

FIRSTDRAFT



THE AUSTRALIAN
Baha'i Community

REIMAGINING THE AUSTRALIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

ROUNDTABLE 1

Discussion Notes

TOWARDS OUR COMMON HUMANITY

Contributions from the roundtable discussion

The roundtable 'Towards Our Common Humanity' was hosted in person and facilitated on behalf of the [Australian Baha'i Community](#), [First Draft Australia](#) and the [Centre for Media Transition](#) at the University of Technology Sydney on 12 March 2020. The conversation was marked by sincere and respectful dialogue among members of the media, academics, civil society and the community. Highlights from this roundtable are summarised online and available via the [Centre for Media Transition website](#).

A [concept note](#) circulated prior to the roundtable stimulated discussion on the following themes: the media as a social protagonist; implications and impact of newsroom 'norms' and reframing approaches to reporting to look beyond conflict; diversity and objectivity; audience engagement; opportunities and pitfalls of new technologies; ethics and social media; and journalism education and training.

This document seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of those discussions. We are grateful to all participants for their commitment to dialogue, particularly in seeking to reimagine the Australian media landscape. We note that the contributions offered have been collated here for the purpose of furthering this ongoing conversation and do not represent the views of any specific individual or organisation.

The media as a social protagonist

Participants agreed that the media can be considered as a social protagonist that plays an important role in society. This role entails responsibility and when acknowledged, elicits thoughtful navigation by both content creators and content consumers.

- The media offers a **representation** of who we are and shapes our understanding about each other and the world around us.
- The 2019 Christchurch attacks were shocking and led to an instructive moment. What followed was **an outpouring of reflection** from the media and the desire to reach out to our **common humanity** by **looking to what we share in common**.
- Media professionals could benefit from **more time in the reporting cycle** to think ahead about the implications of language and images used in reporting.
- There are many ethical dimensions to consider when producing media content which could benefit from **collective exploration** in light of journalism practice.
- It is unhelpful when analysis about the media in our country takes an approach that groups the media as "one big amorphous blob." **There is a need to differentiate between outlets** that make genuine attempts to inform public discourse and discussion, and those interested in sensationalism and pushing political lines.

- In thinking about the human element of journalism, the analogy of a neighbourhood is helpful. We care for our neighbours because we see them and have a sense of them, and care arises from there. **Through media content, an imagined community is created** as the audience is likely to be connected to individuals they have never met before. **This is a significant responsibility** that the media bears, and one that can be taken into consideration when developing human-interest stories.
- Reflecting on times of crisis experienced by our country, there have been **distinct examples of our capacity to band together**. The bushfires experienced in the 2019/2020 summer attest to how Australians mobilised to help each other.
- Crises can act as a window to examine the media's capacity to work together to **overcome prejudice** and focus on reporting the human solidarity demonstrated by the public. This subsequently ripples through society, which can help to boost public morale and instil hope. However, examples were raised where instances of COVID-19 reporting included **misinformation and sensationalist content that was likely to cause social division** rather than cohesion. Participants pointed to how certain populations of Australians were being targeted with prejudice and fear.
- Media organisations are being confronted with the reality that **our common humanity can no longer be an afterthought** or footnote in reporting, particularly given **current levels of disengagement** with the media.

Beyond conflict: 'constructive' and 'solutions' journalism

A focus point during the discussions was around reframing approaches to news reporting by considering constructive approaches in response to the challenges identified.

- Existing conceptions of what is considered '**newsworthy**' **often focus on conflict**, e.g., problems, issues, and the various friction points in society, all of which can have a distortive impact. The underlying assumption is that impactful storytelling comes from drawing attention to disagreements, attacks, and crises. This can be redressed by adding a sense of perspective and offering the audience constructive elements that can be taken away from the story.
- Moving beyond a focus on conflict and differences does not imply dismissing these elements in our society that need to be addressed, but rather **reframing the narrative** to also incorporate our common humanity. This enables reporting to delve deeper into the issues that need to be addressed, **in critical yet constructive ways**. This orientation turns attention to **what is ahead** and invites reporting to examine where to go from here and the approaches or solutions that can or are being explored.
- While journalists primarily consider their role as one which identifies the problems of the world, and point out what is not working, there is scope to go further and extend news narratives by looking at the 'constructive' or 'solutions' angles of the story. For example:
 - Extending journalism reporting by looking at how **communities are coming together** to recover from moments of crisis and how they are overcoming the friction points;
 - Specific images that seek to capture and highlight **shared moments of humanity**.
- When reporting on conflict, journalists need not substitute one mindset for another; **this is not an "either/or" scenario**, but rather an "and" one, by adding **"something people can use."**
- Constructive approaches complete the circle in terms of the incident reported on – by not just focusing on the past or the present, but by **looking at "what's next?"** It's an important part of the story to confront in a critical and constructive way.
- Similarly, 'solutions journalism' **encourages questions**, critical thinking and further asking: "We know there is a problem here – how is it being responded to?"

Diversity and objectivity

Contributions considered how current conceptions of news values and objectivity in reporting may need to be rethought to meaningfully include diverse perspectives and consider transparency.

- If we want to talk about a dialogue that is inclusive, there needs to be **diversity amongst storytellers**.
- The **perspective the story is told from** is key. One of the single biggest problems in most newsrooms is a lack of diverse perspectives. When those who are sitting around the decision-making table all look alike, sound alike, and come from a similar background, then you have a similar perspective. This lack of diversity contributes to newsrooms having blind spots in reading society. In order to address these blind spots, **diverse perspectives allow newsrooms to be better informed and to see and reflect society as a whole**, which can contribute to constructive and hopeful narratives.
- It is helpful when outlets share why they have taken certain approaches to reporting. This is starting to happen more often – if you want to be a trusted voice in a crowded media market, **transparency and accountability are critical**.
- There are various examples of how transparency is being approached in newsrooms. For example, having an article to accompany the journalism explaining, "Why we are doing this story." This offers accountability and transparency, and **invites the audience to be part of the process**, encouraging stronger engagement and feedback.
- Participants reaffirmed **the value of objectivity and impartiality**.
- One of the benefits of diversity is that it serves the public interest. If you have a range of people in the newsroom exploring approaches to reporting social issues, who come from diverse backgrounds, **the dialogue is enriched by their diverse views and from their input. This helps to eliminate blind spots**. Through the diversity of thought that makes up this process, the media outlet generates content which resonates more broadly, irrespective of the background of the reporter.
- Diversity in newsrooms also influences decision making in the process of developing the story, so that **greater context and perspectives** are included across all levels.

Audience engagement

The role of the audience was discussed in depth. A question raised during the roundtable was whether commercial and ethical imperatives are always in conflict with each other. Participants suggested that rethinking the needs of audiences can lead to greater engagement, including among young people.

- Regardless of their socio-political leaning or commercial/non-commercial imperatives, **news outlets are ultimately seeking to engage** an audience.
- Participants reported that in newsrooms, particularly larger commercial outlets, there is a strong dependence on audience engagement. Too often the approach taken seeks an "easy way" **to engage people by making them angry**. The challenge becomes taking up approaches that highlight our common humanity in a way that generates equal audience engagement.
- The long-term viability of populist and tabloid media outlets that seek to engage audiences with methods that polarise, antagonise, incite anger, and perpetuate hatred was questioned. The conversation [referenced research](#) highlighting **increased news avoidance and declining levels of trust towards** the news media for this exact reason. Research also indicates audiences appreciate explainers and are turned off by "yelling matches."

Opportunities and pitfalls of new technologies

Digital technology has led to shifts in business models including a greater focus on subscribers with both positive and negative consequences. At the same time audiences are involved in shaping news stories in new ways.

- There has been a shift in the types of business models used by outlets which has led to an **increased focus on subscribers**.
- The conversation explored the positive and negative implications of this increased focus. On the negative side, the ethics of using people's data to target news consumers was discussed. As was the fact that targeting people's individual hopes and fears is "inherently a division of society." An implication of this is when news organisations take on a **partisan position** to target particular audiences. On the positive side, the digitalisation of the media has offered a **stronger feedback loop between the news media and their audience**. We have only scratched the surface of this relationship. Over time technology is going to deliver greater opportunities to enhance this.
- Given that audience metrics influence the trajectory of news production, **audiences also have a responsibility to consume and engage with media content conscientiously** thereby indicating to news organisations that responsible journalism is valued above divisive and sensationalist reporting.
- Journalism has become a "two-way street," where audiences participate by sharing and disseminating information amongst their social networks. While acknowledging that not everyone with a phone is a journalist, the prevalence of technology offers greater opportunity for individuals to engage in media content. **The desire from audiences to engage is an opening for our common humanity** to be harnessed. One example given was an article written during the 2014 Lindt Café siege in Sydney, which helped guide people as to "how you can be helpful on social media during this crisis." This example points to the possibility of reportage that enables a vision of an involved audience invested in our shared humanity.
- Younger generations are less inclined to read traditional media content. Younger participants at the roundtable highlighted that **their peers crave authentic storytelling in unique and creative ways**, often on non-traditional platforms. Examples were shared of stories that highlight our common humanity by offering the narrative through an alternative perspective - for example, war through the eyes of a mother. This can lead to higher audience engagement and break through viewer fatigue on a long - running crisis. These pieces of journalism have had millions of views and comments, including expressions from viewers asking how they can help respond to the crisis exposed. This is an example of **engagement which transcends the formulaic 'human interest' approach** typically taken by news outlets, which often elicits fleeting empathy, to one which seeks to foster greater engagement with our common humanity.
- Traditional news media are also drawing on audience engagement, for example, through crowdsourcing data for stories. In such cases, even though the news story may be produced in a traditional critical framework, it still leads to constructive outcomes and **a sense of shared humanity by eliciting audience ownership** towards a particular issue.

Ethics and social media

The impact of social media and new technologies, and the need for ethical frameworks when operating in this new environment, led to the following comments:

- The mobile and online environment gives media organisations the capacity and **space to offer an alternative to the two minute TV news story or two columns in the paper**. More and more outlets are

taking advantage of this.

- At the same time, **new media technologies have reduced the 'town square'**. Previously, when watching the news or listening to the radio, one would assume that others were essentially consuming the same content. Today, curated news feeds and targeted content play into individual biases and interests, which fragment and distort reality.
- New forms of journalism and media consumption are on the rise, often in **the absence of training or any form of ethical framework** or principles to guide this process.
- Without ethical discussions to guide action, **audience engagement takes priority and fuels social media platforms**. This often comes at the cost of fact-checked content.
- Participants posed a question about **the role of traditional journalism in curbing misinformation and disinformation** that spread via social media, identifying this as an area for further exploration.
- Claims are sometimes made that anyone can be a journalist if they have a smartphone. **However, the role of journalists is to weigh all the evidence** and place it together. By evaluating the facts and evidence, journalism plays a vital role in the pursuit of truth.

Journalism education and training

Participants discussed the role of practical ethics in the education and training of journalists.

- Many young journalists in training say that they became journalists **to speak truth to power** and to speak up for the voiceless. Given that journalism is a practical subject, educators could look beyond ethical and philosophical theory to **explore the potential consequences of journalism in relation to social cohesion**, which might arise from the approaches taken in reporting.
- **Journalism curriculums** could do more to emphasise ethical considerations of reporters' decisions.