirely support this idea.

Across the sample the three most commonly used labels were: ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Yorta Yorta’ and ‘Koori(e)’, in that order (see Chart 2). This would suggest that, while it was more common to find the local Indigenous community referred to as simply Aboriginal, there was significant reference made specifically to the Yorta Yorta. The local Indigenous community is not only Yorta Yorta, hence the relatively high usage of the collective term ‘Koori’ for Indigenous people from southeastern Australia is understandable. The high usage of ‘Yorta Yorta’ as a label, however, stems primarily from the native title claim. Excluding articles referring to the native title claim, reference to the Yorta Yorta is almost insignificant, only used in nine of the articles. It could be said that the native title claim at least raised the profile of the Yorta Yorta, however, much of the reference in relation to the claim was in the context of articles negative to the claim itself. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that the two papers referred more often to the Yorta Yorta in relation to other issues as a result of the claim.

It would seem that where the interests of the Indigenous community came into conflict with those of the non-Indigenous (or were perceived to do so) these newspapers privileged the perspectives of the non-
Indigenous community. On the whole, however, there is little evidence to suggest these papers are overtly negative toward the Indigenous community. What has been inferred is that the ways in which the *Shepparton News* and the *Riverine Herald* represent the Indigenous population can be categorised over the sample periods as; privileging non-Indigenous voices; tending to label only Indigenous actors, and; on all issues apart from the native title claim, as using labels that obscured the individuality of the local Indigenous community(ies). That said, there seems to be a tendency toward more positive coverage of issues relating to the Indigenous community and less reliance on non-Indigenous voices, although this privileging appears to continue, if only to a lesser extent.
Conclusion

Estimates based on anthropological research commissioned by the Yorta Yorta put the size of the local Indigenous community at approximately 5000-6000 people.\footnote{Hagen, R., (1996-97), “Report to the Yorta Yorta Clans Group on Yorta Yorta Associations with the Claim Area”, unpublished, cited in; Atkinson, W., (2000), Not One Iota…, p39.} Looking at figures from the most recent census, it can be seen that this community has major centres in Shepparton (1443 people), Echuca/Moira (750),\footnote{Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2001), “Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians”, Cat. No. 4705.0, Table 7; “Indigenous status by place of usual residence by Australian Indigenous Geographical Classification, Victoria – 2001”.} and across the border in Deniliquin/Murray (381).\footnote{Ibid., Table 6; “Indigenous status by place of usual residence by Australian Indigenous Geographical Classification, New South Wales – 2001”.} Granted that the local Indigenous community exists, the lack of knowledge being discussed here arguably stems, at least in part, from the exclusion of the Indigenous community, as an oppositional group to the colonial endeavour, from mainstream discourses concerning local history and community. As a result of which, school books, newspapers, community groups, memoirs and political debate made, organised and played out by non-Indigenous people have not, by definition, included Indigenous actors, voices or concerns. This, it could be argued, is a predictable, if unarticulated, consequence of identity formation and the promotion of self-interest.

Problems arise when one starts to include notions of objectivity, the neutrality of ‘the truth’, citizenship, multi-culturalism and democracy. Part of which includes the logic that representations of Indigenous people have been racist in the past, therefore, \textit{we} should go about representing \textit{them} better, or even include \textit{them} in the processes of representation themselves. Little thought, however, is being given to the structures of representation, how the \textit{us} and \textit{them} are created and to what effect, nor is there much consideration of the cultural contingency of values, thought and modes of expression. In part, it is that newspapers are assumed to be inclusive, objective imparters of information about the community, rather than as tools for the creation and maintenance of that community. There is very little realisation, it would seem, that inclusion of a minority group within that mode of knowledge formation is often a process, not of reconciliation, but of
more articulated exclusion. The hegemony of the majority group and their way of maintaining their identity will never be seriously threatened, if ‘others’ being included in public discourse are always labeled for easy identification. Looking at these papers one might see an increase in the inclusion of Indigenous actors, yet these actors will always be tagged as Aboriginal, Koori or Indigenous. Thus, if their ideas about the nation or the community clash with those of the non-Indigenous readership they can easily be dismissed as not being the ideas of ‘one of us’.

Further to that, however, there should be a recognition that the boundaries between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities are blurred by interactions on many levels; through marriage, war, education, academia, sport and no doubt many more. The idea of any community as a relatively static homogenous entity is only partly useful. For instance, the term ‘non-Indigenous’, as it has been used in this study, cannot mean just Anglo-Saxon—it cannot even mean white. How do the many people of Italian, Turkish, Greek and Iraqi backgrounds, living in the Goulburn Valley, relate to Indigenous people’s dispossession and exclusion? Furthermore, people within any community, to greater and lesser extents, also belong to other communities and operate on different levels within communities. These questions and queries serve to caution against a simple conclusion that ‘white’ people are bad and ‘black’ people are oppressed battlers. These questions also show that considering categories of identity and ethnicity is only useful as far as these concepts are employed by individuals, rather than as representing any absolute external reality. Ethnicity and identity are concepts that will not necessarily coincide from person to person, they are, however, ideas that do have some currency in the Goulburn Valley, as elsewhere. The data collected suggests that the conceptual binary of them and us is very much in use in these two newspapers.

The research presented above provides the basis for two conclusions. The first is that during the native title claim these local media outlets were consciously, as well as unconsciously, used as a political tool for fighting change and for fighting the claim. McPherson Media became an avenue for non-Indigenous community apprehension and anti-claim expression. While this has apparent relevance as a barrier to Yorta Yorta social justice and land rights aspirations, it does not speak directly to the aim of this study; namely it does not explain more generally how the local media, through the way it represents the Indigenous community, is shaped by, and contributes to, non-Indigenous ignorance.
The second line of thought is that these papers are written primarily of, about and by the non-Indigenous community, and hence can only really, despite any allusions to objectivity, be expected to represent the interests of that part of the community. Regardless of the particular issues being covered, whether an article is positive or negative, whether it is about the native title claim, community development or local leaders, there are discursive regimes at play which structure representations of the Indigenous community in ways that marginalise their voices and interests. This community affiliation can be traced through the way that people outside the newspapers’ perceived readerships, in this case Indigenous people, are always labeled according to identity, while members of the accepted community of readers remain unmarked. This partiality can also be seen in the priority given to the views of non-Indigenous actors in articles concerning the Indigenous community. In the process of labeling and speaking for Indigenous people, certain constructions of Indigenous people are promoted in the imaginations of these papers’ readers.

The Shepparton News and the Riverine Herald are primarily institutions of the Goulburn Valley’s non-Indigenous community. These papers are not overtly racist, in fact they seem to be becoming increasingly positive toward the Indigenous community, rather they are characterised by systems of reporting and of information production which are inherently partisan. It is clear, however, that there are a multitude of influences on any person’s knowledge and understanding of themselves and their relationships to others. In this context, the ways these papers depict Indigenous people are not simply causes of non-Indigenous ignorance, but rather they are symptomatic of the complicated dynamics of a colonial society coming to terms with itself and its Indigenous counterparts.
**Bibliography**


— Table 7; “Indigenous status by place of usual residence by Australian Indigenous Geographical Classification, Victoria – 2001”.

— Table 6; “Indigenous status by place of usual residence by Australian Indigenous Geographical Classification, New South Wales – 2001”.


*Native Title Act 1993* (Cwth).


**Newspapers**

*Koori Mail*

*Riverine Herald*

*Shepparton News*

*The Age*

**Newspaper Articles**


Internet


Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria [2002] HCA 58 (12 December 2002), published online, accessed on 1 June 2003;

Morgan, M., (1997), speech delivered to the Australian Reconciliation Convention 1997, published online, accessed on 1 April 03:
Appendix A

Coding Schedule

Day: 
M. Monday
W. Wednesday
F. Friday

Paper: 
1. Shepparton News
2. Riverine Herald
3. Country News

Label Used: 
1. Aboriginal
   1P. Aboriginal (Procedural)
2. Indigenous
3. Koori(e)
4. Yorta Yorta/Bangerang
   4P. Yorta Yorta (Procedural)
5. Other Clan Identity
6. Rumbalara
7. Photo
8. Context
9. Aborigine
10. Black
11. Native

Main Actor: 
1. Indigenous (stated)
2. Other (stated)
3. Other (not stated)
4. No Actors mentioned
5. Indigenous (not stated)

Issue: 
1. Native Title Claim
2. Health
3. Sport
4. Crime/Justice
5. Culture (Heritage/Art etc.)
6. Community Development
7. Education
8. Religion
9. Local History
10. Legal
11. Nationalism
12. Forestry
13. Reconciliation
14. ATSIC
15. Social Problems
16. Housing
17. Obituary
18. Racial vilification
19. Census data
20. Equal opportunity
21. Tourism
22. Local leaders
23. Naidoc
Attitude:  
1. Negative toward Indigenous people  
2. Positive toward Indigenous people  
3. Indifferent  
4. Tokenistic  
5. Indifferent toward Indigenous actors but negative toward the claim process  
6. Indifferent toward Indigenous actors but Positive toward claims process
Appendix B

Newspaper Articles Used in Content Analysis

“Keep up native titles interest says Patterson”, Shepparton News, Friday, 9 September 1994, p3.
“Talks end but no result: Yorta Yorta claim goes into ‘private conferences’”, Shepparton News, Friday, 30 September 1994, p3.
“No promises”, Riverine Herald, Friday, 30 September 1994, p3.

“‘Native Title’”, Shepparton News, Friday, 7 October 1994, p24.
“Maughn's reply to questions on Yorta Yorta”, Riverine Herald, Monday, 10 October 1994, p3.
“Further meeting called on claims”, Riverine Herald, Monday, 10 October 1994, p1.
“Debbie is our first Aboriginal JP”, Riverine Herald, Friday, 21 October 1994, p5.
“Mabo night”, Riverine Herald, Friday, 28 October 1994, p3.


“Parker boys are good”, Shepparton News, Friday, 14 April 1995, p42.
“Ningali’s story on stage”, Riverine Herald, Friday, 28 April 1995, p5.

“Fabry fined $5,000”, Riverine Herald, Friday, 26 May 1995, p1.


“What will happen to the forest?”, *Shepparton News*, Friday, 3 May 2002, p2.
“It is all go for program”, *Shepparton News*, Friday, 3 May 2002, p69.


“Reconciliation project funded”, *Shepparton News*, Friday, 8 November 2002, p11.
“Rumbalara plans to make it to the big time”, *Shepparton News*, Friday, 29 November 2002, p75.
“Members learn the kiss of life”, Shepparton News, Friday, 6 December 2002, p18.
Shepparton News, Monday, 16 December 2002, [back page photo]