Media hierarchies of attention: news values and Australia’s Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

Australia’s Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-17) was a highly significant legal exercise that devoted considerable expertise and resources to bearing witness and breaking silences surrounding child sexual abuse in all of its 57 case studies. In analysing the national media coverage we take a critical position to ask to what extent was this groundbreaking exercise in listening for justice reflected or amplified via mainstream news? A rich tradition of journalism and media studies contributes to the findings that routine patterns of media (in)attention produced asymmetries, with highly personalized church “scandals” drawing so much focus that they overshadowed institutional reviews and cases involving some of the most vulnerable and marginalised victims and survivors, with the effect of sidelining institutional responses designed to prevent child sexual abuse in future.

KEYWORDS

Listening; media and marginalization; news values; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; media monitoring; media scandal; hierarchies of attention.

INTRODUCTION

Australia’s national apology to the victims of child sexual abuse on 22 October 2018 was a global media event (note 1). It represented the national Government’s official response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA) (2013-17), and the culmination of a complex, political and widely discussed commission of inquiry (note 2). It was an unprecedented exercise in sustained national “listening” that devoted considerable expertise and resources to hear previously silenced voices and unheard stories, with the aim of ensuring justice and redress. When announcing the Royal Commission in January 2013, Prime Minister Julia Gillard told care leavers (note 3):

Even if you felt for all of your life that no one’s listened to you, that no one has taken you seriously, that no one has really cared, the Royal Commission is an opportunity for your voice to be heard. (Gillard quoted in Golding 2018:194)

Reflecting on its achievements, the whistleblower whose shocking revelations sparked calls for the Royal Commission, Detective Chief Inspector Peter Fox (note 4) said: “We now look at, not just what the Royal Commission has achieved, but more what the media has achieved through the awareness that’s out there ... Australia has changed irreversibly now” (ABC 2017). In this article we explore how journalists helped shape that public awareness in
particular ways through uneven amplification of the stories and voices heard by the Royal Commission.

The decision to call a royal commission of such breadth and significance (Wright, Swain and McPhillips 2017) was made after decades of activism by victims, support groups and some journalists to raise the issue on to the public agenda (McCarthy and Fox 2015; Marr 2014; Wright and Swain 2018, Golding 2018). Calls for a Royal Commission aligned with the emergence of discourses of child sexual abuse as a public issue in Australia and internationally (Kitzinger 2004; Middleton et al. 2014; Sköld 2013; Wearing 2015; Golding 2018; Greer and McLaughlin, 2017a). As in North America, the UK, Europe and elsewhere in the world, increased discussion of institutional abuse in local communities, driven by locally-based investigative journalism, and growing digital networks of survivors, raised the issue on the public agenda (note 4). In their reflection on the role of journalism in bringing about the inquiry, Wright and Swain (2018) have observed the media attention leading up to its announcement was so compelling because it brought together “two previously separate but related strands of concern – one focused on the historical abuse of children in Out-of-home residential ‘care’, the other on clerical sexual abuse in community settings, with both phenomena becoming the focus of the Royal Commission” (Wright and Swain 2018:140, author italics). Investigative journalism played a crucial role in catalysing the RCIRCSA (Muller 2017; Wright and Swain 2018). In particular, a regional daily newspaper The Newcastle Herald’s courageous commitment to pursuing and exposing allegations of child sexual abuse in both Catholic and Anglican churches over several years gave voice to survivors and supporters who had previously been silenced by powerful institutions and agents (Muller 2017). From the outset, however, care leaver advocates expressed concerns that the decision to focus only on child sexual abuse, rather than all forms of child abuse, and the decision to investigate both Out-of-home care and “open” institutions such as churches and schools, would sideline key concerns underpinning their advocacy for a Royal Commission (Golding 2018).

The media coverage generated by the Royal Commission was vital in breaking the silence around child sexual abuse. The RCIRCSA held 57 formal public hearings, reported as 57 case studies, during which it heard evidence about child sexual abuse within institutions from 1,200 witnesses, over 400 days, across all Australian capital cities and in several regional areas (RCIRCSA 2017). In addition, the Commission heard from 17,000 survivors, including private hearings with 8,000 individual victims. Significantly, a number of the case studies related to reviews of organizational policies, procedures and regulations with the specific aim of preventing child sexual abuse in the future. The Commission’s letters patent laid out the breadth of its scope to investigate child sexual abuse across all societal institutions, scouts, schools, non-Christian churches, orphanages, state-run foster care, health, sporting and disability organizations. Commissioners made concerted efforts to ensure that unheard and vulnerable voices would be heard. For example, considerable resources were devoted to ensuring participation of Indigenous people. As a result, 16 per cent of submissions to the inquiry were made by First Nations survivors. The Commission travelled to every state and territory of Australia and employed a vast research team to ensure that abuse in both prominent and smaller institutions was exposed. Despite the breadth of institutions investigated, there was an inherent structural imbalance towards clerical abuse. The Catholic Church was not only the most prominent institution investigated, but had long been at the centre of accusations and journalistic investigation (note 6). It was the subject of 13 of the inquiry’s 57 case studies; 58.6 per cent of those who gave evidence in private hearings were abused in religious institutions, with 61.8 per cent of those abused in Catholic institutions.
This article explores how news coverage of the inquiry reflected, amplified, overshadowed or sidelined certain voices and stories that were heard by the inquiry. We analyse data compiled by media intelligence and data technology company isentia, which was engaged to monitor mainstream news coverage of the inquiry on behalf of the Royal Commission (note 7). Our analysis is guided by two key research questions:

1. Which of the case studies examined by the Commission received the most and the least news media attention according to the isentia reports?
2. Which of the case studies examined by the Commission received the most and the least sustained news attention over time?

In analysing the data we apply a “listening theory” lens, drawing on the concept of “hierarchies of attention” to understand how the RCIRCSA case studies were mediated, and the consequences for marginalised voices and for public understanding. We approach news values as routinised “hierarchies of attention” that enable news professionals to prioritise and attend to certain voices, stories and frames in reporting on the many events that compete for news attention. Our analysis highlights the consequences of these deeply entrenched professional practices by identifying events and voices that were amplified in news media, and also those that were overshadowed by more “newsworthy” stories about the RCIRCSA, or were sidelined due to other news production factors. A rich tradition of journalism and media studies contributes to our findings that routine patterns of news media (in)attention produced asymmetries, with church “scandals” drawing so much focus that they overshadowed institutional reviews and cases involving some of the most vulnerable and marginalised victims and survivors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We locate our analysis within two distinct bodies of thinking and research. The first derives from media and journalism studies literature concerned with how and why certain issues emerge as prominent, why some events are the subject of intense, sustained coverage, and why others are ignored, diminished or overshadowed through the structures and practices of journalism. Drawing on the work of Cate Thill (2015), we refer to this phenomenon broadly as “hierarchies of news media attention”. A body of journalism and media studies literature offers a range of explanations, acknowledging that news content is but one actor in the complex process through which public discussion takes place in a national conversation such as that prompted by a Royal Commission. Secondly, we extend this line of thinking to examine news attention through the theoretical frame of listening (O’Donnell et al. 2009) to generate insights into difference and variability in public discourse. The listening perspective developed in political theory, media and cultural studies contributes a critical lens to these accounts of journalism practice, asking not only what news media attends to, but what are the implications of uneven patterns of attention?

News values, scandal and the news economy

News values shape how journalists construct news stories from events (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Gans 1979; Semetko et al. 1991). They are the product of institutional and individual ideologies, and reflect how news organizations relate to their audiences and commercial contexts. Hall (1973) reminds us that the selection of newsworthy stories is deeply embedded in the ideological structures of the news organization and the society in which the journalist is reporting (see also Gans 1979). News values are the product of institutions and ideologies that have long been in place and reflect how news organizations relate to their audiences and balance market and news values (Harcup and O’Neill 2017). Harcup and O’Neill (2017) say...
news values can take on a “mythical” status, whereby journalists, through their craft, can intuitively identify salient news stories. Curran and Seaton (2003) explain news values as a practice journalists use to translate untidy reality onto neat news stories. Key news values at play in the reporting of the RCIRCSA might include: “elites”, whereby powerful public figures attract more news attention than the marginalised; “personalization”, a focus on people, rather than abstract or generalised processes (Landert 2014: 31); “meaningfulness”, centred upon familiar and culturally resonant stories; and “continuity” – those stories that are already in the news.

A “scandal” is a particularly newsworthy event (Greer and McLaughlin, 2017b; Tiffen 1999; Thompson 2000; Lull and Hinerman 1998; Bell 1991). It has potential to: generate advantages for media organizations through increased audiences and outdoing their rivals; advance political agendas; and reinforce the Fourth Estate conception of investigative journalism (Greer and McLaughlin, 2017b: 115). Media and communication scholars have tended to focus on celebrity or corporate ‘bad apple’ scandals, arguing personalization of the news event is particularly important, with journalists focusing on people, rather than abstract, systemic or structural processes (Landert 2014: 31). This accords with Entman’s (2012: 28) view that scandal demands a narrative that identifies an individual villain who is the cause of a socially significant problem. Hallahan (1999: 220) contends the result of this approach ‘is to ignore systemic problems related to social organization or societal resources available to deal with a problem’. In disciplines including sociology and criminology there is increasing interest and conceptualization of institutional scandals as the news ecology evolves (see Greer and O’Laughlin 2017b on this important topic). Greer and McLaughlin (2017a, n.p) argue that, in a transforming news ecology, emphasis on scandal is an important locus of news power that can expose systemic institutional scandal:

In a digitally-led news environment characterized by ever increasing proliferation, interactivity and adversarialism, newspaper corporations have taken their business model to the next level: from prioritizing individual institutional failures to exposing systemic institutional scandal. (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017a, np)

Key societal institutions such as the Catholic Church, are therefore ripe as the focus of an institutional scandal, particularly if headed by a high-profile and political powerful individual such as the Catholic Church’s Cardinal Pell. However, the child abuse Royal Commission’s considerable efforts to ensure that unheard and vulnerable voices would be heard raises important questions about how that priority translated into news.

Introducing a comprehensive overview of the diverse research approaches to questions of news access, Simon Cottle argues: “put succinctly, who gets ‘on’ or ‘in’ the news is important – very important indeed” (2000: 427). Across sociological and culturalist traditions, “whose voices predominate, whose vie and contend, and whose are marginalized or rendered silent on the news stage are questions of shared concern” (Cottle 2000: 428). A vast body of research has identified a number of factors that influence whose voices predominate and whose are marginalised in news discourse. The “event orientation” of news (Halloran et al.1970 in Cottle 2000: 433) tends to displace from view wider issues of social structure and longer-term processes of change while “credibility and the right to be heard are differently distributed through the ranks of the system” (Cottle 2000: 429). The news economy awards priority to elite organizations and individuals (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Gans 1979; Semetko et al. 1991). Structural violence and injustices receive less attention than individual crimes or transgressions (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Routine pressures of working to deadlines and the professional norms of impartiality and objectivity can contribute to over-accessing of the news media by those in powerful and privileged institutional positions.
Geographic and social proximity to journalists are also key factors in the success of source interventions. Clearly, Cottle argues “the organization of news is not geared up to the needs of the socially powerless” (2000: 434).

Harcup and O’Neill (2017) have recently proposed a contemporary set of values that emphasise the strong news appeal of the power elite, celebrity and entertainment. Our research will further interrogate the dominant news values at play in the contemporary media environment in which the RCIRCSA was enacted. We posit that this attention was uneven, with some case studies overshadowing others in the news narrative of the Royal Commission. Unevenness in news media attention raises important issues in relation to the news conventions that structure how journalists hear stories and the presumed interest of the assumed audience in listening to others (Dreher 2009). In this way, news values create hierarchies of attention with powerful political and social implications.

Voice, listening, and news media hierarchies of attention

With these well-established critiques of conventional news values in mind, we engage with recent scholarship on “listening” as a productive framework for developing a normative account of the role of journalism (O’Donnell 2009; Costera Meijer 2013, Wasserman 2013; Dreher 2017). The turn to listening is significant as it shifts some of the focus and responsibility for just or democratic outcomes from marginalised voices and on to the conventions, institutions and practices that shape who and what can be heard in news (Dreher 2009). Wasserman (2013) proposes a radical project – a journalism ethics of listening – shifting the orientation of journalists “from gatekeepers to gate openers” and from detachment to proactive amplification of unheard voices (Wasserman 2013: 80).

Listening also offers powerful conceptual resources for understanding the communicative dimensions of justice and extends the interest to questions of social justice not limited to the law and criminal justice systems. The listening approach aligns with the concept and practice of ‘media justice’ developed by the Centre for Media Justice in the USA, which has its roots in movements for racial and economic justice and seeks a radical transformation of media and politics (Cyril nd; Thill and Dreher 2018). Analysing truth and reconciliation processes in numerous jurisdictions, Stauffer (2015) identifies “the injustice of not being heard” even where institutions invite certain forms of testimony. The listening framework provides a vital lens for analysing media and social justice, particularly in connection with the politics of recognition as theorised by Nancy Fraser and others (Thill and Dreher 2018). In its many formulations, the politics of recognition centres on the esteem, value and attention given to social and cultural difference as questions of justice. Fraser (1996) argues that cultural or symbolic injustice includes “non-recognition”, or “being rendered invisible via the authoritative representational, communicative and interpretive practices of one’s culture” (Fraser 1996: 71). While theorists of recognition such as Fraser have little to say about journalism, it is clear that news media institutions and representations are central to processes of non-recognition. If the politics of recognition highlights injustice in entrenched patterns of cultural value and social esteem, the listening framework pulls focus to the institutions that distribute attention and respect, including media institutions and their hierarchies of news value, entertainment value, interest and legitimacy (Dreher 2009). In the context of disability reform, Thill (2015: 6) asks: “How, then, is it possible to distinguish between practices of voice that contribute to transformative change and those that reinforce disabling hierarchies of attention?” It is this question that drives our interrogation of news media priorities and agendas in reporting the child abuse Royal Commission. We draw on the conceptual framework of listening (O’Donnell et al 2009; Dreher 2009) to investigate news coverage of the RCIRCSA as a national exercise to listen and uphold justice for victims. This
lens shifts the onus from marginalised people “speaking up” on to powerful institutions’ responsibility to listen out for, and to, these voices. Our attention is squarely focused on the role of mainstream news media, which as scholars including Wasserman (2013) and O’Donnell (2009) have pointed out, has an ethical responsibility to listen to marginalised voices (see also Ward and Wasserman 2015; Dreher 2017). The ideal of “continuation” provides a normative yardstick for listening across difference in such a way that the field of possibility for shared action is sustained or extended (Thill 2015; Bickford 1996). Thinking about continuation in this context has prompted us to ask: did some RCIRCSA cases receive sustained, intense news focus, while others were reported and then forgotten? We consider this in light of the argument that news media coverage in itself is not enough to provide media justice for silenced or marginalized voices of disability or racialised communities (Thill and Dreher 2018), and that uneven and inconsistent interest in some survivor stories over others exacerbates the focus on a few powerful institutions.

**METHODOLOGY**

To address these significant and complex questions, we designed a research study that would provide baseline data about patterns of news media attention over the course of the RCIRCSA. Our research partnership with the RCIRCSA enabled us to access the Royal Commission’s monthly media analysis reports (note 7). The Commission contracted media intelligence and monitoring company *isentia* to produce qualitative and quantitative analyses of its news coverage. The reports were published in the period October 2013 – May 2017, which covers most, but not the full period of the RCIRCSA. Although the contents varied somewhat over time, each report consistently included an executive summary, graphics of the past month’s news coverage, and analyses of the trends concerning issues, case studies, location, media type, favourability, stakeholders, messages and spokespeople. Importantly, the analysis is restricted to data contained in the commissioned media monitoring; it does not provide information on unrelated news topics that might have had an impact on coverage of the various case studies, nor can it be used to assess the publicity management of the Commission, which may or may not have influenced news reporting.

The data material has the status of an historical source documenting the extent and the main trends in news coverage of the RCIRCSA at the time of its work. The method that we draw on can best be referred to as *source criticism*, which is a classical reflexive historical method aimed at extracting trustworthy information from narrative sources of the past. Although lately much debated and influenced by recent developments in discourse analysis and Actor-Network Theory, it remains as an important method for accessing information about the past in a qualitative and systematic manner (Edelberg and Simonsen 2015). Here, we use the *isentia* material as a source that mapped how the inquiries and findings of the RCIRCSA were publicly communicated, and, we argue, how public listening processes were structured in real time. The reports provide reviews of how the Royal Commission’s work and its publication of case studies fared when it met with media logics, journalistic practices and news values. The data can therefore be analysed to identify those case studies that gained the most journalistic attention and those that received the least coverage.

The analysis of data was carried out as a collective effort by the research team. The reports each comprise substantial amounts of information. In order to systematise the information and provide an overview of the entire time period, the research team read all reports, first with a specific view on the executive summaries that highlighted the case studies and events that gained most attention in each month. This method yielded a clear picture of systematic hierarchies of attention (see Figure 1). In a second round of reading, the differences between cases attracting substantial attention and those that did not were studied more closely to secure the reliability and validity of the findings.
Using the isentia reports as sources provides important and relevant insights, but in line with the requirements of the source criticism approach it is important to point out some of the risks and shortcomings. First, the reports were compiled and published with specific objectives: to provide the RCIRCSA with detailed information about the news coverage and alert it to potential media-related challenges to its ongoing inquiry. These priorities may have influenced which data were reported and in what ways. Second, the media monitoring reports were not compiled for research objectives and they do not follow entirely the time line of the work of the Royal Commission. There may be events and inquiries outside of the period of the reports that this analysis therefore overlooks. Third, the reports are not media data and cannot substitute content and/or textual analysis of the news coverage; rather, they provide metadata about the public communication process, and they are analysed as such. With these limitations, the data provide relevant and reliable findings concerning the time line, the inequalities and hierarchies of attention, and point to the mechanisms that work to facilitate and obstruct the possibilities for public listening.

FINDINGS

Our analysis of isentia data indicates the Royal Commission’s case study design correlated with peaks and troughs in the volume of news media attention (see Figure 1). News about the Royal Commission was broadly structured around its 57 public hearings. Peaks of news coverage occurred when particularly newsworthy public hearings were in session, such as May 2015 (8,164 stories) and February 2016 (10,345 stories), while significant troughs in volume aligned with periods when there were no public hearings scheduled such as January 2017 (737 stories) and April 2017 (968 stories). This pattern of news coverage indicates that the “staged” nature of the Royal Commission gave journalists privileged access and fostered a prescribed telling of the story that fitted into familiar news structures. Within this structure, coverage across the five-year period remained consistently high, with 6,000 news items recorded in both May 2014 and March 2017.

Despite this sustained coverage of the Royal Commission, reporting of its 57 case studies was not even (Table 1). Case Study 28 Catholic Church in Ballarat received the highest volume and the most sustained coverage of the cases we examined during almost four years of hearings. This case study inquired into the response of the Catholic Church authorities in Ballarat to allegations of child sexual abuse. It comprised three public hearings in May 2015, December 2015 and February 2016. Case Study 28 incorporated evidence pertaining to perpetrator Gerald Risdale, and the Commission’s radical decision to conduct a public hearing in Rome to question Australia’s most senior cleric, Cardinal George Pell. Media interest in Case Study 28 gained momentum over the course of the three public hearings, culminating in 10,345 stories in February 2016. Figure 1 shows how that peak of news coverage continued into the first week of March that year. According to the February 2016 isentia media analysis report, the volume of stories increased more than tenfold compared with the previous month and continued to rise as Cardinal Pell delivered his testimony via video from Rome. Also discussed during this period was Pell’s capacity to attend the hearings in Ballarat in person, along with coverage of Australian comedian/entertainer Tim Minchin’s release of a song urging the Cardinal to return to Australia. By this stage in the Royal Commission hearing Pell had emerged as both a celebrity individual and a source of scandal for the Catholic Church. In coverage surrounding Case Study 28 Cardinal Pell was identified as the most prominent person mentioned in news articles (852 mentions,
Feb/March 2016). Key stakeholders attracting news attention during this period included religious groups (1,057 reports), followed by victims (856 reports) and police (134 reports). The second and third largest spikes in volume of coverage occurred in May and December 2015. These also related to Case Study 28 in Ballarat. The May 2015 isentia report states there were 8,164 news stories that month, four times the volume of coverage in the previous month. The Ballarat case study was not the only public hearing held in May 2015. That month, the Royal Commission also heard Case Study 27 (Health Care Providers and Regulators New South Wales and Victoria) in Sydney. This hearing investigated experiences of child sexual abuse perpetrated by doctors and other health professionals in hospitals and other healthcare settings. However, the Ballarat hearings were mentioned in 77 per cent of all May 2015 news coverage.

Sustained coverage
The isentia monthly media reports were analysed to determine which case studies were highlighted each month for attracting significant news attention. This was then mapped against the total volume of news reports to produce a list of the five top case studies attracting news attention over time (see Figure 2). As indicated earlier, the analysis shows that the Ballarat Catholic Church (Case Study 28) was highlighted in 11 reports as attracting significant attention and over the longest time frame (May 2015 to February 2016). This was followed by the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle (Case Study 42), which was mentioned in five reports between July 2016 and January 2017. Three other case studies mentioned in three separate reports over three-month periods included the Catholic Church authorities in Maitland-Newcastle (Case Study 43), followed by the Australian Defence Force and YMCA New South Wales (see Figure 2). YMCA NSW (Case Study 2), for example, received the most attention in October 2013 when the hearings were under way, and was mentioned again in November 2013, the same month that Case Study 3, the North Coast Children’s Home, was being held in Sydney. It was also mentioned as significant in January 2014, isentia reports.

Figure 2 goes here

It is important to note that the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle did not record an exceptional volume of coverage when Stage 1 of the hearings began in August 2016. However, the decision to split the case study into two stages due to the high number of witnesses and testimonies meant that it returned to the news spotlight when Stage 2 resumed in November 2016. This indicates that scheduling of case studies may have impacted on both sustained and/or volume of reporting. Given that more people participated in the Newcastle and Ballarat cases – requiring additional hearings – meant they tended to attract more attention.

Volume of reporting and the “overshadowing” effect
Following the peaks and troughs depicted in Figure 1, our initial focus on cases that attracted the least amount of news coverage highlighted Case Study 1 (Scout and Hunter Aboriginal Health Service, Sydney) and Case Study 38 (Church of England Boys Society in Hobart). In line with our observation that the Royal Commission provided an accessible and prescribed form of news, most of the declines in volume tended to align with months when there was no public hearing in session. An exception was June 2015, when journalists focused on controversial comments made by George Pell critic and Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors member Peter Saunders on prime time current affairs program 60 Minutes and in subsequent news reports. Other months in which less than 2,000 stories were reported while case studies were in session included Case Study 36 (Church of England Boys
Society), which recorded the lowest monthly volume of 737 stories during the course of the inquiry, and Case Study 26 (St Joseph’s Orphanage, Neerkol), held in Rockhampton (1,817 stories) (see Table 1).

Table 1 goes here

The troughs evident in Graph 1 were cross-referenced against those case studies that had not been highlighted in isentia reports for receiving news coverage in the months before, during and after they were held. This revealed certain case studies appeared to have been almost entirely overshadowed by other events relating to the RCIRCSA as they unfolded. Our analysis indicates that almost all of the case studies that related to reviews of organizational policies, procedures and regulations coincided with a strong drop in overall coverage (see Case Studies 27, 46-49). For example, institutional reviews of the YMCA New South Wales, Scout and Hunter Aboriginal Children’s Service and The Salvation Army, which assessed current child protection and child-safety standards, recorded a low volume of 1,891 news reports during the month in which they were heard (December, 2016). These hearings were overshadowed by coverage focused on Pell, the Ballarat Catholic Church, the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle, and the Institutional Review of the Catholic Church.

As highlighted earlier, most of the sharp declines in the volume of reporting tended to occur during the traditional summer holiday month of January. Only one case study in 2016 – No. 36 Church of England Boys Society – was held in January and represented the second lowest volume of news coverage throughout the entire inquiry, with 937 reports. This may be explained by the following reasons – news resourcing is particularly stretched due to the festive summer break and the hearings took place in Australia’s southern most capital city Hobart, making it more time consuming and expensive for journalists to cover. Unlike case studies held in the regional cities of Ballarat and Newcastle, which were intensely place-based and affected people within or who had some connection to these geographic centres, the Church of England Boys Society case was more geographically dispersed. It related to instances of child abuse across Tasmania, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia during the 1970s and the 1980s. Further, the CEBS no longer exists as an institution and is now referred to as the Anglican Boys Society and Boys Ministry Australia, although there remains a national council of CEBS. There was however, a high degree of local media coverage in Tasmania for this case – the strongest volume of reports from media in this state for the entire RCIRCSA.

Our analysis of peaks in news volume in October 2014 (5,894 reports) and March 2014 (5,808) provide further evidence of how hierarchies of news media attention operated to overshadow marginalised victim and survivor stories that were deemed less newsworthy than Church scandals. For example, two case studies were scheduled in October 2014 in Sydney: Case Study 18 (Australian Christian Churches) and Case Study 19 (Bethcar Children’s Home). The Church hearings – involving the high profile and well-resourced Hillsong Church (657 reports) received almost three times more coverage than Bethcar (228 reports) – a state-run foster care facility located near Brewarrina in outback New South Wales. Bethcar operated during the 1970s and assumed responsibility for Aboriginal children. Hillsong was a contemporary Church located in an urban setting. Isentia commentary highlights, “access that Hillsong gave the media through interviews with and statements from senior pastor Brian Houston, contributed to the high volume of reporting” for this case study. Isentia recorded 5,805 news stories in March 2014. In March 2014, two case studies were held in Sydney: Case Study 8 (Mr John Ellis, Towards Healing and Civil Litigation), and Case Study 10 (The Salvation Army Claims Handling, Australian Eastern Territory). A third was held in the South Australian capital Adelaide: Case Study 9 (St Ann’s Special School). The isentia data
highlights the unevenness of news attention when multiple case studies were held in a single month. Its commentary shows that in March 2014 news focus was again on Cardinal George Pell during this period as a high-profile witness in Case Study 8.

DISCUSSION

Working with a unique dataset in the form of the most comprehensive record of news coverage of Australia’s Child Abuse Royal Commission, we set out to analyse the extent to which its ground-breaking national listening exercise was reflected or amplified by mainstream news coverage. We were guided by two questions: which case studies gained the most and the least mainstream news attention, and which cases sustained the most and the least attention over time? In exploring these questions, we are attuned to the “politics of listening” because this approach helps to reframe news media practices in relation to questions of difference, inequality and power (O’Donnell et al. 2009; Dreher 2017), and how they played out through representations of the Royal Commission in the news.

In his final report, Commission chair Peter McClellan noted that 13 of the 57 case studies related to Catholic institutions, which were also vastly over-represented in the more than 8,000 private hearings that were a major part of the inquiry. The Royal Commission’s public and private evidence-gathering methods, and differences in the size, severity, complexity and proceedings of each unique case study, go some way to contextualising the volume and silences in the news media coverage. For example, journalists did not have access to report on the private hearings through which the Royal Commission listened most intently to the thousands of victims at the epicentre of the inquiry. Journalists had to wait for the Royal Commission to hand down its report in 2017, in which those many voices and stories were represented.

Our findings demonstrate that the two cases that received the greatest volume and most sustained news coverage, the Catholic Church in Ballarat and Anglican Archdiocese of Newcastle, took by far the most evidence. They were both conducted across multiple hearings and related to a number of other case studies. Significantly, however, the Commission also documented that 41.6 per cent of all survivors who spoke to the Royal Commission were abused in Out-of-home care; 31.8 per cent were abused in schools and 14.3 per cent of survivors heard through private hearings were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, despite Indigenous peoples comprising just 3.3 per cent of the general population. These important aspects of the inquiry were not audible through our findings.

Wright and Swain (2018) noted the dual threads of clerical abuse and abuse in Out of Home residential care (orphanages) came together in the Royal Commission. This twin “listening for justice” focus is apparent in the way the Commission set up and investigated the 57 case studies. However, when filtered through the lens of news values and practices, it is the powerful, contemporary institutions of society that are attended to more closely, amplified more loudly, than those abuses that took place historically and in Out-of-home care settings. In this instance, our analysis suggests that, overall, news attention to the “scandal” of clerical sexual abuse overshadowed the concern for abuse of children in Out-of-home care, as noted by Golding (2018).

The “rubric” of listening theory (O’Donnell et al. 2009) has been used here to determine the patterns of difference and variability in public discourse. We found mainstream media paid close and long attention to clerical sexual abuse and the role of powerful church officials, amplifying this scandal narrative at top volume in news coverage, with the effect of overshadowing other cases and obscuring the voices of people deemed less newsworthy. The inquiry found children from marginalised groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims and survivors, children with a disability, and from culturally and
linguistically diverse backgrounds were more likely to experience sexual abuse in residential “care” and schools, yet some of the case studies involving these children were among those that received the lowest volumes of news coverage (see Table 1). The decision to include “open” institutions such as Church and schools, as well as “closed” institutions such as orphanages, has been critiqued by care leaver advocates and advocacy groups for sidelinng the abuse of care leavers (Golding 2018). Such unevenness in media attention raises important issues in relation to the news conventions that structure how journalists hear stories and the presumed interest of the assumed audience in listening to others (Dreher 2009).

We have considered the tradition of research on the role of news routines and values in the construction of news. As the product of established institutions and ideologies they reflect how news organizations understand their audiences and their commercial markets (Harcup and O’Neill 2017). When viewed through the prism of journalism’s “hierarchy of attention” (Thill 2009), it is unsurprising that Ballarat, dubbed the “epicentre” of the Royal Commission in news media, and the catastrophic failings of the Catholic Church and its most senior Australian cleric Cardinal George Pell attracted the most coverage. The news economy awards priority to elite organizations and individuals and news values direct focus towards individual crimes or transgressions rather than structural violence or injustices (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Furthermore, the events that took place in the diocese of Ballarat provided journalists with the ingredients needed for constructing a narrative about powerful elites as an institutional scandal of internationally newsworthy proportions. This case study more than any other fits the well-established media frame in reporting institutional child sexual abuse as part of a “global chain of inquiry” (Swain in Golding 2018: 192) that has developed over the last 20 years.

“Scandal’s” demand for a narrative with an individual villain responsible for social wrong (Entman 1999; Greer and McLaughlin 2017b) is nowhere more apparent than in entertainment celebrity Tim Minchin’s release of the song, Come Home (Cardinal Pell), at the height of the inquiry. This news event brought together the most powerful contemporary news values of elites, celebrity and entertainment (Harcup and O’Neill 2017) and fused them to the scandal news frame. This is arguably where the Royal Commission’s “listening for justice” practices and news media attention diverge most sharply as “no public space can successfully compete with the media as the ringmaster of scandals” (Waisbord 2004: 1078). The value of scandal to news organizations, with a focus on people, rather than abstract, systemic or structural processes (Landert 2014: 31; Greer and McLaughlin, 2017b) helps to explain the lack of attention paid to the critical institutional reviews of organizational policies, procedures and regulations of the Scouts, YMCA, Aboriginal Children’s Services and the Salvation Army. As Bell (1991:158) argues, “something that can be pictured in personal terms is more newsworthy than a concept, a process, the generalised or the mass”. However, it raises concerns about the politics of listening to the Royal Commission through the lens of scandal. The wider effects include simplifying the complexity, systemic nature and massive scale of the abuse across a wide range of settings, time and place. It also downplays the institutional responsibility to victims through focusing on the dramatic transgressions of the Church and overturning the reputation of Australia’s most powerful cleric.

Not only did our analysis chart a highly uneven pattern of news media attention, it has also revealed the overshadowing effect of some case studies. We understand the phenomena of overshadowing as another consequence of intense news media attention on powerful and elite institutions, and argue that it has had an impact on representations of case studies that did not rank as highly in journalism’s attention economy, including abuse of children with disabilities that occurred at St Anne’s special school in Adelaide. Mainstream journalism presents itself as reflecting social reality and representing the most important events and
issues, however, its representations construct public understanding and, in the case of the Royal Commission, have the indirect but powerful effect of minimising attention paid to some issues and events, including cases of healthcare providers and regulators and historical child sexual abuse in Out-of-home care.

CONCLUSION
We conclude that the overshadowing pattern of news attention actually works against the child abuse Royal Commission’s “listening for justice” approach, which delved into silences and shadows to expose the truth. Where the Royal Commission ensured that previously silenced victims were recognised and valued, entrenched news values directed media attention to some of the most powerful and influential voices in Australia and on the world stage. The RCIRSCA committed considerable resources through its research and community outreach programs, private and public hearings, to encourage Indigenous participation and to ensure the voices of the most marginalised Australians were heard. It was particularly attuned to historical factors, including the additional risk factors of intergenerational trauma, and it was the first Australian Royal Commission to take private hearings inside prison. Our analysis of news media coverage of the Commission finds that such stories did not fit the scandal frame used to expose rings of pedophile priests, or cover-ups of child sexual abuse at some of the nation’s wealthiest and most venerated private schools. In particular, the scandal that surrounded Cardinal George Pell operated as a mechanism to reinforce the news value of already powerful individuals and institutions (Greer and O’Laughlin, 2017b). However, the turn to listening puts the onus on journalists and news organizations to access the interests and claims of communities that have been marginalised (O’Donnell 2009; Wasserman 2013). The valuing of these stories as legitimate and worthy of attention is a crucial form of recognition (Fraser and Honneth 2003) and vital to ensure justice and redress (Stauffer 2015). The challenge, therefore, was for news makers to courageously engage with the proliferation of marginalised voices enabled by the Royal Commission’s listening for justice approach. The inquiry’s groundbreaking methodology created possibilities for journalism to continue to attend to institutional responses to child sexual abuse beyond the church grounds, as it had previously (Wright and Swain 2018), and to give sustained attention to the most vulnerable among victims and survivors.

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REFERENCES


Notes


2. The commission was established following revelations of child abusers being moved from place to place instead of their abuse and crimes being reported. There were also revelations that adults failed to try to stop further acts of child abuse. The commission examined the history of abuse in educational institutions, religious groups, sporting organizations, state institutions and youth organizations.

3. According to Golding (2018: 192), ‘the term “care leavers” is widely used to refer to people who were raised in orphanges, children’s homes and foster care.


6. During the late 1990s and early 2000s allegations of child sexual abuse in Australia surfaced in the Catholic Church. Some of these led to a number of convictions, trials and ongoing investigations into allegations of sex crimes committed against children by priests and other church personnel.

7. Personal correspondence, Mr Phillip Reed, RCIRCSA Chief Executive Officer, 28 June, 2017. CEO granted access to the *isentia* media reports on the grounds that *isentia* was acknowledged in any publication.

Figures and tables

Figure 1: Number of news items September 2013-May 2017. Source *isentia*

Figure 2: Frequency of case studies mentioned as attracting media coverage

Table 1: Case studies with low volume of reporting
Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case studies with low volume of reporting</th>
<th>No. news reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church of England Boys society (Case 36 held in Hobart, Tasmania, January 2016)</td>
<td>937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Joseph’s Orphanage, Neerkol (Case 26 held in Rockhampton, Queensland, April 2015)</td>
<td>1,817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Review of YMCA New South Wales, Scouts and Hunter Aboriginal Children’s Service and the Salvation Army (Cases 47, 48, 49 held in Sydney, New South Wales, December 2016)</td>
<td>1,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic and Harmful sexual behaviours of children in schools (Case 45 held in Sydney, October 2016)</td>
<td>2,082</td>
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