

FIRSTDRAFT



THE AUSTRALIAN
Baha'i Community

REIMAGINING THE AUSTRALIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

ROUNDTABLE 2

Concept Note

FOSTERING PROGRESS THROUGH A PANDEMIC

A thought piece for reflection and dialogue

Background

A key insight generated from our first roundtable held in March 2020, comprising of media executives, journalists, academics and civil society actors, was how instructive times of crisis can be in responding to the challenge of building social cohesion through the media. As the Christchurch attacks sent shock waves into the depths of our humanity it also set in motion a parallel conversation about the agency and social responsibility of the media as a public good, a conversation which was seen again during the devastating summer bushfires and is with us still as society struggles through the many difficult permutations of the pandemic. It is in this moment of rupture in which we have again found an opportunity and an opening for constructive dialogue.

Initial observations

Our first dialogue brought out the key reflection that analysing media responses in times of crisis can offer an accessible way to identify what it means to respond with common meaning and purpose, particularly with a heightened sense of compassion for one another. In such moments, differences are set aside, and media narratives reflect back to us the glimmerings of hope that emerge when we work together with consensus and collective action. In such times, we are able to look beyond the friction points as our dominant narrative and elevate our focus towards the power of human solidarity and hopeful action.

At the same time our interlocutors observed that the challenge is not to wait until moments of

shock but to take these learnings, and types of reportage which build commonality, into everyday practice. The conversation then moved to identify how our common humanity can be "more than just an afterthought" and the way in which the media, as a social institution, can help to cultivate and regenerate the life of society. What emerged from here was the need to continually identify and address the challenge of commercial imperatives, an appreciation for creative and authentic approaches in developing media content, the strengthening of audience engagement and an appreciation for greater transparency from the media. A deeper exploration of these forces is required to better identify the ways in which the media can play a constructive role in responding to social challenges, one pathway being to extend current approaches to reporting by looking to 'solutions' or 'constructive' journalism, as part of a "full-cycle" of reporting.

The next stage in our learning process

As we grapple with the reality of a pandemic, the coronavirus global health crisis has offered new light on what it means to share a common humanity. Each moment of despair has brought with it learning for deeper exploration. This crisis has acted as a litmus test for the racial prejudices which linger as a blight on our humanity yet has heightened our sense of interconnectedness and co-existence as members of one global community. In this crisis has been an opening to share together in a common global narrative. Our interdependence has been felt through a deeper appreciation of our social ties and the role of

human connection as a need that sustains us. In taking measures to “flatten the curve”, individuals, communities and institutions came together in a moment of cooperation and with an appreciation for the collective effort required to safeguard the wellbeing and interest of the whole. Such expressions of commonality have been further tested since the emergence of the pandemic, by the realisation that different groups are being impacted in different ways, often due to existing social structures with discussions opening up about how we treat the elderly and respond to gender and racial inequality as well as our economic divides.

For many, including the media, the pandemic has brought on moments of crisis within a crisis. Economic pressures have led to the collapse of news outlets and restrained existing models. Yet never before has the role of the media and its constructive potential been pronounced as it has during this time: in offering knowledge derived from scientific truth as a means to help safeguard the whole; working cooperatively alongside social institutions in keeping the public informed with accurate information, while at the same time seeking to quash and debunk mis and disinformation.

During this crisis, society has been offered with a tangible expression of how readily our habits of thought and behaviour are influenced by media narratives and the cycle of activity that emerges as a result of the language and images we are exposed to. These can cause either panic and despair or offer hope and encourage resilience.

The role of hopeful narratives has been given renewed meaning in helping to sustain our collective journey, with stories that speak to the ‘silver lining’ as a source of comfort. This experience has generated new possibilities in the constructive capabilities of the media.

In addition to its pre-existing role to shine light in dark corners, instances emerged that allowed the creative and affirming capacities of the human spirit as expressed by individuals, communities and institutions to be highlighted in media narratives, seeding new ideas during unprecedented times as we learn to forge ahead.

As a public good and pillar of our society, the media stands at the centre of our pursuit for truth and in conceptualising the world around us and can be further characterised as an avenue for education and understanding.

Questions for exploration

We invite you to consider the role of the media through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic and the guiding principles and values that have shaped media practice, including specific examples of reporting during this period, as we work through the following questions:

What new insights have emerged from our interdependence and interconnectedness as individuals, communities and social institutions and how has this been observed in media reporting? How can this community-building role be balanced with the media’s need to hold institutions to account through critique?

What impact does the language of the media have on our response to crisis, resilience and our relationships as a society?

What are the implications of media narratives on patterns of thought and behaviour? What have been some of the attitudes they have fostered during this time?

What has been the value of the media during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This is an ongoing discussion and opportunity for a new and visionary description in identifying our shared values today and into the future, and in highlighting how the media can help facilitate constructive change in the life of our society and foster dialogue about our common humanity. Through a process of dialogue, learning in action, and reflection in light of experience, we see this conversation as an iterative process, which we hope will be at the heart of a growing community of learning, joined by many.

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