

FIRSTDRAFT



THE AUSTRALIAN
Baha'i Community

REIMAGINING THE AUSTRALIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

ROUNDTABLE 2

Discussion Notes

FOSTERING PROGRESS THROUGH A PANDEMIC

Contributions from the roundtable discussion

The roundtable 'Fostering Progress Through a Pandemic' was hosted online 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 19 August 2020. At a time when the impact of the global pandemic was being deeply felt, this conversation brought together journalists, academics, civil society and community members who were interested in looking at the role of the media in society. Highlights from this roundtable are summarised online and available via the [Centre for Media Transition website](#).

A concept note was distributed prior to the roundtable. During the roundtable a live document was populated in response to four main questions focusing on the media's role during the pandemic. Key insights from that document have been distilled into these notes.

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.

Question 1

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?

Summary responses:

- The discussion highlighted the need for a deeper exploration about how media reporting can go beyond division and conflict.
- The pandemic presented us with good reason to revisit how we deal with conflict in the media and whether there is some kind of "reimagining" or "redefinition" of conflict in that context.
- There is a need to address underlying assumptions by re-examining the role of traditional news values and their implications on how society interacts and sees itself: *what is done in journalism vs what it should do*.

Issues identified for further exploration:

- *What are the ideal values that guide quality journalism?*
- *How can media content both engage and inform without pitting groups against each other?*
- *Rather than just focusing on the conflict, what opportunities are available to the media in focusing on how conflict might be addressed or resolved?*

Distilled notes:

- **Media coverage has emphasised both unity and division.** On the one hand, there has been a lot of messaging during the pandemic about unity and coming together and being "all in this together" in some media coverage. Yet at other times, media reporting has resorted to more traditional debate and divisions, whether they are state versus state or inter-community.
- In the most extreme cases, **certain communities and individuals were vilified**, where the public was encouraged by media reporting to unite against a supposed "common enemy."
- The media might take the approach to divide so as to increase their ratings - but **do people actually enjoy this type of reporting?**
- Audiences want to get information without the theatrics and are seeking information outside of mainstream media. **Narrowcasting gives the audience a wider choice for media consumption**, including the option to avoid aggressive and polarising content.
- **What is the role of the media?** To entertain? Inform? How can the industry manage a public audience with a short attention span?
- **Commercial media feel pressure to keep the story fresh** and find ways to relay the story to everyday Australians.
- Two streams of **purpose** were identified within journalism: to reassure, unite and inform versus to challenge, divide and question. How do we balance these two streams? **Can we challenge and question without dividing?**
- When you focus on bringing everyone together, for example, in facing a common challenge, such as the COVID-19 virus, it tends to have a uniting effect.
- As soon as you start **questioning and challenging what's going on, it has a potentially divisive effect.** It's not that you deliberately set out to divide, but it may have this effect, particularly if you identify certain groups, individuals, or structures in society that are being highlighted as part of the problem.
- When considering the division, a necessary step is **to think about why and how you are reporting. Is it towards constructive ends?** Is there a way to keep the audience engaged without dividing them?
- **Audiences are switching off divisive content.** There is a thirst for content that is not just the "typical stories." Constructive and dispassionate conversations can be quite good.
- **Revisiting 'conflict' as a news value.** Traditional news values focus on 'conflict', but does the pandemic give us an opportunity to reimagine these news values?
- The conflict imperative in journalism pushes journalists towards presenting conflict or focusing on conflict. **The pandemic presented us with good reason to revisit how we deal with conflict** and whether there is some kind of reimagining or redefinition of the term 'conflict' in that context.
- The **traditional 'news values'** list was actually [a list describing what was happening in journalism, not what should be done](#). The first **academics who developed the concept of 'news values' offered this description to challenge those values**, because they recognised that if they continued, we would become a more divided globe. They were very focused on the divisiveness of these news values, which were never intended as "this is what you should do" but rather highlighted how news reporting is currently done. Yet in journalism schools, we tend to teach traditional 'news values' as if this is how news reporting should be done.

Question 2

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

Summary responses:

- Care ought to be taken by the media in how they interpret situations, particularly those concerning marginalised communities. Offering context for each situation is a valuable approach in news reporting.
- Diversity acts in the service of impartiality - a diverse newsroom allows for a process which embeds multiple perspectives and creates the opportunity to capture nuance in the storytelling process. This offers a strong process.
- Seeing positive experiences and the new communities that have emerged during the pandemic have been important for resilience; media content has cast light on these positive developments.

Issues identified for further exploration:

- *How do we report in ways which help to overcome division and vilification?*

Distilled notes:

- There is scope to develop greater consciousness around how stories are presented, including the **choice of language used by the media, particularly when reporting on marginalised communities** as this influences how situations are interpreted by the public.
- **The media can take care in how they interpret situations.** Context is very important when reporting stories. One example offered was the scenario during the Melbourne towers lockdown, when the Australian Defence Force was door-knocking on homes. It was assumed that those who did not answer the knocks, despite being forced to isolate, were not home. A perspective that was not considered was that, for certain communities, past experiences in their countries of origin may have created a fear of authority or language barriers, that prevented them from responding to the door-knocks. **This lack of context led to the misrepresentation** of those who were isolating. Without context, media reporting can lead to division and vilification.
- **Diversity in newsrooms:** The above scenario offers an example as to why diversity in newsrooms is significant. Even with the best of intentions, without lived experience, not all perspectives can be considered.
- When considering diversity in the media, it is about the way we interact with each other through **diversity in the service of impartiality - a diverse newsroom allows for a strong process.** A diverse newsroom is more likely to understand the nuances, differences and have greater context of the scenarios being reported on. This lends itself to a stronger reporting process.
- **There have been positive experiences in terms of reporting COVID-19 in mainstream media.** For example, reporting on new neighbourhood communities that have emerged during this period, or stories highlighting greater connectivity within neighbourhoods. The "A View from My Window" podcast was cited as one example of such media content.
- Media content during this period has also **offered a greater appreciation of human diversity** in terms of different personalities and their varying needs in responding to the pandemic. For example, extroverts struggling during lockdown.

Question 3

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?

Summary responses:

- The media can be a force for good or otherwise. In the current pandemic environment, there is a greater need for the media to show a sense of restraint towards sensationalism, a sense of responsibility and maturity for "the greater good of humankind."
- It is important to be asking ourselves as journalists, how is this report likely to impact our audiences?
- Media narratives can shape the direction in which we look, think and act. Responses to the pandemic are a tangible example of this.
- Throughout this period, we have seen the value of the media in highlighting scientific information and also in highlighting the values and qualities that are helpful for society to progress, including thoughtfulness, compassion and care for one another.
- Recognition of the role of constructive and hopeful narratives compared to those which solely focus on conflict.
- Drawing on a wider breadth of people to tell their stories allows for greater inclusion of lived experience which can, in turn, make stories editorially stronger.

Issues identified for further exploration:

- *What are some of the helpful attitudes, patterns of thought and behaviour that can be fostered by the media during this pandemic?*

Distilled notes:

- **Objectivity is a contested and controversial term** in journalism. There is an assertion that as long as a plurality of voices are represented objectivity has been achieved. However not all voices have the same merit in being heard. **Does it necessarily contribute to the quality of the discourse** by saying that, in the pursuit of objectivity, we need to engage someone in a report with a position which is not constructive and their views are not backed by research, or are not scientifically substantiated?
- Social media has thrown a "spanner in the works" in terms of the core journalistic mission of objectivity. **Incentivising outrage—particularly in headlines**—to gain attention and social-media traction has distorted the system and **skews perceptions of reality**.
- Social media is also the vehicle through which journalists are attacked and targeted by political forces and accused of partisanship. This **delegitimisation of journalists occurs in order to strengthen highly contested prepositions**. This model is being emulated across the world - in Britain, Philippines and Australia.
- Often narratives focus on othering and draw on racial and political divides. Hopefully we have **moved towards narratives that are more reflective of people's experiences**.
- The way journalists have been encouraged to think about "balance" is to engage in a spectrum of voices. However, this is not always reflective of **the weight of evidence and lived experience**.
- Having **a greater range of people to tell their stories**, allows us to have narratives that are more authentic and offers greater diversity.
- The idea of two people **shouting at each other across the political divide** as the only way to lead us to truth and representation **is limiting** and showcases **the need for authenticity and lived experience**. We also know that this has turned audiences off and is driving them to alternative sources of media.
- On the plus side, there is rising maturity by the media when **considering who offers their stories, who**

talks about people's experience, and what representation looks like. It is increasingly uncomfortable for the organisations themselves when there is inadequate representation. It is seen as editorially weak when reporting lacks those with lived experience and who cannot speak with authenticity as interview subjects. Before it was mostly people who were not part of the story speaking to the issues at hand. We have reached a tipping point as this is less often the case.

- There is no need to reinvent the wheel of **journalism's core mission- its first obligation is the truth.** Where there is a vacuum of reliable information, there is rumour and conjecture. Are governments responding to this mis and dis information? There is a need to overcome the sporadic and inconsistent approach currently being demonstrated by the government in connection to the dissemination of information concerning the pandemic.
- One of the challenges of journalism is **the assumption that "if it's not conflict, it's not news"** (i.e., if a bridge didn't collapse, it's not news). The conflict imperative nudges journalists and publishers towards where conflict exists. Journalists and the media can consider identifying good news stories that benefit society.
- In the current pandemic environment, **there is a greater need for the media to show a sense of restraint towards sensationalism**, a sense of responsibility and maturity in keeping in mind the greater good of humankind.
- We need to ask ourselves as journalists, **how is this likely to impact our audiences?** If you are motivated by conflict or the need to keep capturing conflict, then you will keep showing empty shelves (as evidenced during the pandemic). When there is a "blip" of shortages again, how appropriate is the question, "Is this a sign of a new round of shortages?" **What motivates this type of reporting, when we had just come out of a very bruising panic-buying session?**
- **On the flip side, there is the potential for unintended consequences**, particularly if professional journalists impose upon themselves an edict of responsible journalism **and self-censorship** on stories involving conflict. In a world where everyone is a publisher, journalists then risk others capitalising on this type of self restraint to fill information voids and further their (potentially divisive) aims.
- **Journalists can draw on a broader reading of society.** In the same way stories focusing on scientific information have been helpful for our society throughout the pandemic, so too have those which highlight our shared values and qualities, **such as the 'Kindness Pandemic'**- stories of people reaching out to their neighbours with thoughtful acts of compassion and care. This has helped individuals and communities become more resilient. We have seen in the midst of this pandemic that the media, through the narratives and stories reported on, **can shape the direction in which we think and act.** Just as we have seen the benefits of the media highlighting scientific facts in responding to data voids, we have also seen the benefits of being exposed more readily to stories which capture the values and qualities that can help society advance, through the experiences of individuals and communities.

Question 4

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

Summary responses:

- The value of the media has been its ability to keep the public informed about what is actually happening with regards to the spread of the virus but also the response of the government and the authorities, and how to adhere to the restrictions and requirements being imposed.
- The media has been like a tool or an instrument to help keep society informed about the pandemic.
- The stories that have highlighted resilience and the value of community-led responses to the pandemic have been beneficial to audiences and well received.
- Stories of resilience and strength have been critical to maintaining a sense of hope.

- There has been a strong focus on mental health which has led to a shift in how mental health is reported. Mental health has been taken more seriously as a topic during this time.

Distilled notes:

- The media has provided **examples of community resilience and community-led responses**. The response of an Indigenous community to the pandemic was offered as one example of community-driven and community-led responses. A media [report](#) on these experiences provided a spotlight on how community-led responses need to be recognised as necessary and fundamental in dealing with crises. This story highlighted **the role of community led responses**. Seeing such stories published in the media is really positive.
- **Stories that have highlighted community resilience** have underscored the need to care for each other during this time and care for different communities who might be experiencing the pandemic in varying ways.
- The power of resilience, and its pertinence during these challenging times has become a major topic, including **the necessity to remain connected and supportive**.
- **Resilience can be learned**. Stories of resilience and strength have been critical throughout this time and reinforce this capacity within our society.
- Reporting on mental health has become more prevalent in the media. We have witnessed numerous examples of **meaningful and mature reporting on mental health during the pandemic**.
- At a fundamental level, **the media has the capacity to educate** and keep society informed about the pandemic's restrictions, stories, the preventative measures to be taken, and how to adhere to the requirements being imposed. This also relates to the '[Kindness Pandemic](#)'.
- **The media has highlighted our oneness while not homogenising stories**. The realisation of our innate oneness during these unprecedented and challenging times has heightened. There has been an emphasis in some reporting in realising that we are all in this together. This includes caring more for each other and an increased care for the different communities experiencing the varying effects of the pandemic.
- At the same time, it has been important not to label the challenges faced by different pockets of society as homogenous. Given that **we have all been impacted by the pandemic in different ways, we need to recognise these differences**. Journalism can help us with this in capturing these different experiences and not homogenising them.
- The media is a tool to keep society informed and in offering a view into **the way everyone in the world is somehow affected by the pandemic**. For example, seeing people in Italy singing on their balconies, seeing how different people in different places responded and the small steps being taken to support one another. During the first phase of the pandemic, everyone was feeling the varying pressures of the pandemic at the same time. **The stories of resilience and strength were really helpful** in creating a greater sense of connection about our innate oneness and connectedness.