Discursive Depletion:
The Fourth Estate & Aboriginal Opposition to the Northern Territory Emergency Response 2007

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Abstract

This thesis is located at the conjuncture of two events in Australia in 2007: an industrial 'crisis' in the Australian newspaper industry and a declared 'crisis' of child sexual abuse in remote Northern Territory Indigenous communities for which the government devised a radical emergency response. This thesis examines Australian newspapers' coverage of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) 2007, in the two-month timeframe between its announcement on June 21 to its enactment in legislation by parliament on August 17, 2007, in order to explore the operation of the press's normative Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role at this policy moment. It does so to gain a deeper understanding of the newspaper industry's ongoing structural changes' implications for the Fourth Estate role, particularly in relation to the interests and perspectives of Aboriginal Australians of the Northern Territory. It aims to inform journalism education and practice. The methodological approach taken is Norman Fairclough's dialectical-relational critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is a text-oriented analysis that encompasses two layers of contexts to the texts' production: journalists' discursive practices, that is, the processes whereby journalists produce text; and the sociocultural context, that outside of the newsroom which has a bearing on the text. CDA has a focus on "moments of crisis" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 230) in processes of social change, which speaks directly to the conjuncture of events under examination here.

'Discursive depletion' refers to routine journalism practices' minimising representation of Aboriginal opposition to the NTER. This thesis argues that, despite recent calls in Journalism Studies for its decentring, the normative Fourth Estate role of the press remains important to journalism scholarship and is particularly important when considering the press's role in representing the interests and perspectives of marginalised groups, such as Indigenous Australians.

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Dedication

Most of all, I wish to thank my very lovely husband, Adrian Breen, for his unwavering encouragement from first notion to submission day. You have shown such generosity of spirit and given up so much of your own time to help me realise this project. And to our wonderful little children, Declan and Maeve. Thank you for your understanding and for being so blatantly proud of me. This is for you.

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Abbreviations and list of figures

AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies
AMA	Australian Medical Association
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CAONT	the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
FaHCSIA	The Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, so-named from 2007 to late 2013
IDA	Indigenous Doctors Association
MEAA	Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance *(Australian journalists' union)*
NTER	the Northern Territory Emergency Response 2007 policy

Figure:

Diagram summarising Fairclough's analytical framework (from Titscher, Wodak, Meyer & Vetter, 1998, p. 188), in chapter 3, p. 79.

Aboriginal/Indigenous – a note on terminology

'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' are used somewhat interchangeably in the thesis. Both terms are correct in referring to Indigenous people of the Northern Territory. The Indigenous peoples of Australia are Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. The Indigenous people of the Northern Territory are Aboriginal people. Government policy tends to cover all Indigenous people, without differentiating between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. (Flinders University, n.d.)

Prolegomenon: setting the scene

Imagine this real-life scenario applied to your own life. Someone in your neighbourhood or a neighbourhood near yours is suspected of sexually abusing children. A Government minister appears on national television characterising the communities in your area as wilfully harbouring paedophile rings, as enabling their abuse by protecting them. Then a Government inquiry into child sexual abuse is launched. The inquiry comes to your area to ask you your thoughts. You and your neighbours tell the inquiry that you have heard this abuse has occurred, but have not witnessed it yourself. You tell the inquiry that you know such abuse is wrong and would never condone it. You also say that you have seen no evidence of paedophile rings but that you know that some men, mainly outsiders, including workers from a nearby mine, have preyed on young girls in your community, giving them gifts in exchange for sex. You tell them that you are concerned, too, about sexual relationships between teenagers – that they get into sexual relationships with each other and you are worried about that. Kids these days do not have the same morals as when you were growing up. You also tell the inquiry about dire infrastructure problems in your neighbourhood, particularly of overcrowded and dilapidated housing. You tell the inquiry about the very high levels of alcohol abuse amongst some adults, and that you are concerned that children in those adults' care are not being cared for properly. You are pleased you have told the inquiry these things. It was not easy to do. It was not easy to trust that the inquiry, unlike so many other inquiries, would amount to anything, but these things matter and need to be resolved. Then, imagine the inquiry's report is published, detailing your concerns. You are relieved. Someone has listened to you at last. This has been going on for a very long time, and nothing has been done to fix the housing or to support the drinkers to be better care-givers. The abusive miners and other predatory outsiders have been

reported many times to the police, but the police have said that they are powerless to do anything about it. You told the inquiry all of this, and all of this is recorded in the inquiry's report that has just been published. You are hopeful that something will be done at last. Six days pass. Then the Prime Minister appears on television, looking grim. He announces that the Federal Government is taking over your neighbourhood and all the neighbourhoods in your area. That it will take over responsibility for the running of your home. Your children will be forced to have health checks to detect signs of abuse. Half of your welfare payments will be quarantined, accessible only through a debit card that can only be used at the local shop. The Prime Minister in his speech on national television announces that this is a national emergency, that your neighbourhood is depraved, that the local men do not know it is wrong to have sex with children. He announces that the army is on its way to begin this intervention. You are shocked, and you are scared. The army was used in living memory to take generations of children away from neighbourhoods like yours, for them to be raised in state-run institutions because successive governments believed that the adults in your communities could not do the job properly themselves. Nothing the Prime Minister is saying resembles the help you have asked for. Little he is saying reflects the reality you live, the reality you told of to the inquiry which is reflected in the inquiry's report. The newspapers report this government initiative largely as the government does: as an urgent, heroic crusade to save your neighbourhood's children. Few journalists seem to have read the inquiry's report. Even fewer have come to your neighbourhood to talk to anyone. How is any of this, all of this, possible?

Chapter 1 *Introduction*

This thesis argues that the Australian press, in general, did not fulfil its 'Fourth Estate' democratic watchdog role in reporting during a time of crisis in 2007, when the then government under Prime Minister John Howard declared a national emergency in relation to child sexual abuse in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. It employs a critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough, 1992; Richardson, 2007) – a text-oriented social research method which analyses processes of social change – to explore how the Australian press performed this normative role in relation to the interests and perspectives of Indigenous Australians at this time. The policy in question, the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), was chosen as the site of study because it was a controversial policy that was seen by many Indigenous people and their supporters as disempowering, unfair, punitive and ineffective (Altman and Hinkson, 2007a; Arena, 2012). It is arguably the most controversial Indigenous affairs policy since that which had become known as the Stolen Generations, when mixed-race Indigenous children were removed from their homes from the 1890s to the 1970s to be raised in state-run institutions. The NTER was also chosen as the site of study because it happened very quickly, being deemed an emergency response. It was launched in June 2007 and enacted by parliament in August 2007, leaving a brief two-month timeframe in which the press could perform its normative role as watchdog on government before the Act was passed. A consideration in choosing newspaper reporting of the NTER as the site of study was that research shows that Indigenous affairs reporting in Australia is of a very poor standard in terms of its representation of the interests and perspectives of Indigenous Australians (Jakubowicz et al., 1994; Meadows 2001; Bacon 2005; Simmons and Lecouteur, 2008; McCallum, 2013; Waller, 2013; McCallum & Waller, 2014). Indigenous perspectives have little chance of being

acknowledged by government without their representation in the mainstream media. Furthermore, newspapers are powerful intra-media agenda setters in the Australian context (Turner, 2007).

The NTER legacy persists today, under the rebranded Stronger Futures legislation (Australian Government, 2012). In launching the highly controversial and extremely interventionist NTER in June 2007, the government appealed for its support by asking Australians to imagine if the alleged trigger circumstances were present in their suburbs, on the premise that no one would or should tolerate such dysfunction.

> "We regard this as akin to a national emergency. [Indigenous Affairs Minister] Mr Brough's put it to me this way; that if this set of circumstances had been disclosed as taking place in the [Canberra] suburb of Dickson, can you imagine what the local response from police, from medical authorities and from the state government would have been?" – Prime Minister John Howard at the launch of the NTER (Howard, 2007)

Thus, to introduce this thesis, I imagined just that: the NTER as it happened, but as if it happened to you.

This thesis argues that the journalism practices involved in this social phenomenon need to be understood at this particular time because the newspaper industry has been undergoing fundamental change with the shift to the online domain, resulting in mass editorial redundancies, particularly of subeditors, which has implications for journalism's normative Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role. This concept is historically derived and can be understood simply as the press acting in the public interest as the brake and check on government:

> When Edmund Burke described the embryonic media of the late eighteenth century as the 'Fourth Estate' (the first three being the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of the state), he was acknowledging their importance to the health of liberal democracy. The media represented an independent source of knowledge, not only informing the people about politics, but also protecting them from abuses or power. (McNair, 2011, p. 44)

This concept underpins Western journalism's arguably universal ethical code (as discussed in chapter 2). This ethical code and the Fourth Estate concept both inform the normative theoretical thread that runs through this thesis. This is closely integrated with the conceptualisation of the press as a public sphere – a forum for informed discussion and debate, where something approaching public opinion can be formed (Habermas, 1962/1989). It is debatable whether public opinion exists (Lippmann, 1922; Bourdieu, 1979), and it is notoriously difficult to measure (for example, Herbst, 2001). Furthermore, Fraser (1999) has argued that there is not one but multiple public spheres relating to different 'publics', in which public opinion can be formed. Public opinion can be, and is for the purposes of this thesis, understood in terms of the expression of the interests and perspectives of Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory as the result of such informed discussion and debate in the public sphere, whereby a consensus is reached between participants regarding how society or aspects of it should be organised.

This thesis's critical discourse analysis approach examines the news reports in the sociocultural and discursive practices contexts of their production. Fairclough's three-dimensional definition of discourse defines discourse as simultaneously text, discourse practice and sociocultural practice. The texts in this study are the newspaper reports about the NTER. The 'sociocultural practice' context is everything outside of the newsroom that has an impact on the text. The 'discourse practice' context encompasses processes of text interpretation and production, with discursive practices being "the processes through which journalists produce texts" (Richardson, 2007, p. 75). The journalism discursive practices whereby news texts are produced are distilled for this study as the newsgathering, news-writing and news-editing processes. This thesis aims to uncover the discursive practices that contributed to the reporting of the NTER. It argues that mass redundancies among subeditors and other editorial job losses wrought by the industrial changes have implications for the press's Fourth Estate democratic

watchdog role regarding the representation of the interests and perspectives of Indigenous Australians, which is generalisable to other marginalised groups.

1.1 What this thesis is about

Bowles (2010) writes of the process of "reverse engineering – trying to figure out the designs that lie behind the representations we see in order to remake them, with the hope that this will lead to real-world benefits" (Bowles, 2010, p. 54). I see this thesis's analytical approach as a form of reverse engineering. This thesis seeks to excavate – uncover and examine – the Australian newspapers' performance of their Fourth Estate role in their coverage of this highly controversial Indigenous policy, the NTER 2007. On June 21, 2007, the then Prime Minister of Australia John Howard announced an 'intervention' in the Northern Territory (NT), to protect Indigenous children from sexual and other abuse. The *Little Children Are Sacred* (*LCAS*) report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (Anderson and Wild, 2007), which reported a concerning level of abuse of Indigenous children in the Northern Territory, had been made public six days earlier, on June 15. Howard said the NTER was in response to it.

Brown and Brown (2007), writing in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, capture a common complaint about the questionable nature of this move:

> The 'Little Children Are Sacred' report, irrespective of its integrity and worthiness, joins a disturbingly long list of reports whose recommendations have been largely ignored. In comparison, however, it may well stand out as one of the most blatantly bastardised of all Aboriginal health reports, in that the Federal Government has 'delivered' the NT intervention, in rhetoric, as a means of protecting Aboriginal children... (Brown and Brown, 2007, p. 621)

Legislation was drafted to intervene in the areas of welfare payments to Indigenous families (to 'quarantine' half to be accessible only via a store card), alcohol and pornography bans, compulsory health checks of Aboriginal children and access to Aboriginal land. The Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Commonwealth) was suspended, and soldiers entered the NT's

remote Aboriginal communities within days of the announcement, followed by teams of doctors and bureaucrats. Two months after *LCAS*'s publication, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007 was passed by parliament without amendment and came into effect on August 18, 2007. In 2012 the Gillard minority Labor Government rebranded and extended the NTER via the 10-year policy legislation *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012*, despite contested evidence of the NTER's benefit to the lives of children in remote NT Indigenous communities (Altman, 2011; FaHCSIA, 2011; Shaw and d'Abbs, 2011; Concerned Australians, 2012).

The normative expectation of the media's Fourth Estate role would be that it inform the public and critique the government where necessary. In 2007, the hasty progression of the NTER between its announcement and its enactment by parliament only gave a two-month window for the media to scrutinise the policy's intent, detail and justification before it was passed into legislation. This thesis explores how the Australian print media performed its Fourth Estate role in relation to the NTER and the interests and perspectives of NT Indigenous people. This is within the context of newsrooms under pressure from the industrial changes. Furthermore, these same newsrooms were, as a long tradition of journalism studies research shows, already routinely reporting on Aboriginal affairs in a consistently unsatisfactory, often clearly racist way (Jakubowicz et al., 1994; Meadows, 2001; Bacon, 2005; Simmons and Lecouteur, 2008; McCallum, 2011; Waller, 2013). This thesis explores the implications of this confluence of events – the newspaper industrial changes, the advent of the NTER policy and the parlous state of Indigenous affairs reporting – for the press's role in Australian democracy, particularly in relation to the interests and perspectives of Indigenous citizens.

Further to this, it is not the Fourth Estate role alone that places responsibility on the press for fairness in Indigenous affairs reporting. There is also a moral obligation. Australia is a signatory to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 16 enshrines

Indigenous peoples' right to establish their own media and to have access to their self-expression in non-Indigenous media. It also enshrines state-owned media's obligation to reflect cultural diversity and for states to encourage commercial media to do the same (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

The newspapers under examination fall into this latter category, commercial media, and as businesses, they are floundering (MEAA, 2008; Finkelstein, 2012; Papandrea, 2013). A viable business model for online newspapers has yet to be established because casual readers generally expect their online news for no cost and revenue from accompanying advertisements is weak (Tiffen, 2010). Consequently, editorial workforces have been hit hard by redundancy, most acutely amongst production journalists, that is, subeditors, who are deemed most dispensable despite their crucial fact-checking function, because they do not provide content. Research internationally shows that this changing nature of the newspaper industry has a negative effect on how journalists perform the press's Fourth Estate role (e.g. Davies, 2008; Lee-Wright et al., 2012).

I argue from a liberal-democratic theoretical perspective that, without a functioning watchdog media we cannot have a functioning democracy, and that it is important to pay attention to the performance and practices of the press at this time of unprecedented industrial upheaval, which I argue is leaving a vacuum in Australia's democratic system.

This watchdog function of the press that acts as a check on the powerful is particularly important for the protection of marginalised groups. NT Indigenous Australians were particularly powerless in the face of the federal government's NTER policy. Their interests and perspectives had little chance of being acknowledged by government without their representation in the mainstream media.

This thesis's main original contribution to knowledge is in its lexical-level excavation of the nature and the role of journalism's discursive practices in representing the interests and

perspectives of Indigenous Australians. Lexical analysis pertains to language choices in meaning-making; discursive practices are the processes whereby news reports are created. The literature shows that the Australian print media routinely excludes Indigenous Australians in terms of enabling, even allowing, their voices to be heard. However, no study prior to this one has explored the lexical-level mechanics of this exclusion (that is, the dialectical interplay of lexical choices with discursive practices to achieve exclusion) and, furthermore, to suggest remedial action.

The aim of this research is to improve both journalism education and practice. This is important because of the press's democratic role and the Australian news media's influence on policy formulation (McCallum and Waller, 2013; Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer, 2010). At a time when much communication research is now focussed on the shiny promise of new media, there is still much to be learned from the challenges facing the fading but still functioning 'old' media, not least because the two are increasingly intimately linked, with the same newsrooms producing for both print and online, a trend that was still very much in its beginning stages at the time of the NTER launch in 2007. Furthermore, newspapers to some extent still set the news and policy agenda, and shape public opinion (McCombs, 2014).

The subeditorial role is an important consideration. This is particularly so regarding its fact-checking function, its role in the structuring of news stories and its consequential representational influence. A news story is produced by both subeditors and reporters, and their relative inputs to the text are indiscernible from a text-oriented analysis such as this one. Reporters and subeditors are both journalists, their discursive practices are all journalism practices. The normative theories pertaining to journalism in general (discussed in chapter 2) are also applicable to the particulars of the subediting role. A 'good sub' might have been expected to have 'caught' the questionable discursive practices noted. It is theorised that those

'catches' are far less likely to occur in newsrooms under pressure, when journalists feel that they do not have enough time in which to do their jobs well.

While there has been extensive research into how reporters perform their roles in the face of the industrial changes (e.g. Pew Research Journalism Project, 2008; Lewis et al, 2008a, 2008b; Simons, 2007), there has been very little research into how subeditors (or copy editors, as they are known in the United States) perform their roles in the face of the industrial changes, and none from a text-oriented discourse analytical approach. Recent research has sought subeditors' perceptions of their changing roles, via qualitative interviews (e.g. Ewart, 1999; Keith, 2009); and ethnographic approaches such as organisational observation (e.g. Vandendaele and Jacobs, 2014). This research found that subeditors felt somewhat overwhelmed by their workloads, saying that they do not have enough time to do their jobs properly. None of these studies, however, has sought to connect this context with the consequences of precise lexical choices (the words and phrases employed in the news-writing process which produce particular meanings) arising from particular discursive practices – whether reporters' or subeditors' – as this study does.

To clarify further, this thesis uses the term 'lexical choice' to refer to the words and phrases employed in the news-writing process which produce particular meanings. Lexical words' primary function is referential (Chandler and Munday, 2011, p. 178), a representative function which imparts information and is oriented towards the context (Chandler and Munday, 2011, p. 360). There are a variety of words available to the reporter to express ideas, each with its own particular meaning. Therefore, in this research approach, lexical choices inherent to the news reports, whether they be nouns, verbs or adjectives, are noted for their function and meaning-making potential in the news reports.

This particular line of inquiry, about lexical choices and subeditors' practices, arose through inductive analysis informed by my own extensive experience as a newspaper subeditor

and forms an explanatory thread running through the thesis. The question arose regarding what journalism practitioners and educators now need to know about the subeditor's fast-receding skill-set as the newspaper newsroom evolves into one where the subeditor's role is being disposed of and reporters are increasingly expected to subedit their own work. The contribution that a reflective approach can make to journalism practice in this scenario is valuable. This thesis builds on the literature about reflective practice in examining the press's performance of its Fourth Estate role in relation to the NTER. Given both the haste of its conception and implementation, and the poor record of Indigenous affairs reporting in Australia, as well as the industrial pressures in the newsrooms of Australian newspapers, I hypothesised that the reporting of the NTER would be particularly prone to problematic reporting practices. By highlighting those practices and interrogating the precise lexical mechanisms that embody them (that is, how they are written up and how they work in the text, whether alone or together), suggestions can be made regarding how to improve the press's performance of its democratic watchdog role.

1.1.1.1 *Critical Discourse Analysis*

This thesis identifies and focuses on four 'moments of crisis' within the two-month timeframe under examination, between the NTER's announcement and its enactment by parliament. Moments of crisis, that is, "moments in the discourse when there is evidence that things are going wrong" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 230), are a particular focus of inquiry for CDA analyses, for their potential to show up problematic aspects of routine practice that otherwise might go unnoticed. Thus, in this thesis, characteristics of routine journalism practices and their consequences for the representation of Indigenous voices are investigated. These four key moments in the NTER policy development process correspond with chapters 4 to 7 and are

referred to as The 'Launch' moment; the Child Health Checks; Oppositional voices: talking back to the NTER; and The Delegation.

The methodological approach taken is that of Norman Fairclough's dialectical relational CDA, which I argue has a critical realist perspective that combines a realist ontology with an interpretivist/constructionist epistemology. As mentioned above, Fairclough defines discourse in a three-dimensional way, as simultaneously text, discourse practice and sociocultural practice. With regard to the three dimensions to Fairclough's definition of discourse, the discourse under examination here consists of the textual dimension of newspaper news reports about the NTER policy; the discourse-practices dimension of the journalism discursive practices involved in the news reports' production; and the sociocultural-practices dimension of the goings-on outside the newsroom which has a bearing on the text.

This thesis offers perspectives from journalism education, the sociology of news and media studies as a contribution to a transdisciplinary approach. This methodology is employed to answer the following research questions:

1) What discursive practices employed to produce the NTER-related news reports in Australian newspapers, in the two months between announcement and enactment, demonstrate the press's failure to prosecute its Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role, as normatively theorised?

2) How were NTER-critiquing Aboriginal 'oppositional voices' represented in the news reports?

3) What implications might the newspaper industry's industrial changes have for the reporting of the NTER, and Indigenous affairs in general?

4) What emergent insights from this analysis could there be for enhanced or new journalism practices for this changing newspaper industry?

The next section details where I am situated in relation to the research, before presenting a general overview of contemporary developments in the field.

1.1.1.2 *Self-reflexivity*

Self-reflexivity has been integral to the iterative analytical process undertaken for this thesis, whereby I constantly asked questions of myself as well as of the material. Researchers are socially situated. Experiences, beliefs and values can influence what is perceived and how it is perceived. To mitigate against this, I was as self-reflexive as possible regarding where I stand in relation to the phenomena under examination. That involved being aware of my position in relation to the NTER Indigenous affairs policy, the newspaper industrial changes and their implications for the press's Fourth Estate role, and the treatment of Indigenous Australians by the state and by the news media.

I worked for more than 20 years as a print journalist both in Australia and overseas, most recently as a subeditor in Australia from 1999 to 2011, including in the newsrooms of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian* and *The Canberra Times* newspapers. I have first-hand experience of the effects of the industrial changes on the factual accuracy of newspaper news reports, and how this is most acutely relevant in the redundancies faced by subeditors. I know intimately the subeditorial role, the importance of its fact-checking function and its influence on news story structure (for example, the subeditor's role in deciding what information in the news story is most important, what 'the angle' should be, what is included and omitted). I also know through my extensive experience what is normatively considered to be 'good practice' for reporting and by extension subediting – for example, the use of the active voice, using unnamed sources sparingly, only beginning a sentence or a paragraph with 'But' to indicate counterpoint, seeking comment from 'both sides' of a dispute, verifying claims. This 'learned knowledge' is supported by reference to journalism textbooks (e.g. Sheridan Burns,

2013) and journalists' codes of ethics, as well as by the research literature. I have also drawn on

my seven years' experience as a journalism educator since 2007, regarding what some

Australian journalism students are taught as being good practice. Given this learned knowledge

about routine journalism practices from my journalism training, industry experience and role as

a journalism educator, I am self-reflexive regarding what might appear in sharp focus in the

text for me, and conversely am also aware that some other aspects to the text might not be so

apparent to me. This was mitigated by reading the texts closely several times in rounds of

iterative analysis.

On immigrating to Australia (from Dublin via London) in 1999 I became aware of the

historical and ongoing injustices suffered by Indigenous Australians. I have travelled

extensively in remote Australia, including around the Northern Territory prior to the NTER. I

am aware through having visited some remote NT Indigenous communities that there were

some, at times stark, differences between them in terms of how they functioned. This made me

suspicious of the 'one size fits all' NTER policy when it was launched, and the Prime

Minister's characterisation of all NT communities as the stuff of "Hobbesian nightmare[s]".[1] I

was also taken aback by the racialised nature of the policy, and the suspension of the Race

Discrimination Act to implement it.

I was overseas visiting family during the two months between the NTER policy being

announced and enacted, which is the two-month timeframe of my inquiry. While overseas I

wondered how the newsrooms coped with the issue, and on my return I began to think about

investigating this. As a former journalist, I am interested in journalism practice in relation to the

NTER. As a former subeditor, I am interested in how that plays out in the text. As a journalism

educator, I am interested in what lessons might be learned from this confluence of pressures

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[1]In a speech to the Sydney Institute, as reported in Schubert, M. and Murdoch, L. (2007, June 26). It's Our Hurricane Katrina. *The Age*, p. 1.

that might be useful to feed into classroom teaching about journalism practice to equip prospective journalists for the job, when they are increasingly expected to subedit their own work. This is an emerging trend which has been anathema to good journalism practice for generations, the thinking being that one is too close to one's own work to see its flaws clearly.

Having situated myself within the research, this next section details contemporary developments related to the research.

1.2 Contemporary developments

The NTER is widely understood as the most dramatic recent policy intervention in Australian Indigenous affairs and has been the focus of substantial academic inquiry, one of the first being *Coercive Reconciliation*, a collection of responses edited by Altman and Hinkson (2007a). Since 2007, researchers have critiqued the NTER from various perspectives. For example, from a social-work policy perspective (e.g. Fawcett and Hanlon, 2009; Hunter, S.V., 2008), a medical policy perspective (*Medical Journal of Australia*, themed issue, vol. 187, 2007), a post-colonial perspective (Stringer, 2007), a whiteness studies perspective (Moreton-Robinson, 2009), an Indigenous policy perspective (Altman, 2007b; McCallum, 2013; Thompson and Hill, 2009; Tait, 2007), a feminist perspective on 'child politics' (Baird, 2008), a social class perspective (Watson, 2009), a social inclusion perspective (Hunter, 2008), a media studies perspective (McCallum, 2011; McCallum and Waller, 2013), and a media racism perspective (Brown and Brown, 2007). There has also been some research from a discourse analysis perspective (Moreton-Robinson, 2009; Macoun, 2012; Mesikammen, 2013; Proudfoot and Habibis, 2013), but none before this thesis from a journalism studies perspective.

There have been four recent discourse analyses undertaken of media coverage of the NTER, however, the approaches taken differ markedly from this one. Due and Riggs (2011) included a chapter on the NTER in their book *Representations of Indigenous Australians in the*

mainstream news media, which focuses on the function of rhetorical devices. In this case study, they identify and conceptualise some rhetorical devices employed by politicians to support the NTER policy, which were identified from the examination of NTER news reports. They concluded that the media accepted uncritically the politicians' reasons for the NTER and focused on the political aspect while relying on stereotypes of Aboriginal people to do so. Proudfoot and Habibis (2013) undertook a comparative CDA of three popular (tabloid) newspapers' representation of NT Indigenous communities – two mainstream (News Ltd tabloids *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Herald Sun*) and one Indigenous (*The Koori Mail*) and found a racialised divide in reporting of the NTER:

> Our analysis shows that mainstream media consistently constructed all Aboriginal communities as places of violence and abuse, with the cause located in the deficits of Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal media contextualised problems of violence and abuse as occurring within only some Aboriginal communities, and linked the causes to the historical and sociopolitical legacy of the Australian state's engagement with its Aboriginal population. (Proudfoot and Habibis, 2013, p. 2)

Macoun's (2012) focus was on the discursive construction of Aboriginality in relation to the NTER. She applied a Foucauldian discourse analysis "to identify the ideas about Aboriginality deployed by the intervention's architects and supporters, and to examine ways that these constructions of Aboriginality and Aboriginal people operate to animate the intervention" (Macoun, 2012, p. 13). Mesikammen's PhD thesis (under examination at the time of writing), also a CDA about news media coverage of the NTER, takes a different approach to the current study: Mesikammen (email correspondence, March 2014) uses a mixed methodology that includes interview data. Her examination is of three moments emerging from mainstream media coverage (including broadcast media) of the NTER over a three-year timeframe, with a focus on news access (Mesikammen, 2013), whereas this thesis examines four moments emerging from newspaper coverage within a two-month timeframe, with a focus on the democratic role of the press. Therefore, my approach and focus differ substantially from

that of Mesikammen (2013), Proudfoot and Habibis (2013), and Macoun (2012) and it contributes to the scholarly examination of this important Australian policy moment.

1.2.1.1 *The nature of news media reporting*

The at times problematic nature of news media reporting has been a perennial research subject and finding (Harcup, 2009). Bias, balance, objectivity, voice, source selection and the hierarchy of sources, including their roles in race-based representation, persist as contemporary concerns. These have been investigated via numerous research methodologies, including by critical discourse analyses. However, investigations often ignore the sociocultural context of news production. What is a relatively new avenue of inquiry is the effect of the contemporary industrial changes on newsgathering and news products (for example, newspapers' contents), which I draw on in applying Fairclough's CDA approach's specific focus on the 'context'. The industrial changes' effect has been studied from perspectives such as political economy, political, economic, social-organisational, sociological and cultural; and from research approaches such as participant observation, content analysis and ethnomethodology. However, what has not been examined up to now in any general, comprehensive way (and specifically not in relation to the NTER), are the lexical mechanisms whereby problematic practices are textually rendered – that is, how they are written up and how they work in the text, whether alone or together. This thesis, in finding and exposing such lexical mechanisms in the news reports about the NTER, points to ways that they may be mitigated or dismantled in the course of routine news-gathering and -writing practices. This has implications for both text-based journalism and journalism education, making a contribution to both domains of practice.

Having given an overview of contemporary developments in relation to the location of this research, the next section will give a general overview of the major themes and debates.

1.3 Major themes and debates

This section argues how this thesis contributes to relevant contemporary debates, by situating it amongst the contextual and historical themes of this research project. This argument coalesces in considering, examining and arguing for the press's normative Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role.

A major debate to which this thesis contributes is an epistemological one around whether normative theories of the press have a legitimate place in studying contemporary journalism practice. One of the most prominent voices on the other side of the debate, Zelizer (2012) has criticised journalism scholarship for focussing on what journalists should be doing rather than what they are actually doing. This thesis adopts an explicitly normative standpoint regarding the press's democratic watchdog role and argues that normative theory, as embodied in journalists' codes of ethics, can be legitimately central to a critical analysis of the NTER news reports. It takes as the starting point of analysis what the press itself says it should be doing in relation to its own self-selected standards, through its codes of ethics. This thesis goes to heart of the scholarly conversation about the utility of journalism's Fourth Estate claim.

Related to this normative standpoint is this thesis's contribution to the major theme of inadequate representation of Indigenous Australians in the mainstream media. This thesis adds to the body of knowledge around how Australian journalism practice poorly serves the interests and perspectives of Indigenous Australians. Twenty years ago Jakubowicz et al. (1994) wrote that in news reports "[t]he exclusion of Aboriginal voices as authoritative is persistent" (p. 85). This thesis demonstrates that that is still the case in relation to the NTER. In excavating and dismantling the routine journalism discursive practices that serve to exclude and misrepresent, this thesis offers practical pedagogical solutions to this.

To offer practical solutions is particularly urgent at this time of fundamental structural change in the newspaper industry. Mastheads are losing money as advertising has shifted to the

online domain, and a viable online business model has not yet been established (Finkelstein, 2012; also Pew 2008, 2013). Research in the culturally comparable countries of the United States and the United Kingdom shows that this is having a negative effect on the media's democratic watchdog role. Here in Australia, research by the journalists' representative body, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA, 2008; MEAA, 2010; MEAA, 2012), points to a similar situation. Because of technological change and its economic effects, there have been thousands of redundancies from Australian mastheads over the past decade (the numbers are discussed in chapter 2), and the workloads of remaining journalists have increased. Subeditors – who have critical fact-checking and story-crafting roles – have proven to be particularly vulnerable to these changes, with the consequence that there is an ever-diminishing number of subeditors working in any particular newsroom. Little research has considered the subeditor's diminishing role and its implications at this time of industrial change, and none has considered this from a text-oriented perspective. This thesis highlights some consequences of subediting's diminished role for the production of newspapers and their Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role, while exploring how journalism educators may best prepare students to reflexively 'subedit' their own work as they produce it, to mitigate the consequences.

This thesis supports the continued relevance of CDA in contributing to CDA's defence as a research method, by foregrounding self-reflexivity to make assumptions explicit and providing detailed documentation of the analysis and demonstrating that all claims are grounded explicitly in the lexical features of the text. It is argued here that text-oriented discourse analysis is a valid social research methodology, as argued by Fairclough (1992) and building on Fursich (2009). Philo (2007) has argued that CDA requires triangulation with reception studies and/or ethnography. However this thesis, in locating the researcher in the research, also locates the researcher-as-a text consumer. The most strident critique of the

methodology comes from Widdowson (1995), who contends that much CDA is neither critical nor analytical. However, this thesis demonstrates that CDA's investigation of discursive practices in news texts is a highly effective and revelatory method, uncovering deep insights into the structures of news texts reflecting and affecting structures in society and vice versa. That is, in examining the dialectical relationship between discourse practices and sociocultural practices, this study is the first to examine the news media reporting of the NTER from a journalism discursive practices perspective. It is the first to excavate the precise mechanisms of these discursive practices, laying them bare for realignment.

This thesis examines the newspaper industrial changes by theorising their implications for the text through examination of subeditorial and other journalism discursive practices. It examines the NTER from the perspective of print journalism's discursive practices that constitute its reporting and it builds on the literature on Indigenous affairs reporting by examining the Australian press's performance of its Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role. It investigates the precise lexical mechanisms that serve to exclude, silence and misrepresent the NTER critique by Aboriginal 'oppositional voices' – that is, instances of NT Indigenous people 'talking back' to the NTER. (Oppositional voice is theorised in this thesis as those treated as 'unofficial sources' – that is, sources outside of the government and the bureaucracy – who voice opposition to the NTER policy in part or in whole.)

Having located the topic and explained what this thesis will do, the next section details how this will be done.

1.4 Building the argument

This section gives a chapter summary to indicate how the argument is built through a critical discourse analysis of the newspaper texts within the contexts of their production. It will examine the discursive practices that shaped the news reports – that is, the journalism processes

through which the texts were produced. It will also examine the wider sociocultural-context influences, for example, what was going on politically at the time (Fairclough, 1992; Richardson, 2007). The aim is to establish the text-shaping and meaning-making characteristics of routine journalism practices in the newspaper reporting of the NTER, in order to explore their implications for the press's Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role.

Following this introductory chapter, the chapters unfold as follows:

- In chapter 2, the background to this thesis is examined by discussing the NTER policy; the changes to the newspaper industry affecting the industrial environment around the advent of the NTER in 2007; and their implications in combination for Indigenous affairs reporting, in the context of journalism's democratic watchdog role. This chapter also serves the dual purpose of detailing the sociocultural context – in Fairclough's methodological approach, the goings-on outside of the newsroom which have a bearing on the news text. I situate this thesis at the point where these contexts overlap and establish the original contribution that is made.

- In chapter 3, the methodology is laid out, detailing how the text is analysed within the aforementioned sociocultural context as well as the discourse practices context – that is, "the processes through which journalists produce texts" (Richardson, 2007, p. 75). This examination of the text in the contexts of its production enables an evaluation of the press's performance of its Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role at this policy moment. In order to do this, Fairclough recommends a strategy of focusing on 'moments of crisis' – when things go wrong – which, he argues, have the potential to expose aspects of routine practices that might otherwise go unnoticed (Fairclough, 1992, p. 230). Four moments of crisis identified from within the data set were selected for analysis on the basis that, between them, they mapped the policy's trajectory during the two-month timeframe from announcement to enactment: 1) the NTER launch; 2)

child health checks; 3) attempts by organised and representative Aboriginal opposition to the NTER – what I call collectively 'oppositional voices' – to be heard in the policy development process; and 4) a delegation of NT Aboriginal leaders' attempt to delay the tabling of the legislation in parliament. Each of these moments is the focus of a findings chapter, respectively chapters 4 to 7.

- Chapter 4: The 'Launch' moment. This first of the four findings and discussion chapters analyses news reports of the NTER's launch, to ascertain how the print media performed its Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role in relation to this highly controversial policy when it was first announced. The theme that emerged was the similarity between the news reports, including the repetition of unfounded claims and particular discursive constructions.

- Chapter 5: The child health checks initiative. This policy as first devised was highly controversial. It was rhetorically constructed, developed and modified by the government over a period of about six weeks, an example of 'policy on the run'. The theme that emerged was the lack of journalistic scrutiny of false claims, including those made by anonymous sources.

- Chapter 6 analyses the metropolitan mastheads' representation of Indigenous opposition to the NTER. It does this via analysis of news reports about the two related 'perceptual interventions' (Pickering and McCulloch, 2010) in the news cycle by these oppositional voices – an Open Letter to the Indigenous Affairs Minister signed by 140 organisations, and an Alternative Plan document, put together by some 40 Aboriginal organisations from the Northern Territory as a vision of how they thought the government could better focus its reform efforts. The chapter's underlying assumption is the press's functions as a public sphere and a forum for public opinion formation. The theme that

emerged was the news media's routine discursive practices that work against NTER-critiquing Aboriginal oppositional voices being heard and listened to.

- Chapter 7, the final findings and discussion chapter, analyses the news reports about a delegation of leaders from the Northern Territory who travelled to Canberra in a final bid to delay the legislation. The chapter is about the news story's construction in light of a newspaper's organisational and editorial values, and what is revealed in terms of news values, the representation of sources and what it is deemed that the readers need to know. The theme that emerged was what editorial changes to news stories between editions of the same day's newspapers could reveal. For example, what aspects of a story or a source are foregrounded or diminished between editions, and what this may tell us about editorial priorities and organisational values.

- Chapter 8 draws conclusions as to how the problematic discursive practices identified might be remedied, as a valuable pedagogical contribution to journalism education and practice.

Taking a CDA approach enables a unique and valuable perspective on the research questions to emerge. The focus is on the nature of the discursive practices as meaning-making mechanisms. This thesis identifies the discursive mechanisms deployed by print journalists at this time of crisis to make sense of a rapidly evolving situation. If we are going to understand what is going on, we need to look at the discourse about it, which in this thesis's definition is the text in context.

This thesis makes a methodological contribution by extending Fairclough's CDA analysis of social change to the analysis of rapid policy change. It does so by employing CDA's focus on 'moments of crisis', coupled with the NVivo qualitative analysis software, to break open an atypically large data set. The emergent analysis makes theoretical contributions

through its transdisciplinary approach, encompassing journalism education, the sociology of news and media studies. This methodological innovation for field of journalism studies is applicable to the representation of marginalised groups and to media reporting of rapidly evolving crisis situations.

This thesis argues for the Fourth Estate democratic watchdog role of the press. It is a timely contribution to the debate that Zelizer (2012) has opened, where she argues for the decentring of the Fourth Estate in journalism scholarship. I acknowledge that there are many other functions of the press, from entertainment to community cohesion and beyond, but that its democratic function should remain a central concern of journalism training and practice. This thesis makes a robust contribution to the discussion about what kind of media we want to have.

Having explained what this thesis is about, and discussed contemporary developments, major themes and debates, the location of the topic, what the thesis will do and how this will be done, the next chapter details the background to this research project.