

# How television moved a nation: media, change and Indigenous rights

Media, Culture & Society

2018, Vol. 40(7) 992–1007

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DOI: 10.1177/0163443718754650

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**Lisa Waller** 

Deakin University, Australia

**Kerry McCallum** 

University of Canberra, Australia

## Abstract

This article examines the role of television in Australia's 1967 referendum, which is widely believed to have given rights to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It presents an analysis of archival television footage to identify five stories that moved the nation: Australia's shame, civil rights and global connections, admirable activists, 'a fair go' and consensus. It argues that television shaped the wider culture and opened a channel of communication that allowed Indigenous activists and everyday people to speak directly to non-Indigenous people and other First Nations people throughout the land for the first time. The referendum narrative that television did so much to craft and promote marks the shift from an older form of settler nationalism that simply excluded Indigenous people, to an ongoing project that seeks to recognise, respect and 'reaccredit' the nation-state through incorporation of Indigenous narratives. We conclude that whereas television is understood to have 'united' the nation in 1967, 50 years later seismic shifts in media and society have made the quest for further constitutional reform on Indigenous rights and recognition more sophisticated, diffuse, complex and challenging.

## Keywords

Australian television, Indigenous media, Indigenous rights, media and memory, media and national myths, television and national narratives

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### Corresponding author:

Lisa Waller, School of Communication and Creative Arts, Faculty of Arts and Education, Melbourne Burwood Campus, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway Burwood, VIC, 3125 Australia.

Email: [Lisa.waller@deakin.edu.au](mailto:Lisa.waller@deakin.edu.au)

This article examines the role of television in the 1967 Australian referendum that is widely believed to have given rights to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It considers how mass media shaped the wider culture, and how specific representations of the 10-year campaign and related issues contributed to the referendum becoming an important chapter in the national myth (Elder, 2007). In this context, the term 'national myth' describes a form of collective memory that is constructed and institutionalised through top down mechanisms of state policy, public commemoration and elite discourses (Kattago, 2016). Australia's colonial history and subsequent federation in 1901 deliberately excluded Indigenous peoples. The campaign to reform the constitution began as a grassroots movement during the Assimilation policy era, when integration of Indigenous people into mainstream society, and living like 'white Australians' were desirable concepts (Elder, 2009). It took place in a period when television can be seen as both the medium through which white Australia saw itself reflected in a changing world, and at the centre of inclusive political processes (Turner and Cunningham, 2000). Television was launched in 1956, and by 1964, 80% of households owned a TV set, rising to 90% by 1971 (Flew and Gilmour, 2004: 175). The campaign for Indigenous rights was one important movement in the decade of social revolution throughout the world, which played out on the streets and the small screen in living rooms throughout Australia, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa.

In May 1967, the Federal Government responded to the pressure for civil rights for Indigenous people through a referendum that asked voters whether two discriminatory clauses of the constitution should be changed. The first involved an amendment to allow the Federal Government to make laws for Aboriginal people; the second, for Aboriginal people to be included in the national census. There was no official 'No' case, and when the ballots were counted, 90.77% of Australians had voted 'Yes'. The 1967 referendum is often described as a moral highpoint in Australian politics and a watershed in the battle for equality (see, for example, Lippmann, 1994). Others argue the referendum did little to bring about the rights and recognition Indigenous activists were seeking, and that its widely understood impacts are in fact 'myths' (Attwood and Markus, 2007; Gardiner-Garden, 2007; Maddison, 2017). Indigenous scholar and filmmaker, Frances Peters-Little (2010), has conceptualised it as an act of compassion by mainstream Australia that changed the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people felt about their place in the nation (p. 75). She also argued the referendum cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of its associated 'myths', and why they have lasted so long (Peters-Little, 2010: 95). We respond to Peters-Little's argument by exploring television's role in generating and circulating these 'myths', and how the media-related practices of activists, politicians and TV journalists shaped public understanding of the referendum as a question of Indigenous rights and the settler nation's core values. The late African American activist and academic Julian Bond argued that until scholars unravel the complex links between the Southern freedom struggle and the mass media, their understanding of how the US civil rights movement functioned, why it succeeded and where it failed will be incomplete (Montes-Bradley, 2013). The same can be said about the relationship between Australian media and the movement for Indigenous rights, so we draw on our backgrounds in media studies, journalism and political communication to (1) explore how the medium of television shaped the campaign for constitutional change from 1957–1967,

(2) identify the dominant narratives in television coverage, and (3) generate insights into their part in the ongoing process of 'reaccrediting' Australia's national identity. The article concludes with an assessment of how seismic changes in media and society in the past 50 years have made the quest for further constitutional reform more sophisticated, diffuse, complex and challenging (Davis and Langton, 2016; McCallum et al., 2016; Hartley, 2004; Maddison, 2017). These insights have ongoing significance for other settler nations where Indigenous people maintain the struggle for rights and redress.

## Activism, television and reconciliation narratives

Television's power to advance the campaign to amend the constitution was the result of a convergence of technological, governmental, social and political forces at work throughout the world and in Australia as the medium developed from 1956. The push for constitutional reform emanated from a grassroots campaign that gained momentum from 1958 through the newly formed national Indigenous peak body, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). It called for the Federal Government to take control of Aboriginal affairs, the repeal of racially discriminatory laws and the securing of citizenship rights (Attwood and Markus, 2007). Behind the local campaign sat important shifts in international relations and the phase of decolonisation worldwide since 1947 (Moran, 2002: 1026). The technology of television as a platform of mass communication was crucial to making visible the activist agenda. The visual and dramatic effect of film, national coverage, and the linear narrative demands of television news combined to make it a powerful instrument for change (Gitlin, 1980). Its potential was being harnessed by civil rights activists and politicians globally because it personalised their appeal and reached into individual homes (Bodroghkozy, 2012: 113).

In Australia, television news had the potential to eclipse the print media in terms of audience, altering the sources of information, and therefore perspectives, available to viewers. News and current affairs programmes highlighted international protest movements, told local stories about the quest for civil rights and made household names of a number of Indigenous activists. Television news not only reported events, but helped to craft visual narratives for audiences (Goggin, 2015; Lang, 1984; Turner and Cunningham, 2000). TV's visual power revealed the reasoned appeals of those seeking change and the dramatic words and gestures of the struggle (Gitlin, 1980). Television also spread news and exposed events in a way that put pressure on governments and specific communities. American historian Paul Weaver (1975) observed that the television news story always displays a certain level of narrative coherence. To achieve this, 1960s television news directors in the United States and Australia began to focus not so much on an event *per se* as on social processes, moods, trends, conditions and relationships. For example, Australian television cameras of the period ventured where many whites had never been – into Aboriginal communities where they told the story of disadvantage and discrimination (Four Corners, 1961, 1966). These images, and the commentary that Indigenous spokespeople provided, were often the only sources for whites to hear from and see Aboriginal communities unfiltered through the mainstream print media.

To understand the formation and ongoing significance of the referendum narrative crafted via television, it is crucial to understand its historical and social underpinnings.

The term 'settler colonialism' (Wolfe, 1999) is used to define postcolonial states including the United States, Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia, which despite major differences, are all structured by the fact they are predominantly English-speaking settler cultures, which have to a large extent permanently displaced Indigenous peoples and have no intention of undertaking a process of structural decolonisation (Strakosch and Macoun, 2012: 41). White Australian myths of origin and national identity are therefore typically produced in relation to the illegitimate status of the act of invasion in 1788 that marks white national beginnings (Elder, 2009: 30) and are undermined by an anxiety concerning the disturbing history of race relations (see Davis and Langton, 2016). Such struggles over collective memory have affective, motivational and moral properties. Moran (2002) observed that settler nations have tried to deal with the discomfiting memories and structures of colonialism through 'deafening silence', denial, justification and accommodation. He contended: 'the discourses of settler nationalism must continue to engage with histories of Indigenous dispossession, in order to explain the nature and quality of their national existence' (p. 1016). Andrews (2003) has argued that nations are, among other things, communities of shared memory and shared forgetting.

From the mid-20th-century Australia gradually set about reconstructing itself through a fuller recognition of Indigenous people and their claims (Hartley, 2004; Moran, 2002). This move can be understood as the stirrings of a reconciliation narrative through which the dynamics of the making of collective memory can be witnessed. These narratives are designed to weave national identities and unity in a spirit of truth and understanding that transcends the conflicts and traumas of the past by establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the human rights violations that were committed (Andrews, 2003). Maori scholar Ihimaera (2013) said there is a compelling case for colonised societies to forge narratives about reconciliation that can help to actualise it. However, in his scholarship on national mythologies, Canadian historian and sociologist Gerard Bouchard (2013: 279) has questioned whether it is really possible for a nation to blend two opposing narratives grounded in a past of domination and oppression. Clark and de Costa (2011) suggested that if reconciliation stories are weak, or if they have not entered the wider cultural flow of stories, then it is difficult to effect any real change in Indigenous dispossession. We argue that television narratives about the 1967 referendum played a crucial role in colonial and Indigenous narratives converging in that moment. However, the referendum did not acknowledge human rights violations, remove all discriminatory clauses from the constitution or recognise the status of Australia's First Nations. More than 50 years later, this remains unfinished business (Dodson, 2012; Maddison, 2017), but the 1967 narrative is invoked constantly in the current and ongoing quest for recognition and treaty in Australia (Davis and Langton, 2016).

## **Methodology: analysing the mediated construction of the 1967 referendum**

This article builds upon Bouchard's (2013) historical-sociological approach to national myths and the body of scholarship that has provided valuable insights into television's involvement in myth formation (see, for example, Anderson, 1991 [1983]; Hall, 1996 [1991]; Schlesinger, 1991; Silverstone, 1994). Studies of mediated memory (see, for

example, Ashuri, 2007; Edy, 1999; Kitch, 2008; Neiger et al., 2011) are also relevant here as the concept of memory destabilises grand narratives of history and power, such as colonialism, and ‘memory, remembering and recording are the very key to existence, becoming and belonging’ (Garde-Hansen, 2011). Memory research is also closely linked to many issues at the forefront of contemporary political debate, particularly the political effects of the continuing presence of past hurts in the present (Radstone, 2008).

Bouchard (2013) has speculated: ‘Once a new idea or any message has been set forth in the public sphere, one wonders about the accreditation process that down the road will convert it into a fully-fledged myth’ (p. 286). In other words, what do we know about how myths evolve? He has proposed a three-step ‘analytical itinerary’ that pays close attention to (1) initial framing, (2) diffusion, and (3) institutionalisation (or ritualisation). ‘One expects that the further an idea goes in travelling those steps, the more likely it is to convert into a fully fledged myth and to impact on the course of a society or on individual minds and behaviours’ (Bouchard, 2013: 286). This brings us to the value of discursive analysis for understanding the formation of the 1967 narrative and television’s part in grafting it to the settler nation myth. We demonstrate that close narrative analysis of media texts and archival political communication can provide precise insights into the process of framing the constitutional reform myth, its dissemination into public discourse through television, and its institutionalisation in the settler state myth.

In order to conduct this investigation, we needed to find out what information and images were circulating via television during the 10-year campaign from 1957–1967. As well as media content, we examined the media-related practices of activists and politicians to see how a national myth was socially constructed in the Australian context (McCallum and Waller, 2017). Archival research on television coverage of the referendum and related matters from 1956 to 1967 was conducted at the Australian National Film and Sound Archive. We located, viewed, documented and analysed more than 30 relevant news and documentary items. Documentary research undertaken at the National Archives of Australia identified a collection of parliamentary papers and ministerial correspondence related to television coverage of the 1967 referendum. The analysis is based on a thematic narrative reading of television texts, historical accounts and archival materials (Reissman, 2008). It identifies and investigates five narrative themes that together reveal how the medium of television was pivotal in changing Australia’s relationship with the world, allowing the nation to experience the phenomenon of Indigenous rights in new ways, and was instrumental in ‘reaccrediting’ the settler nation myth. The nation was moved through its engagement with the following five stories told through television and political actors’ media-related practices: Australia’s shame, civil rights and global connections, admirable activists, ‘a fair go’, and consensus.

## **Five narratives that moved the nation**

### *Australia’s shame*

‘The eyes of the world are upon us’ was a constant theme in the Assimilationist era (Gitlin, 1980), and was used in the media by activists, commentators and politicians to highlight Australia’s shameful record on Indigenous rights (AIATSIS, 2017b). Examples include

news commentary on the jailing and subsequent death of Western Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira, which played out in a very public manner from 1957 to 1959 (Taffe, 1995: 31). However, it was a documentary aired in cinemas in 1956, and then on television, that alerted the nation to the 'Warburton Ranges controversy' and sparked the movement for constitutional change (Attwood and Markus, 2007). The 20-minute film was made by a campaigning state politician and activists. It depicted Aboriginal people starving, covered in flies, barely able to stand and left to fend for themselves in the remote West Australian desert setting of the Warburton Ranges, after being driven out of their homelands by the British nuclear tests at Maralinga. It shocked white audiences when it was shown in cinemas as *Their Darkest Hour* (McGrath and Brooks, 2010). The film was screened on commercial TV in Australia's major cities soon after under the title *Manlaughter*, by GTV Channel 9, and a relief appeal was also advertised on television in conjunction with the screening (Clark, 2008: 75). The film galvanised activists and led to the creation of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) in 1957 (Peters-Little, 2010). Other television news features and documentaries followed, highlighting racial discrimination and inequality in housing, employment, education, health, land ownership and access to public services and facilities (e.g. Four Corners, 1961, 1966).

In November 1960 'Australia's shame' was intensified by widespread media coverage of a visit by US civil rights leader and performer Paul Robeson, who attended a private screening of *Their Darkest Hour*:

When he saw small, thirsty children waiting in line for water, he threw down his black cap in anger, declaring he would return to Australia to help bring attention to the appalling conditions in which the Aborigines lived ... he repeated the promise a few days later at a press conference: 'There's no such thing as a "backward" human being. There is only a society which says they are backward. The Indigenous people of Australia', he roared, 'are my brothers and sisters'. (Lake, 2002: 85; see also Curthoys, 2010)

By 1961, the debate on Aboriginal issues in Australia was further internationalised through letter writing, reports in the foreign press, and academic material published for international audiences (Clark, 2008: 48). 'Australia's shame' continued to be leveraged throughout the decade to highlight injustice and advocate for change beyond the referendum. For example, a 1968 newspaper report quotes Mr J.W. Jeffrey, a former NT welfare officer at Wave Hill station saying 'Australians are hated throughout the world because of what they have been doing to their own countrymen' (The Canberra Times, 1968: 1). Narratives such as 'Australia's shame' can be instrumental in defining goals and challenges for settler nations and initiating wide-ranging social reform; in securing the required support from powerful institutions, as well as changing individual minds and behaviours (Bouchard, 2013: 276). 'Australia's shame' can therefore be understood as providing the initial framing in the accreditation process of the 1967 referendum becoming a fully fledged myth.

### *Admirable activists*

Activists popularised the Indigenous movement's views, using the news media to provide evidence of racial discrimination and press the need for constitutional change, based on their personal narratives. Most recent theorising about narrative has attested to its

value for disadvantaged groups, and Polletta (2006: 2) argues that personal stories in particular, ‘chip away at the will of public indifference’ because they can elicit sympathy on the part of the powerful and sometimes mobilise official action against social wrongs.

Civil rights campaigner Faith Bandler, who had a South Sea Islander heritage, was the acceptable face of change and chief narrator of the 1967 referendum with the effect that the story was literally told with one voice (Attwood and Markus, 2007: 14). Her biographer Marilyn Lake has argued: ‘Her magnetism as a speaker and media performer – together with her sheer persistence – were vital to the successful outcome of the campaign’ (Lake, 2002: 85). Other important activist storytellers included Indigenous spokespeople such as ‘radical’ Arrente-Kalkadoon university student Charles Perkins, Yorta Yorta sporting legend and preacher Doug Nicholls, Yorta Yorta singer Jimmy Little and the Minjerriabah writer Oodgeroo Noonuccul, who provided the poetics of the movement. They all made regular appearances on television throughout the 1960s.

The conventions of news reporting and television production shed light on why some victims of social injustice are appealing (Gitlin, 1985). Bandler embodied the future she was fighting for, and was a stylish media performer. In May 1965 secretary of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship Jack Horner wrote to Bandler about the ‘resounding public response’ to one of her many TV appearances: ‘There seems little doubt that you caused something of a sensation’ (in Lake, 2002: 96). Activists can exploit the conventions of storytelling, and especially the presumed relations between personal narratives and authoritative knowledge (Polletta, 2006: 136). Lake (2002) observed, ‘Faith’s brilliance as a public advocate of Aboriginal rights rested on her ability to always relate specific instances of injustice to general principles’ (p. 90). Whenever they appeared on television, activists could make a reasoned, direct appeal for Indigenous rights and constitutional change. The news format itself encouraged inclusion, a form of intimacy and integration that put Aboriginal people in white people’s consciousness as never before.

### *Civil rights and global connections*

Bandler was especially inspired by international developments in the historic struggle for blacks to win their freedom (Lake, 2002: 86). In 1960, declared by the United Nations to be the Year of Africa, 17 African countries gained their independence, yet in the same year in South Africa, 67 National Anti-Pass Law demonstrators were killed in what became known as the Sharpeville Massacre. Australian activists and audiences were among the millions throughout the world witnessing these events through television news. Bouchard (2013) observed that most of the modern myths have not been ‘home-made’. Ideals like pluralism, sustainability, citizenship and human rights ‘belong to a core of myths that have disseminated at the world scale, even though they can be locally appropriated and entrenched, even grafted to vernacular emotional roots’ (Bouchard, 2013: 284).

Australian activists appealed to local television audiences’ familiarity with apartheid in South Africa and the US civil rights story to raise awareness of racial discrimination in Australia. For example, in 1958, the white community in the small town of Nambucca Heads protested against the sale of a house in their area to an Aboriginal family. In an interview on 19 August that year, Bandler likened the Nambucca Heads community to the white Americans in Little Rock, Arkansas, who had responded with violence to the

introduction of nine African American children to the local high school: 'To my way of thinking, there is no difference between what Little Rock people have done and the Nambucca protest. I think it is absolutely shocking and disgusting' (Lake, 2002: 91).

American news was a key influence on the Australian referendum narrative, not only in terms of what people in Australia were seeing on their TV screens, but also in the formats and narrative techniques being developed in the United States. The civil rights story was central to shaping the new genre of serious television news in America (Gray, 1995; Torres, 2003), which was, in turn, highly influential on the developing Australian television sector and its audiences. Sydney University student activists led by Charles Perkins consciously modelled their 1965 Freedom Ride on anti-segregation campaigns in the United States to raise awareness in the cities of conditions faced by Indigenous people in regional Australia (Curthoys, 2002). They conducted a survey of Aboriginal living conditions, challenged a ban against Aboriginal ex-servicemen entering veterans' clubs in some country towns, and staged demonstrations against local laws barring Aboriginal children from public swimming pools. They ensured their protests were covered by the mainstream media, bringing the issue of racial discrimination to national and international attention, and stirring public debate about the disadvantage and racism facing Aboriginal people across Australia (AIATSIS, 2017a). In what can be seen as an early example of embedded broadcast journalism, Darce Cassidy, a student and also an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) producer, recorded and filed news stories from the bus. He captured physical and verbal confrontations between protesters and white locals that received wide coverage by the national media (Lake, 2002: 96). Hall Greenland, a non-Indigenous student who was one of the Freedom Riders said,

We were the first generation to be turned on by the idea of a different and better world and it was coming to us across the Pacific in black and white on our little televisions. (Oxfam, 2013)

The power of the story depends on the teller's skill in making it resonate with the narratives a community already has in mind (Mayer, 2014). Archival news footage of the 1965 Freedom Rides provides compelling evidence that Australian activists appropriated and adapted international civil rights narratives and succeeded in grafting them to the national narrative.

### *A fair go*

'Public narratives' including historical, ideological, religious and popular stories are at the core of a community's culture. They establish society's basic orientations – its worldview and ethos – and also serve as what MacIntyre (1997 in Mayer, 2014) has called an 'initial cultural stock' from which new stories may draw, either by directly referencing them or appealing to the basic understandings of 'who *we* are, what *we* believe, and what *we* value that they construct' (italics in Mayer, 2014: 102). A public awareness campaign on the referendum took place from March to May 1967, including radio, television and newspaper interviews with key Indigenous activists (Raines, 1990: 20). It drew on the settler nation's 'initial cultural stock' of the 'fair go', egalitarianism, for laws to apply equally to all Australians, and appealed to the Australian spirit of 'mateship' (Raines, 1990: 22). The



campaign capitalised on a decade of television news and documentaries that presented incontrovertible evidence of Indigenous dispossession, deprivation and discrimination that ran counter to white Australia's highest ideals and could no longer be ignored.

The 'fair go' myth is key to Australia's settler nation identity (Elder, 2007). Its strong roots lie in the beginnings of colonisation, when the first governor, Philip King, is said to have insisted on distributing food rations equally among convicts and free-men (Ozdowski, 2012). It was further entrenched by the folklore surrounding the famous colonial outlaw Ned Kelly, which revolves around him being denied a 'fair go' by the state. The fair wage case of the early 1900s and the 'mateship' myth of WWI have contributed to the 'fair go' enduring as Australia's key national value (Gough, 2012). Critics provide evidence that a 'fair go' has not been enjoyed by all Australians, especially Indigenous people. Ozdowski (2012) highlights that 'In particular, the concept *terra nullius* or "no man's land" was the antithesis of the extension of a "fair go" to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders'.

The doctrine of *terra nullius* has been described by Moran (2002) as the 'foundational settler nation myth', and he argued that Indigenous ownership and occupation has constantly unsettled it. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have therefore remained a disturbing problem that the state must try to accommodate (Moran, 2002: 1015). Policies of assimilation, and the 1967 referendum in particular, can be understood as important manoeuvres to accommodate Aboriginal peoples' disruption of the colonial project by incorporating them in the settler nation's narrative. We argue the news media played a central role through its deployment of white Australia's most cherished value – the 'fair go' – which enabled the public to embrace the movement for constitutional change.

In the decade leading up to the referendum television journalists exposed the 'unfair go' experienced by Indigenous people. The ABC's long-running current affairs programme *Four Corners* was launched in 1961 and in its first year presented an exposé of life on an Aboriginal reserve (Four Corners, 1961). Reporter Bob Raymond's story about Box Ridge Aboriginal Reserve ventured into an area few white Australians had ever seen. In 1966, a programme titled 'The price of equality' examined the actions of the Gurindji stockmen who went on strike over the right to equal pay for their work on Wave Hill station in the Northern Territory (Four Corners, 1966). This dispute received much media attention in the press and on commercial radio and television. Gian Carlo Manara's 1963 ABC Television documentary, *Living on the Fringe* highlighted the bleak living conditions of Aboriginal people in the bush and in the cities. It featured interviews about housing hardships, prejudice and poverty and highlighted entrenched racism and exclusion. Aboriginal people also discussed discrimination and disadvantage in the 1964 ABC documentary *A Changing Race*, directed by Therese Denny. It featured Aboriginal people in stockmen's camps, missions, factories, in their houses, all around Australia. The show was introduced by the well-known entertainer Jimmy Little, who is seen directly addressing the camera at the start of the film.

Archival news footage of the campaign in the fortnight before the poll shows supporters holding banners and posters with slogans, including 'Right wrongs, Write Yes', 'What is the nature of the Australian Nation?', 'Is this the nation of the Fair Go?' and 'Are people being treated equally?' These direct appeals to white Australia's highest

values provided the national storyline that campaigners and voters could interpret in a new social and political context to accommodate Indigenous people in the settler nation's myth. The way this theme unfolded aligns with what Bouchard (2013) termed the 'diffusion' step in the accreditation process that converted the 1967 referendum campaign into a fully fledged narrative about the road to Indigenous rights in Australia.

### *Consensus*

Parliamentary records held at the Australian National Archives provide evidence of high-level co-operation to ensure the narrative of 'consensus' was the overarching story of the 1967 referendum in the 3 months before the vote. The parliamentary parties, Indigenous activist organisations, and powerful institutions including news media, trade unions and churches, advocated together for constitutional change. Crucially, there was no 'No' case mounted. Communications between Prime Minister Harold Holt, the leader of the Country Party John McEwan, Labor leader Gough Whitlam and the Attorney-General Nigel Bowen on 21 March 1967 provide evidence that key politicians united. In correspondence with Bowen regarding a draft public statement and strategy for the campaign, Holt (1967b) wrote, 'John McEwen and Gough Whitlam have agreed to join me in presenting the "Yes" case in respect of the referendum proposals'.

There was no investment in a commercial media campaign. Instead, the Government relied on the ABC to provide key politicians with airtime. In a confidential nine-point document distributed to the Liberal Party Federal Executive on 16 March 1967, members were told,

It is not contemplated that any State Division will be in a financial position to embark on an advertising campaign through the media of commercial TV, radio and press (Australian Federal Government, 1967).

This document also emphasised the importance of all political leaders working together so they 'appear to be speaking in one voice' the confidential campaign notes say. With that in mind, it would be desirable for the parliamentary leader of the Liberal Party, The Country Party and the Labor Party to confer with a view to a 'Yes' case signed and authorised by the three leaders and a sharing of 'Yes' ABC TV and radio times.

Television was identified as the most important medium by both activists and government, as letters in May 1967 between the voluntary publicity officer for the Harold Blair Aboriginal Children's Project, Jan Merton, and Prime Minister Holt reveal. Merton (1967, 10 May) wrote,

Recently I believe that you received a letter from Mr Stan Davey, Director of the Aborigines Advancement League, and ... I have no doubt that he sought publicity of a personal kind from yourself on mass media (TV), if possible. I would like to endorse his comments to the utmost ... Publicity needs to be front-page and top viewing time.

Two days later, Prime Minister Holt responded,

You can be sure that I will be giving this my whole-hearted backing including, as you suggested, on television. You may be interested to know that I will be making two telecasts and two

broadcasts supporting the 'Yes' case ... These programmes will be used on the ABC's national network covering all states. (Holt, 1967a)

The NSW branch of Aboriginal Rights 'Vote Yes' Committee wrote to radio stations across the state imploring them to sponsor and play its advertising jingle 'Vote Yes for Aborigines' as a public service announcement in the fortnight before the vote. The 'Publicity sub-committee' wrote,

... We want the jingle on the air all over Australia, to counteract apathy on this issue and can assure you that the churches, trade unions and all political parties wish for an overwhelming 'YES' result. (Aboriginal Rights 'Vote Yes' Committee, 1967)

The archival record left by this correspondence reveals aspects of the structural relationship between politics and media that Salmon and Glasser (1995) conceptualise as the communication of consent. It highlights news media ties to government and the privileged access elite politicians had to media gatekeepers. Television was central to sharing the consensus message from all perspectives. For example, at the conclusion of the ABC television programme, *The Day of the Aboriginal*, screened a week before the poll, members of the Aboriginal-Australian fellowship raised their voices and sang Gary Shearston's song *Vote yes for freedom*. The programme also televised the 'Vote Yes' FCAATSI committee meeting on 7 May 1967, highlighting the tireless campaign of its members.

In 1967, the public discourse around constitutional reform was celebratory, unified and uncontested. The 'consensus' theme can be understood as Bouchard's (2013) 'institutional', or 'ritualised' step in the process of merging Indigenous and settler nation narratives. Archival television footage from this key time in the 10-year campaign shows how the news media narratives of 'Australia's shame' 'admirable activists', 'civil rights and global connections', 'the fair go' and 'consensus' had fused into a widely accepted national narrative of such significance that it could see through major political change. It was technically enacted in the constitution through the overwhelming 'Yes' vote that quickly came to symbolise national unity and was committed to the settler nation's collective memory. But while 'consensus' may be the culmination of this story, it did not close the book on the settler nation narrative, which has continued to be unsettled by Indigenous demands for rights, recognition and restorative justice (Davis, 2016; Foley and Anderson, 2004; Maddison, 2013, 2017).

## **Implications for contemporary campaigns for constitutional reform**

Since 1967, there have been persistent calls for further reform of the nation's framing document to recognise the status of Indigenous peoples and remove discriminatory clauses (Davis and Williams, 2015). The push for 'recognition' was formalised early in the new millennium through a series of government inquiries and cemented with cross-party support. The non-government organisation Reconciliation Australia was funded to run a community engagement and awareness campaign (Recognise, 2016). Working in tandem with government, Recognise operated as an arms-length public information tool;

effectively outsourcing political function in a form that adopted the logics of marketing to engage the electorate (Davis, 2016). Recognise drew on the collective memory of 1967 to promote constitutional change as unfinished business, attempting to re-ignite the message of 1967 to argue that the settler nation has fundamentally shifted and that constitutional reform will finally unite the Indigenous and non-Indigenous nation (Recognise, 2016). Together, these processes essentially take the complexity out of settler colonial Australian race relations and reconstruct it as a rational political choice.

However, the contemporary constitutional reform campaign failed to take into account two interwoven factors: the global movement and scholarly critique of the politics of recognition that has emerged in the intervening 50 years (e.g. Coulthard, 2014; Povinelli, 2002; Simpson, 2007) and the dramatically changed media landscape. Since 1967 in Australia, there have been growing calls to acknowledge unceded sovereignty, land rights and a treaty (Moreton-Robinson, 2007). Maddison (2017) proposes ‘a more agonistic engagement on this issue; one that favours dissent and contestation over consensus and closure’ (p. 4). The mediatised Recognise campaign was challenged by the underlying multiplicity of views and perspectives on what might be changed by the referendum, while the digital media environment has enabled social media incursions by Indigenous activists that have been effective in disrupting the official campaign (McCallum et al., 2016; Dreher et al., 2015). Most recently, the 2017 Uluru Convention of 250 Indigenous representatives envisaged far more substantive change – including a treaty and representative parliamentary body – than could have been envisaged by the electorate in 1967. However, their proposal, titled ‘The Uluru Statement from the Heart’, was rejected by the Australian Government in October 2017, and there are no signs a referendum will be held any time soon.

## Conclusion

Analysis of television media texts and political communication practices have yielded important insights into how the medium of television shaped the campaign for constitutional change from 1956–1967 and contributed to ‘reaccreditation’ of the settler nation narrative. Television made a significant contribution to changing the landscape of Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations, inaugurating a more direct, more intimate and more integrated form of communication. Bouchard’s (2013) observation that public narratives are at the core of a community’s culture has helped in understanding how Australia’s deeply held belief in equality and fairness was harnessed through the narrative conventions of television stories, driving the institutional support for constitutional change (Mayer, 2014; Polletta, 2006). The consensus narrative was sponsored by political elites who suspended the traditions of political conflict to support a unified stance on constitutional change, which in turn was powerfully represented through their appearances on television. National consensus emerged as the overarching story of the referendum campaign, advocated through television by both activists and government. At the same time as constitutional change was enshrined in law, the collective memory that was created was subsequently ritualised and made available for cultural appropriation over the next 50 years.

Key outcomes of the 1967 campaign were the emergence of a strong national Indigenous political movement, with demands for treaty and sovereignty at the top of

its agenda, and a vibrant First Nations media scene (Waller et al., 2015). In 2017, mainstream political and media elites face a highly sophisticated Indigenous public sphere that has controlled its own media for some four decades. Hartley (2004) examined Indigenous and national identity in the post mass media era from the 1990s and observed that what composed a nation, citizenship, broadcasting, or democratic participation was entering an unsettling period of choice. We argue that intensive digital disruption since 2000 has had profound impacts on the capacity of both elites and activists to garner and sustain the consensus narrative that was so effectively deployed via mass media in 1967. This is not to suggest a technologically determinist outlook, but to highlight how the intersection of changed political and media landscapes can impact on national political conversations and collective memories.


### Funding


Lisa Waller received financial support for the research in this article through a Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia Award for Research Excellence.

### Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Magali McDuffie, who assisted with the archival research at the Australian National Film and Sound Archive and the National Archives of Australia.

### ORCID iDs

Lisa Waller  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2689-8010>

Kerry McCallum  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7567-2125>

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