

COMPLAINING ABOUT MEDIA RACISM

By Helen Basili

Australian journalists are governed by ethical codes that prohibit racism but lodging a complaint against journalists breaching the codes is no straightforward business.

The person that makes the complaint must be determined, persistent, energetic, skillful in dealing with complex institutions and have a more than adequate grasp of the English language. Even then, the penalties imposed on the offending journalist are likely to be mild and the power to enforce them is limited.

Television and radio stations

The Codes of Practice of the Federation of Commercial Television Stations say that:

“A licensee shall not broadcast a program which:

- (a) Is likely to incite or perpetuate hatred against; and
- (b) Gratuitously vilifies any person or group on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, sexual preference, religion or physical or mental disability.”

The Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters has developed a similar code.

To lodge a complaint about a commercial television or radio program the offending station must be contacted directly. If the station fails to respond to the complaint in 60 days, or the person making the complaint is dissatisfied with their response, then he or she may complain directly to the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA).

The ABA, if it decides to take action, has a range of sanctions available to it. For example, it can make compliance with a code of practice a condition of license.

Since 1994, only three cases of racial vilification referred to the ABA have been found in favour of the complainant. The incidents regarded broadcasts on commercial television, community radio and commercial radio.

Individual journalists

Clause two of the Australian Journalist's Association (AJA) Code of Ethics states: “[Journalists] shall not place unnecessary emphasis on gender, race, sexual preference, religious belief, marital status or physical or mental disability.” All journalists who are members of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance are obliged to work under the Code of Ethics.

Complaints about individual journalists can be made to the AJA. It can fine the journalist up to \$1000, suspend the journalist from membership of the Association for 12 months or expel the journalist. These options are rarely used. In the five years to 1997 the AJA fined only one journalist for a breach of ethics.

The print media

The Australian Press Council receives complaints relating to the print media. Under the Press Council's Statement of Principles journalists are urged not to place undue emphasis on race, nationality or colour.

The impartiality of the Press Council is dubious as it is funded by the newspaper and magazine industries. Further, the Council's ability to enforce its findings is limited as its authority rests on the willingness of publishers and editors to respect the Council's views, to adhere voluntarily to ethical standards and to admit mistakes publicly.

The Council requests that any complaints are first taken up with the editor of a publication. If the complaint is unable to be resolved it may then be referred to the Press Council in writing within three months of publication. After hearing a complaint, the Complaints Committee will draft a recommendation which goes to the full council for final adjudication.

Structural discrimination

According to UTS researcher Kalinga Seneviratne, it is unusual to find examples of blatant racism in the media however commercial TV and radio, and even the ABC and SBS, virtually ignore the non-Anglo Celtic population of Australia.

“Racism in the media is not necessarily name calling, but lack of non-Anglo Celtic people on our airways who think and talk differently, and the way they are excluded from our media structures, especially in production and management,” says Seneviratne.

This inherent problem is one that industry complaint procedures are ill equipped to tackle.

The continued exclusion of Indigenous and non-English speaking background perspectives from the mainstream media and the difficulty of lodging a complaint about racism, means that a balanced, unbiased media is still an ideal to be pursued.

