



# The Idea of Australia in Indian Media

## THE FEARLESS NADIA OCCASIONAL PAPERS ON INDIA-AUSTRALIA RELATIONS

*The Fearless Nadia Occasional papers are original essays commissioned by the Australia India Institute focusing on various aspects of the relationship between India and Australia. Fearless Nadia (1908-1996) was an Australian actress born Mary Ann Evans in Perth, Western Australia, who began her career working in the Larko circus and eventually became a celebrated star of Hindi films in India. Fearless Nadia brought a new joie de vivre and chutzpah into Indian cinema with her breathtaking 'stunts'. Her role in the renowned film Kuntowali, where she appeared dressed in leopards and wielding a whip, became an iconic image in 1930s Bombay. The Occasional Papers series seeks to inject a similar audacity and creative dialogue into the relationship between India and Australia.*



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## Introduction

In 2006 during the months before *Tehelka*, the English language Indian liberal weekly news magazine where I worked could afford a reliable electricity supply and a failsafe internet service, the travel guide *Lonely Planet India* inadvertently became a fact-checking source in the news room. Rarely disputed, and with the benefit of high editorial quality and attractive design, the book was a compendium of immense curiosity, even for my Indian colleagues. The guide's wide ranging coverage of India's rich cultural pluralism and incredible natural landscape presented an outsider's view of the subcontinent. Unsurprisingly, this representation of the country appealed to the young *Tehelka* journalists, since it provided a positive alternative to what they often read about their own country. Australia prides itself on its success as a multicultural society, a fact that often goes unrecognised in India, but this diversity pales in comparison to the complexities of Indian society.

Post-1947 independent India's experience of multiculturalism has been different to Australia's. The recognition and rights of India's many diverse ethnic and language-based cultures is fundamental to the modern Indian ideal of nationhood. But in practice the concept of multiculturalism, its emphasis and value is often differently understood there. While cultural pluralism, i.e. the experience of social inclusion, or "understanding sameness from the lens of difference"<sup>1</sup>, is essential to India's national identity and is framed in the Constitution, multiculturalism as a social term has really only gained prominence since the 1990s. In contrast Australian multiculturalism has been part of that country's social fabric for almost 50 years. Australia has absorbed – first from Europe after World War II, then increasingly from Asia – relatively large immigrant populations which are now recognised as among its most important social assets. The successful settlement and integration are what Australians tend to mean when they talk of multiculturalism – and yet this success has not been effectively narrated abroad as part of Australia's story. In India, by contrast, multiculturalism mostly refers to the growing awareness and acceptance of the diversity which has long existed within the country itself. This difference in meaning may explain in part why multiculturalism is not yet essential to the idea of Australia in India. Also, while Australians tend to believe that our multiculturalism successes link us with contemporary Asia, this is not necessarily how the country is perceived externally, particularly in India. Such an omission is bound to influence India's perceptions of contemporary Australia; multiculturalism is not the most immediate point of comparison between our two societies that Australians might have hoped for. Perhaps for this reason, India's mainstream media can often seem to pointedly ignore the positive dynamics of Australia's multiculturalism. Perhaps also, Australia has not yet presented sufficiently persuasive creative examples of our society's multicultural expression in India.

Many Indians still see Australia as a poorer version of the United States, a land taken from its native inhabitants by white settlers. It was in the *Tehelka* newsroom I first heard an editor say, "Australians are all descended from convicts". *Tehelka* ran the quote in my story on racism in India without changes the following week.<sup>2</sup> From my research into cultural and racial perceptions in India, it became clear that many Indians do not identify personally with Australia's rich multicultural diversity. For some in India, the absence of recognisably South Asian names in the upper echelons of Australian life is an indication the Indian Diaspora has yet to attain a recognisable foothold in Australia. The diverse cultural backgrounds of Australian cricketers and other prominent sporting identities notwithstanding, little of the

1. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/policy/law-change-may-put-fawad-ahmed-on-ashes-team/story-f9hm1gu-1226667021800>

2. Jane Rankin-Read, "Unmasking Bias; Are We Racist", *Tehelka*, 10 February 2007, [http://archive.tehelka.com/story\\_main26.asp?filename=hub021007Unmasking\\_bias.asp](http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main26.asp?filename=hub021007Unmasking_bias.asp).



positive everyday dynamics of Australia's multiculturalism has been available to Indians. Eventually, such perceptions of Australia must either be countenanced or engaged in respectful debate. The *Tehelka* editor's remark was repeated in December 2013 on ABC television but received little if any comment either within India or Australia.<sup>3</sup>

The deepening awareness and increased familiarity with modern India promises tremendous benefit to Australia's economic, trade and cultural future there. For Indians, particularly young people, a more assured and engaged understanding of Australian life and culture will undoubtedly make the benefits of Australian society more accessible. Increasing our familiarity and people-to-people connections with India through its burgeoning new media industry is one sure step towards achieving this important aim.

This report was inspired by my experience in the Indian media industry and the increased awareness of the Indian perspective this professional immersion gave me. Many experiences and the consequent outlook were reconfirmed in the findings of "Beyond the Lost Decade", the searching examination by the Australia India Institute's Perceptions Task Force of the modern history of the Australian-Indian friendship. It is one of the most important accounts to date of the political and cultural issues affecting our country's relationship with India. Consequently, my quest in this study has been to search for potential opportunities for increasing positive Indian-Australian intersections in India's new media environment.

In my review of the Indian media's coverage of the assaults on Indian students in Australia, questions of how Australia might better defend itself against future criticism have inevitably arisen. Australia's experience of Indian mainstream and new media's response to these assaults shows why our government and its agencies need a changed approach. That approach must enable Australia to better defend itself when faced with such criticism in future. It will also highlight some of the realistic possibilities for Australia in the Indian new media industry in the event of further crises.

Creativity, flexibility, increased cultural insight, innovation and imagination in visualising where these positive intersections may lie, are all still needed. To this end, I have searched for spaces within each society's media landscape where Australian and Indian values may be more readily shared, exchanged, debated and newly acknowledged: places where there is greater scope for shared creativity in media innovations between the two societies. My aim is to see the many innovative multi-platform publishing and broadcasting opportunities in India and Australia exploited far more frequently, positively and purposefully.

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3. "India; More than Bollywood and Batsman", Q&A broadcast from Delhi, ABC, 18 November 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/txt/s3875415.htm>.



## Media Politics in India

For many Indian media observers, scandalous revelations about the corrupted state of Indian mainstream media demonstrate that a free and genuinely unbiased press is no longer possible in the world's largest democracy. A number of in-depth probes have been published in recent years, exposing how Indian newspapers have been profiting from so-called 'paid news' – where individuals and organisations pay publishers to place positive articles about them. Vinod Jose's "Habits of Mind: Why the Indian press needs a philosophical model"<sup>4</sup> and Ken Auletta's "Citizens Jain"<sup>5</sup>, stand out. But there has been little change in the regulation of Indian media to date. In the race to the 2014 general elections the previous Indian Government all but ignored the 2010 findings of a Press Council of India (PCI) sub-committee's report "Paid news: How corruption in the Indian media undermines democracy".<sup>6</sup> Even so, the Indian public has become widely aware that the two major political parties, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress (Congress), regularly paid for positive articles to be printed through financial and/or in-kind deals with several of India's major media publishers. Consequently, the credibility of India's mainstream media, particularly among young Indians, has plunged.

*"The deception or fraud that such paid news entails takes place at three levels. The reader of the publication or the viewer of the television program is deceived into believing that what is essentially an advertisement is in fact independently produced news content. By not officially declaring the expenditure incurred on planting paid news items, the candidate standing for election violates the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, which are meant to be enforced by the Election Commission of India under the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Finally, by not accounting for the money received from candidates, the concerned media company or its representatives are violating the provisions of the Companies Act, 1956, as well as the Income Tax Act, 1961, among other laws..."<sup>7</sup>*

In August 2012, the PCI further recommended that the "Government of India be requested to initiate suitable legislation to amend the Press Council Act, 1978, by (i) bringing the electronic media (both broadcast and social media) within the purview of the Press Council Act, and renaming it as The Media Council."<sup>8</sup> However, Indian bloggers and media analysts have been disinclined to support the extension of the PCI's powers to encompass social media in India. Still, in a healthy sign that it recognises the impact of new media in India, the Electoral Commission now requires candidates to include their new media budgets in campaign financial statements.<sup>9</sup> The change in market conditions for media employment and politically-driven editorial pressure have led to widespread disillusion over paid news among younger media professionals. Many are migrating to India's new media environment to publish articles, commentaries and analyses. Recent new media startups include Scroll India a partnership with US media company Atlantic Media, Live Mint, News Laundry, Sans Serif, Kafila, Churumuri, First Post, DNA, Epilogue, The Hoot, Greater Kashmir, Kashmir Online, Kindle Magazine, Midday, in addition to several ground-breaking late-1990s news websites such as Sify.com and Rediff.com among others. In the lead-up to the 2014 Indian election, a far broader range of news and views about the main candidates and their campaigns was made available to the Indian public. In turn, candidates, their campaigners and volunteers swiftly learned how to penetrate and occupy online media, using Twitter and Facebook

4. Vinod Jose, "Habits of Mind: Why the Indian press needs a philosophical model", *The Caravan; A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 1 December 2013, <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/perspectives/habits-mind>

5. Ken Auletta, "The annals of communication", *The New Yorker*, 8 October 2012, [http://www.kenauletta.com/2012\\_10\\_08\\_Auletta\\_IndianNewspaper.pdf](http://www.kenauletta.com/2012_10_08_Auletta_IndianNewspaper.pdf).

6. Press Council of India, "Paid news: How corruption in the Indian media undermines democracy", 2010 <http://presscouncil.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/Sub-CommitteeReport.pdf>.

7. Ibid.

8. "Media Release", Press Council of India, 28 August 2012,

9. Press Council wants electronic and social media under its control", *The Hindu Business Line*; 28 August 2012 <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/industry-and-economy/press-council-wants-electronic-and-social-media-under-its-control/article3831639.ece>.



to promote, refute, endorse, distort, blame and shame their opponents. In critical ways, questions about the integrity of India's legacy media and its tabloidised dysfunctionality are rapidly being superseded by the growth of online media and the uptake of rapidly emerging alternative news sites.

To be fair, the air of fatalistic disgust regarding the integrity of legacy news publishing in India is widely echoed in the international media industry. The 24-hour news cycle has fundamentally changed the way democratic governments interact with new and old media. In Australia, we're wrestling with another phase of evolution in news publishing, from proposed revisions of ownership laws and regional coverage obligations, to reviews of possible bias in the ABC. Just when the economics of the national and international news industry have declined so sharply the viability of the daily print newspaper is in serious jeopardy, governments from both sides of politics have yielded to pressure trying to alter the emphasis and content of basic information available to the Australian public. Talk about hitting a guy when he's down.

## India and Australia's Shared Ground

Despite its reputation for media corruption, the Indian mainstream press is sometimes still regarded by westerners as a quaint postcolonial outpost, drenched in anachronisms, pukka and charmingly Anglicised, but not always to be taken seriously. Today, India's more progressive English language editors and writers proffer no such illusions. The ecology of the international press is comparable with what is occurring in their country's media culture. Hartosh Bal Singh, political editor at *The Caravan* magazine, and author of *A Certain Ambiguity* and *The Waters Closing Over Us*, first saw Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* when studying at New York University in the early 1980s. In an online broadcast in 2012 hosted by new media website The Big Picture, Singh leads viewers through the film's narrative, drawing vital comparisons between the young Italian press corps' growing disillusion with celebrity-driven tabloid culture and his personal and professional disenchantment with Indian media's increasingly similar characteristics.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps Indian and Australian media have more in common than is usually recognised. What they share may be hard to define with accuracy, yet the news industry in both cultures is showing tentative signs of reinvention in response to changing audience appetites. In India, that revival is clearly occurring in new media. In Australia, several independently owned print and online news publications are steadily building readership for in depth reportage and analysis of the nation's state of affairs.

But what about the idea of Australia in India? Are the over ripened curry and cricket clichés finally being superseded, or are we simply repeating ourselves through updated tourism and education marketing campaigns? How might we expand Indians' knowledge and awareness of Australia and simultaneously, Australians' understanding of India so that both may actively engage in the economic and cultural opportunities a stronger relationship will inevitably bring?

10. "The Eye of the Beholder, Hartosh Bal Singh", *The Big Indian Picture*, 12 November 2012, <http://thebigindianpicture.com/2012/11/eye-of-the-beholder-hartosh-singh-bal/>.



## The Australia Network Failed to Present the Idea of Australia Convincingly in India

In 2014 when closing down the Australia Network, (funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)) the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop said she wanted to improve the promotion of positive values to South Asia and the southern Pacific. In early 2014, she told a London audience,

*“My question is whether under a soft power diplomacy contract... is that the best use of taxpayers money to project a positive image into the region?... I have to consider ...whether scarce public diplomacy dollars should be spent on getting a media outlet - any media outlet - to run the program and I think that perhaps in this day and age there are other ways of projecting soft power into our region.”*<sup>11</sup>

Australia Plus, presenting ABC news and other programming, is its replacement.

In the Indian broadcast industry's rampant free market, the Australia Network, and to a similar extent, Australia Plus have been failing to build Indian audiences. As AN, the station looked like a neglected, provincial, institutional afterthought and did little for Australia's image there. Australia Plus has yet to creatively distinguish itself as an effective alternative; its social media engagement remains institutionally modest. Innovative India-orientated broadcast strategies have yet to be announced. But it is worth reviewing where the AN may have gone wrong in contemporary Asia in general and, more specifically, India.

Too little of Australia's multicultural energy and the creative polish seen on SBS were evident in the AN's programming choices. The idea of Australia takes many literal forms after all. If an Australia-driven broadcaster is to thrive in the Indian TV marketplace, everything must be rethought: websites, accessibility, target markets and – especially – programming. The Abbott Government wanted to see greater ideological cohesion in the messages Australia disseminates into Asia. But how can diplomats deliver Australia's international messages effectively in the 21st century international broadcast industry? Engaging more effectively in the Indian media market will require Australia to come to terms with the dynamics of that marketplace, including its new media environment. Inviting Indians to contribute to online debates and commentary on broadcasters' websites and social media spaces will also broaden audience access. There are also tremendous opportunities for Indian-Australian co-productions in broadcast, online and print media for exploring shared values, dialogue and discovery.

With the rapid uptake of mobile technology, there has been a dramatic shift in the way many Indians consume news and engage in debate. Given these changes, perhaps even the ABC's dynamic weekly discussion show *Q&A* could build a niche audience there, at least for its more topically relevant episodes. But if the best that *Q&A*'s producers could come up with is “India: More than Bollywood and Batsmen”, broadcast from Delhi on 18 November 2013, we still have some distance to cover. The selection of the program's panelists was ill considered; Australia was represented poorly, little new information and few alternative viewpoints were aired in the increasingly noisy hour-long discussion, while the host failed to highlight much of what the Indian panelists were saying. *Q&A India* was a disappointing example of the reluctance by the Australian media to host Indian experts – let alone engage with them in productive debate.

11. “Foreign Minister Julie Bishop says Australia Network should promote Australia, not ABC”, *ABC News*, 13 March 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-03-13/an-bishop-on-australia-network/5317500>.





## Historic Indian Media Restrictions Influence Contemporary Media Usage

After decades of government restrictions, India's media rules were liberalised in the 1990s allowing the industry to evolve into a vigorous, de-institutionalised marketplace. Yet the legacy of pre-1990s limitations lives on. The long years in which the Indian government's public broadcaster, Doordashan fed viewers a diet of carefully sanctioned messages have led many Indians to expect publicly funded media and its managing institutions to be inherently politicised. It is assumed their spokespeople exist only to bolster the survival and identity of media organisations and the programming of public broadcast could be dumbed into submission by political sensitivities and restraints. Simultaneously, young urban Indians in particular have become disillusioned with the lack of ethics in commercial mainstream media's overt commercialisation of information with the paid news phenomenon, particularly following revelations that several star Indian journalists tried to influence politicians over the 4G scams. However the 2014 election campaign demonstrated that some of India's media has begun to fight back. The popularity of new media news sites in urban and rural areas has been significantly enhanced by the rapid uptake of mobile technology. Substantial increases in the mainstream media's coverage of social media responses to Indian political candidates' statements, actions and backgrounds also encouraged greater interaction between media consumers and media producers. For Australia, the lessons from India's rapidly changing new-media landscape may appear bewildering at first, but for our more flexible and innovative media producers, publishers and media consumers, the opportunities now emerging to share in and profit from India's new media landscape are potentially huge.

## Losing the Edge: New Media Innovator Retreats to Old Media Values

As *Tehelka's* web editor in 2006, I found it harder than expected to persuade the publishers to remove its unprofitable website's pay-wall so it could become a free online service. *Tehelka's* initial 2001 success as a game-changing Indian news dotcom, breaking investigative stories of high-level government corruption, witness bribes and corporate malfeasance had earned it a nationwide reputation as a champion for accountability and transparency. *Tehelka* was a pioneer of sting journalism, an innovator in celebrity campaign journalism, a passionate defender of many of India's forgotten causes and a proud champion of India's rising international profile. The news magazine attracted some of the country's brightest young journalists and editorial staff. But scarce financial resources and differing priorities left the website surviving on a narrow bandwidth, slow for readers to load and navigate, and harder still for editors to innovate from, using a basic web template that badly needed updating. Although it was a vigorous advocate of citizen journalism, *Tehelka's* various website overhauls and relaunches offered less space for dialogue, moderated public commentaries, blogs, and online access than expected. The business of creating a nationally-distributed print news magazine from a low-budget start-up news website paradoxically left one of India's most innovative news dotcoms languishing in a technological time warp. It is a salient lesson in the contemporary history of the new media environment that one of India's earliest and most prominent online news portals was left behind due to disbelief in the form and failure to



invest sufficiently in the future. In some ways, publishers' mistrust of online media power is recognisable today in mainstream Australian news publishing. News Ltd Australia's pay wall strategies have achieved only limited success, for instance; sales and subscriptions continue to decline in all of Australia's major mainstream newspaper publishing. Also, the challenges arising from the generational news consumption habits of Australia's aging population have yet to be addressed with sufficiently innovative niche market solutions.

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In 2005, the enormous potential for cross-format accessibility allowing readers to interact in new media was only the vaguest concept for Australians and Indians alike. While *Tehelka* wanted to create a space where Indians could tell the story of India to the world, its website often seemed to prevent this dream being realised. *Tehelka's* literary standards, moreover, were erratic – at times vigorously idiomatic, at others polished and profound. It was not unique in this: in 2005, the copy standards of many mainstream Indian newspapers still fluctuated wildly. But in recent years the standard of Indian mainstream and new media English-language editing has been radically upgraded. Consequently, India's story is now being told more clearly and engagingly than ever before. Increased critical scrutiny from within Indian new and mainstream media itself has also helped raise literary standards. But in India's mainstream regional and tabloid media, the extraordinarily short and fast news cycle presents a continuing cause for concern: stories lack depth, and are rarely followed up.

In 2014, Patricia J. Sethi, *Newsweek's* former UN bureau chief, noted Indian media is “vibrant, alive, and effervescent”. However, she highlighted that there is:

*“a lack of consistency, no continuation of a story, no follow-up... It hits the news, and b-h-a-m, it's gone. There's media hysteria for a day or week and then kaput, gone with the wind... We have an obligation to be correct and precise in whatever language we're writing in... Paid news is dangerous for democracy. Corporate ownership of the media creates a great potential for misuse...”*<sup>12</sup>

Today, a far wider dissemination of news, commentary, reports and analyses has become available to Indians in English and Indian languages. Improved copy standards have engaged international readerships, while legacy newspapers are achieving vastly increased dissemination of content through websites, mobile technology and social media. Simultaneously, a range of dynamic independent news websites as well as foreign news partnerships have blossomed since 2008. The dream of Indian voices leading in the telling of the story of India to the world has become a reality.

In contrast, Western media has shrunk foreign correspondent coverage of South Asia in general and India especially. Australians are not seeing much of the scope or pace of change in India on a sufficiently regular basis to be able to connect with it productively. In a speech at the Lowy Institute's 2014 Media Awards, the former journalist then Minister for Communications PM Malcolm Turnbull said:

*“The Australian media rarely reports how different countries have approached what are usually shared and very familiar issues that are topical in our own country, even if the issue is dominating the news. And the little such reporting there was in the past has almost disappeared in the digital age... We should intellectually get out more.”*<sup>13</sup>

To date, the by-lines of India-based experts, commentators and journalists remain relatively unfamiliar in Australia's main daily and weekend newspapers. But international newspapers such as *The Guardian UK*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *Christian*

12. Patricia J Sethi, addressing the Goa Union of Journalists' Conscientious Journalism seminar, 9 March 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeITUOqyo>.

13. Speech by Malcolm Turnbull, Lowy Institute's 2014 Media Awards, <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/address-hon-malcolm-turnbull-mp-2014-lowy-institute-media-award>.



*Science Monitor*, *The New Yorker*, and magazines such as *London Review of Books*, *New York Review of Books*, *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy Review* among others, frequently host dedicated Indian blog or editorial pages, often edited by Indian experts. These sites publish articles, commentaries, blogs and opinions, adding texture and authentic context particularly to topical Indian news stories with independent local authority and literary dynamism to Indians, non-resident Indians' (NRIs) and international readers' overall exposure to Indian news and debates.

In India, print and online publishing start-ups such as *Open Magazine*, *The Caravan*, *Scroll*, *Fountain Ink* and more recently *Wire India*, founded by former Hindu editor Siddarth Varadarajan, have also embraced the innovative skills of the new generation of Indian editors, journalists and writers in narrative journalism or long-form essay writing, furthering opportunities for probing and exposing the complex challenges of Indian life. The noted Indian columnist and author Palagummi Sainath's 1996 book *Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's poorest districts*, has been a seminal influence, renewing Indian journalists' affection for the power of the narrative essay. Australia is not without its own champions of long form journalism; independently owned publications such as *The Conversation* online, and *The Monthly*, *Quarterly Essay* and *The Saturday Paper* in print, are helping reverse the overall shrinkage of page space available for the slow read essaying reportage in Australian media. The initial success of the Guardian UK's outreach into Australia through its online Guardian Australia website has also helped turn the tide. International online media titles *Buzzfeed* and *Huffington Post* among others have recently launched here and in India. Productive models for crowd-funded and issue-sponsored partnerships in international journalism, such as the recently closed independent journalism publishing community *Contributoria*, are potential approaches that may stimulate alternative avenues for Australian narrative essay publishing. But these new endeavours have yet to produce a wider dissemination of the idea of Australia through international media, and specifically in India. We have much to learn from the next generation of Indian writers and editors' innovations in narrative journalism and the far reaching impact they have had on English-language story-telling traditions in India and abroad.

The increased frequency of Indian by-lines in international media is also providing an invaluable profile for younger writers telling the story of India to the world. The popularity of articles, blogs and essays written by writers and journalists such as Siddarth Varadarajan, Monoj Joshi, Hartosh Bal Singh, Basharat Peer, Manu Joseph, Praveen Dhondy, Vinod Jose, Mirza Waheed, Ananya Vajpeyi, Shivam Vij, and Aveek Sen, among many others is also a healthy sign of Indian and international readers' growing interest in Indian stories written by Indian writers. Indian and international readers' uptake of long-form reading apps, from *The Guardian's* Long Read options, Read Later and the *New York Times* NYTNow functions, as well as curated essay sites such as *Medium* and *Longread*, are also encouraging signs contradicting the belief in media publishing readers have limited attention spans, lower levels of interest and an overall lack of preparedness to spend the additional time needed to read longer in-depth articles.

Many Indian journalists are keen to carve space for their work in international media. There is no question the high quality of Indian narrative writing appearing in international media helps expand the idea of contemporary India abroad. Other influential Indian journalists, commissioned less frequently to write for foreign news magazines, have also gained increased exposure abroad, when their stories became readily available online. Most English language Indian newspapers and weekly news magazines now have freely accessible websites which invite readers to access articles often through a series of staged releases of weekly or



monthly magazine contents. Daily subscribers' email lists of curated article links, as well as cross postings, or sharing on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Ello among others, actively further this dissemination. To a greater extent, India has achieved its desire for a global media voice without having to compromise many of its idiomatic literary tonalities, its scholarship or its writers' artistic ideals. Australia, struggling to be heard clearly and accurately in Indian media, let alone elsewhere in the world, might draw useful lessons from this particularly healthy Indian literary publishing phenomenon. There is no question that Australian writers and journalists could do more through narrative essay writing to expand the idea of Australia in India and elsewhere.

## Australia's Profile in Indian Media

Australia came under intense scrutiny in Indian media in 2009 after a series of attacks on Indian-born students reported on India's national TV channels. In the days following the initial reports, the country's 24-hour English language TV news channels, blogs and print newspapers' online commentaries rose in shrill unison to accuse our nation of casual and institutional racism. Australian commentators tried in response to stem the howling tide of opprobrium for all things Australian in several carefully argued opinion pieces published in *The Hindu*; but overall, too few voices defending Australia in the Indian media landscape could be heard above the outcry. The virtually non-existent debate between India and Australia about racism became a "dialogue of the deaf" as *The Age* opinion editor Sushi Das observed. Neither party was prepared to listen to the other long enough to establish an objective understanding.<sup>14</sup>

The reporting by Indian media of the student assaults saw a series of dramatic story arcs – typical in a media storm – playing out over a series of weeks. New reports of additional assaults continued to fuel the momentum. Media fever pitch reached another apex of outrage when (then) Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, on a whistle stop visit to India, declined protesters' requests to apologise for Indian students' treatment in Australia. In early June 2009, images of his burning effigy at protests in Delhi made the nightly news in both countries.<sup>15</sup>

## Media Storms as 'Key Events'

The trajectory of the anti-Australian media storm in India is a text book case of what communication theorists define as a "key event"<sup>16</sup>. The media environment can move the emphasis of a news story away from the simple facts of a news report so that it becomes an incident which galvanises similar stories, creating an "event" in news making. The momentum and intensified content demands of the 24-hour broadcast and new-media story cycle generates input that can actively shift the factual emphasis of a news story from an original newsworthy item into an incident that galvanises similar stories, creating a "key event" in news making. Media studies academic Michael Slater's *Beating up the News* identifies the shifts in reportorial emphasis occurring in the initial coverage of the Indian student assaults, and analyses the racially oriented language used in Indian media coverage of the stories<sup>17</sup>. But it is important to recognise political correctness in Indian English differs from

14. Sushi Das, "It's simple, India doesn't want to see its citizens harmed", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 January 2010, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-opinion/its-simple-india-doesnt-want-to-see-its-citizens-harmed-20100114-ma0i.html>.

15. Amanda Hodge and Patricia Karvelas, "Hindu Extremists Burn Kevin Rudd Effigies", *The Australian*, 2 June 2009, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/hindu-extremists-burn-kevin-rudd-effigies/story-e6frg6n6-1225720021579>.

16. HM Kepplinger and J Habermeier (1995), "The Impact of Key Events on the Presentation of Reality", in C Critcher (ed.), *Critical Readings: Moral Panics and the Media* (New York: Open University Press, 2006).

17. Michael Slater, "Beating Up The News? The Indian media, Sensationalism, and the Attacks on Indian Students in Australia", Monash University, 2010.



Australian standards of linguistic expectation. Even so, it is not hard to see how Australia's unusually negative experience in Indian media on this occasion may be avoided in future. On reflection, several important opportunities to enlarge, legitimise and authenticate a more accurate image of Australia in Indian media were squandered.

The day after an effigy of Prime Minister Rudd's face burst into flames outside the gates of the Australian High Commission on the quiet tree-lined streets of New Delhi's diplomatic enclave, *The Times of India's* Times Now TV channel hosted a debate, subtitled "Indians – global hate targets", anchored by high-profile Times Now's editor-in-chief Arnab Goswami. Among the discussion panelists was Farrukh Dhondy, the British-based Indian author, anti-racism activist and former commissioning editor for Channel 4 UK. The irony of Dhondy's rhetorical question, "Don't Australians know we have nuclear weapons?" was fortunately lost on viewers, just as an important opportunity to deepen the level of debate between Australia and India also seemed to evaporate in the following days.<sup>18</sup> Dhondy's equally facetious remarks, that perhaps "Indians should take matters into their own hands in Australia", were taken somewhat more seriously, infuriating Prime Minister Rudd in the bargain. In the Times Now broadcast, Dhondy went on to flesh out Asian born UK residents' anti-racist activism in the 1970s. But his reference to campaigners' vigilantism stuck, it was virtually the only sentence from his Times Now panel remarks picked up, frequently repeated thereafter in Australian media. But instead of inviting Dhondy to appear on Australian television, to write opinion pieces for Australian newspapers, to refresh, revise, update or contextualise his comments, the same edited clip of his vigilante statement was aired endlessly on Australian broadcasting channels, and recycled again in ABC in-depth TV and radio segments, all the time giving the misleading impression that Farrukh Dhondy is little more than an anglicised Indian hothead. Nothing could be further from the truth. Dhondy's numerous essays and campaigning journalism against racism were part of his 70s and 80s Oxford generation of South Asian students' contributions to changing race relations in modern Britain. Dhondy's literary achievements speak for themselves. But not for the first time, PM Rudd seemed to miss the most useful cultural cues available to him, consequently sending more negative signals about Australia to India than ever. Defending Australia's reputation as a safe society for Indian students was clearly the primary diplomatic priority for the government, although the claim was disputable. By declining widespread Indian demands for an apology Rudd put the soft power requirements of attaining this important diplomatic agenda in jeopardy. Indians and other foreign born residents in Australia have become accustomed to putting up – often daily – with casual racist attitudes. For enlightened Australians and newcomers alike, the Government's institutional defence of the indefensible was unconvincing and hardly helpful in deepening and authenticating Australia's relationship with India. Few Indians were going to read – let alone believe – the forensically researched Victorian Police study of random acts of criminality against foreign born students by Australia's antisocial elements. The White Australia Policy remains relatively fresh in Indian memory and although Australia's immigration policies were reformed in the early 1970s, this still has not necessarily changed the way many Indians perceive Australia.

With hindsight, from an Indian perspective, any Australian examination of racism against Indians and other foreign born residents – not to mention indigenous Australians – should be undertaken in a manner which might convince Indians we are genuinely concerned about the issue. Creating space in Australian media for Indian authors, writers, academics and journalists to present their own ground-breaking work in this contentious field might have helped unravel some of the painful confusion at the time of the student assaults. A

18. Farrukh Dhondy, "Taking on Kevin Rudd on Aussie Racism", *DNA India*, 1 October 2009, <http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/comment-taking-on-kevin-rudd-on-aussie-racism>; "Indians as Global Hate Targets", Times Now Debate, <http://www.timesnow.tv/Debate-Indians-global-hate-targets/videshow/4318239.cms>.



more inclusive new media strategy could also have helped hold back the acrimonious tide of anti-Australian sentiment. By presenting more reasoned Indian views about Australia, a moderate, intelligent counterpoint to the Indian media's reactive sensationalism may have had a chance to succeed.

The anti-Australian outcry in Indian media was a public relations disaster. Harm-minimisation and damage-control strategies are familiar challenges in media management. But in today's 24-hour news cycle, such conventional strategies may no longer work. The right of reply, a convention of legacy media, has been marginalised not only by the dynamism of the 24 hour news cycle in Indian English-language channels, but also by social media – to the point where no organisation can afford to be without a contingency plan for the swift spread of corrective information. A counter campaign, in other words.

The shredding of Australia's reputation in Indian media had significant consequences. Foreign born students' complaints highlighted the urgent need for the government to tighten private Australian skills training colleges' educational and operational standards. Even so, the volume of enrolments of Indian-born students decreased significantly between 2009 and 2014. Elsewhere, mistrust lingered.

Although negotiations between India and Australia on trade and defense treaties continue to develop successfully behind the scenes, there is no question that the way Australia managed its response to Indian media's portrayal of our racism issues has made the building of trust between the two societies, particularly among young people, much harder.

## Promoting Healthy Discourse in a Media Storm

How else could Australia have persuaded India that it is more aware of and more alert to the need to better manage its social problems than it appeared to be during this crisis? Australia's creative capacity for self-examination takes many exceptionally innovative forms. Our independent documentary productions are admired in the global television marketplace. Australians often benefit, too, from influential socially engineered awareness campaigns, building upon public policy determinations, aimed at holding up a mirror to our culture's failings and inconsistencies, provoking discourse and promoting persuasive alternatives. So, let us imagine that instead of foregoing the opportunity of showing one of Australia's most challenging and creative responses to the 2009 Indian student assaults, the ABC's six-part series *Dumb Drunk and Racist; Are We?* had been broadcast in India. Filmed partly in India, the program hosted four Indian guests as they travelled throughout Australia. Throughout the journey, the Indian guests continually expressed their doubts and questions, changing awareness while revealing some of their own personal and stereotypical cultural responses to what they were seeing, as well as their wholehearted appreciation of many positive aspects of Australian life. In India, initial print news reports of the program were greeted with pages of inflamed readers' online commentary – although reviewing this feedback at the time revealed an overall frustration with Australia itself rather than with *DD&R's* content. Still, the strength of the initial online reaction to news of the series may have made programmers nervous about *DD&R's* possible reception in India, and the effect on Australia's profile and reputation there. Yet in our globalised, multi-access world, it may have been more effective to let the program present Australia's highly developed capacity for self-examination



and self-questioning to demonstrate the way Australian society invites innovative documentaries such as *DD&R* to contribute to open-ended discourse in our free expression of dangerous ideas.

Yes, the *DD&R* commentary has a mawkish rawness and at times a somewhat cavalier attitude to cultural sensitivities. The host, Joe Hildebrand, a News Ltd columnist, has an emboldened on-screen persona which can grate at times. *DD&R* also thrives on the assumption that you can pretty much get people to say anything in front of a television camera. But Hildebrand's provocative style often unearths important revelations about life in Australia. The program's overall integrity as a TV series is continually demonstrated in the questioning of propositions and choices of experience for the four Indian guests. Most importantly, *DD&R* is an authentically Australian creative response to the daring questions it poses about our society.

The dread of more anti-Australian public demonstrations and inflamed outpourings online and on Indian television and talkback radio doubtlessly weighed heavily on decisions not to air the series in India. The potential benefit of balancing the debate by broadening the discussion of difficult issues was felt, it appears, to be too insubstantial. It was a missed opportunity. Australia must be seen to be engaging with the issues of racism in our culture if it is to achieve its desire for an authentic and trustworthy identity in India.

Five years later, Australia's characteristic questioning style of comedic self-parody has recently hit a new highpoint. *How to talk to Australians*<sup>19</sup> is a devastatingly funny YouTube series about Indian students learning about Australia at a Delhi call centre. In the first episode, an Indian teacher points to a chart and says: "A recent survey reveals that 30% of Australians are casual racists, which means the other 70% are full time"<sup>20</sup>. Taking an Indian point of view to explore some of Australia's more recognisable social problems and stereotypical cultural anomalies, the eight-part series stars Indian actors Vishal Kotak, Jeffrey Dsouza, Chum Ehelepola, Robert Santiago, Vikrant Narain, Sybil Quadros, Ananth Gopal and Kamla Chandar in the roles of call centre trainees and instructors. Since *How to talk to Australians* was launched in late July 2014, it has received more than 1 million hits at the time of writing.

## Operating in India's New Media Space

In the last decade the shift in Indian viewers' participation in online or below-the-line news debates has been substantial. Increased coverage through mobile technology has fed this growth. According to the Telecom Registry Authority of India, there were over 900 million wireless subscribers in September 2014.<sup>21</sup> Attempts to monetise media consumers' access have inevitably followed. *The Times of India's* TOI Loyalty program issued online "badges" to encourage commentators registered with the site to debate responsibly. Options to "agree", "disagree", "recommend" or nominate a comment as offensive give readers alternative ways to register their views. Threads on a topic appear directly beneath a contributor's original remarks, to manage the dialogue more effectively. The TOI Loyalty Scheme helped reshape its online subculture when readers began to drive community standard enforcements. In another important model, a partnership between Atlantic Media and Scroll Media Inc., one of India's most successful online news start-ups, has built the Scroll Machine,<sup>22</sup> a curated aggregate system sorting more than 100,000 social media posts a day to help Indian readers make sense of the information and commentary overload now assailing them. TOI and Scroll's contrasting models clearly demonstrate how swiftly Indian new media is changing

19. "How to Talk to Australians – Episode 1: 'G'day Knackers'", [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHQRZXM-4xI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHQRZXM-4xI).

20. Bhakthi Puvanenthiran, "Talking Australian parody web series tackles racism", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/talking-australian-parody-web-series-tackles-racism-20140819-105owj.html#ixzz3CsF5jCjA>.

21. "Press Release 73/2014", Telecom Registry Authority of India, <http://www.trai.gov.in/WriteReadData/WhatsNew/Documents/PR-TSD-Sep-14.pdf>.

22. "About Scroll Machine", *Scroll India*, retrieved 1 April 2015, <http://blog.scroll.in/scroll-machine/>.



in emphasising a far higher priority to readers' engagement. Times Now, TOI's dynamic television news channel has migrated its commentary publishing almost entirely onto its social media platform. By doing so, to date it has gained almost 3.5 million "likes" on its Facebook page, and a strong flow of commentary on its stories. *The Hindu* has close to four million Facebook followers, *India Express* has more than two million, while the public broadcaster Doordashan's DD News has fewer than a million Facebook followers. There's no question the significant uptake of social media in India has fundamentally altered public engagement with media content and publishing brands; Indian audiences have responded positively to the changing inclusiveness new media provides. According to Reuters, "most English-language Indian news channels are discarding the traditional format of news and experimenting with debates and discussions. The aim is to provide an added dimension to the news that viewers have got from their mobile phones or the internet"<sup>23</sup>.

In coverage of India's anti-Australian media outrage, Australian audiences were given a taste of the pitch of India's TV news debates typically featuring a high-profile moderator or anchor and several expert guests. During the Times NOW live debate titled "Indians; Global Hate Targets", Editor-in-Chief Arnab Goswami yelled: "Forget about the sociology," several times during his guests' attempts to contextualise the Australian situation. Goswami's on-screen delivery is often deliberately provocative, not unlike Australia's Joe Hildebrand in fact. It is the bread and butter of high-profile television identities, after all. Even so, Goswami's lack of moderating discipline can swiftly turn his hosted debates into muscular noise fests, verbal punch-ups resembling a squabble at an Indian bus stop. But for a significant segment of younger Indian viewers, Goswami's high-pitched onscreen delivery is liberating: noisy telegenic anchor overrides priggish academics and experts without always acknowledging what they are trying to say. Part of Goswami's popularity among younger Indians clearly rests on his impassioned irreverence for his guest experts.

## Readers Write Back: The Increased Value of Below-the-Line Commentary

Monitoring discussions in Indian mainstream media's below-the-line and social media commentary space requires patience and persistence, demanding new skills from editors. The new media discussion environment throws up interesting sub-themes and changing online behaviour, which are invaluable for media publishers and marketers. In Indian 24-hour English-language television, the volume of such contributions alone can swell an ordinary news item into a news incident – an example of the "key event" in news ecology described previously.<sup>24</sup>

Reviving a news story which is approaching its use-by date by enhancing the volume and frequency of below the line (BTL) and social media commentary is another strategy frequently used on Indian TV news channels. For mainstream English-language commercial news broadcasters (NDTV, Times Now, News Now), scrolling onscreen layers of viewers' commentaries from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, SMS and the networks' own website feedback options, are frequently recycled as content filler, sometimes described by Indian TV news presenters as "bystander updates" during a breaking story. For many Indian commentators, seeing their remarks scrolling across the television screen is a triumph of identity recognition; their statement has been registered, their access to the debate newly

23. James Painter (ed.), *India's Media Boom; the good news and the bad* (Oxford: Reuters Institute, 2013), <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publications/risj-books/indias-media-boom-the-good-news-and-the-bad.html>.

24. Kepplinger & Habermeier, "The Impact of Key Events".





confirmed, their opinions shared with national audiences. For Indian media observers, however, this juggernaut of outrage has become part of the problem. For TV anchors, the responsibility of incorporating the emphasis of what often appears to be un-moderated feedback displayed on screen, into the dynamics of a breaking news story presents a newly evolving challenge in live broadcasting.

Curating or moderating online feedback for live broadcast display or inclusion below the line on websites or Scroll Machine-style social media curation sites is a major growth area in professional media editing. A task once performed solely by technical staff is now increasingly handled by trained journalists and editors. In *“Networked Press Freedom and Social Media”*, journalism academic Mike Ananny analyses how the nature of news is being transformed, and how many western publishers are reacting to readers’ increased desire to interact with news sites:

*“How they let readers interact with online news content and generate content for publication, and how they meet audiences in new social media spaces ... it seems in at least the official policies regulating news workers’ use of social network sites, that news organisations are adopting utilitarian, defensive, and fundamentally conservative relationships to audiences – continuing to seek freedom from readers...”*<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the risks, there are important lessons for Australia in the example of the Indian media’s willingness to open up their online spaces for readers’ commentary.

## New Media Consumers’ Changing Influence

Online media consumers’ engagement with mainstream news publishers was not always so influential. In 2006, when Georgina Henry, *The Guardian* UK’s then deputy editor, launched *The Guardian* website’s “Comment is Free” section, it was one of the first times legacy media had used new media to invite readers to participate.<sup>26</sup> Henry set a high standard for monitoring comment but admitted she was inexperienced in digital technology. She was quoted as saying:

*“We hadn’t spent much time thinking about the debate that the pieces we published would provoke; we hadn’t properly briefed our writers on what to expect (because we hadn’t given it much thought); we hadn’t suggested to the writers that they joined in their comment threads.”*<sup>27</sup>

It was “a naive experiment” – but one she did not regret. She continued:

*“I would never, ever want to go back to a world where we never heard from readers except through a filtered letters page...I’ve learned that ATL (above the line) without BTL (below the line) is not complete...they are mutually dependent...I’ve encountered views and opinions that have made me think harder about all the assumptions I’ve made over the years – political and otherwise.”*<sup>28</sup>

To date, Australian mainstream media publishers have been more cautious about opening their online spaces up to curated or moderated readers’ commentary. This is an obstacle to attracting and retaining younger media users seeking engagement with debates in our society.

25. Mike Ananny, “Networked Press Freedom and Social Media: Tracing Historical and Contemporary Forces in Press-Public Relations”, *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* (2014), 948.

26. Alan Rusbridger, “Georgina Henry Obituary”, *The Guardian* UK, 7 February 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/feb/07/georgina-henry>.

27. Ibid.

28.



## Media as Agent for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Soft Power

By the late 1990s, India's economic liberalisation had been extended to the media: government controls were relaxed. According to Prannoy Roy, co-founder of NDTV, when he and his wife Radikha Roy launched *The World This Week* in 1995, it was India's first independent television news program – still heavily restricted from broadcasting Indian news, but able to cover world events nonetheless. Today more than 250 news channels broadcast in India, in English, Hindi, Urdu, Telugu, Malayalam, Tamil, Gujarati, Marathi, and Punjabi, among other Indian languages, creating “a more discerning democracy”<sup>29</sup>, Roy writes. “The growing power of the media suggests that five years from now soft power could become as important as hardware in war and conflict...”<sup>30</sup> Roy notes that after the India-Pakistan war in Kargil in 1999, the Pakistani president General Perez Musharraf is reported to have said: “India won the war because of its media”<sup>31</sup>. Roy believes President Musharraf decided to open up Pakistani media from its rigid government controls after being surrounded by Indian journalists at the Agra Summit in 2001. When Rupert Murdoch's Star TV partnered with NDTV in 1998, it became the first English language 24 hour news channel. When NDTV split from Star in 2003, it went “tabloid”, Roy writes, a trend followed by virtually every Hindi news channel. In the global competition for advertising revenue, attracting eyeballs is driving the tabloidisation of Hindi news channels and newspapers, a trend he believes is also reflected in mainstream English language news organizations.

## India's 2014 Election Campaign: Migrating From Old to New Media

What better moment to examine the reach and impact of new media in India than the 2014 general election? Extensive media reviews and heightened scrutiny of media content, as well as issues of integrity and accountability have helped increase public awareness of how the press interacts with political campaigning in India. A number of former print journalists moved into online publishing in response to the compromises paid for news requires of their ethical standards.

In an essay published on *The Hoot*, an online independent not-for-profit Indian media analysis site, the academic Dr. Maya Ragnanathan explores Indian political parties' rapid uptake of online media as a campaigning tool:

*“The news media's compulsion to ‘garner audience attention while keeping down the costs, dictates their functioning rather than the needs of political actors or of citizens. (This) has led to ‘mediatisation’, where political parties and actors tailor their words and actions to suit the media agenda. In India it has pushed them into the new social space. The heightened activity online is explained by a clear understanding that mainstream media will only work towards protecting its revenue. For political actors the charm of new media lies first and last in that it provides political actors and parties the means to overcome ‘news media logic’ to reach voters. In an environment in which mainstream media agendas are considered*

29. Prannoy Roy, “More News is Good News: Democracy and Media in India”, *India's Media Boom*, ed. James Painter, Reuters Institute, 2013 P 3 [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Other\\_publications/Indias\\_Media\\_Boom.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Other_publications/Indias_Media_Boom.pdf).

30. Ibid, p. 10.

31. Ibid, p. 10.



*suspect, social media provide the means to reach unhindered the ‘tech-savvy’ young voters who belong to a generation.”<sup>32</sup>*

## Soft Power and Social Media

In the 2014 election campaign, India’s candidates and campaigners partially met the challenge of reaching close to 23 million newly enrolled young Indian voters through social media. As mobile phones, tablets and websites have made news more accessible, younger Indian news consumers consistently demonstrated their interest in debating election issues. But not every candidate for the election was confident in the new media environment. In early March 2014, News Laundry, partnering with NDTV, hosted “Candidates 2014 on Facebook Talks Live, with Madhu Trehan” inviting the five most prominent candidates to the live online debate. The event took place across several evenings and received a strong online following. However, news of the Bharatiya Janatha Party’s prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi’s decision to withdraw from the event due to an unfavourable tweet, was covered far more widely. “The impact of social media is now swiftly magnified by big media. They see social media as the voice of the people,” notes Shivam Vij, one of India’s leading new media journalists.

Ankhi Das, Facebook’s public policy director for India and South Asia, writes:

*“2014 will be remembered as a year when the old ways of doing things will simply not work. It will be remembered as a year of transparency, impatience and an environment which, though irreverent at times, pushed the boundaries of openness. And surely the internet and platforms like Facebook have played a central role in that. It has enabled people to use the platform to speak fearlessly... There has been much debate about the impact of social media on election outcomes. Recent data released by the Election Commission of India shows that there are 23 million first-time voters in the age group of 18–19 years. For example, if we look at Delhi, there are 12 million registered voters. The total number of internet users in Delhi is above 8 million. This picture is more or less mimicked in almost all urban and peri-urban areas of the country.”<sup>33</sup>*

## New Media and Public Diplomacy

*“Today, we carry the Internet around on pocket-sized devices with more computing power and pixels than we previously had on our desks a few years ago. We have innumerable options for sharing our deep thoughts – with or without a retro filter. Our collective, casual, everyday shares demonstrate that millions of people have the power of a printing press at their fingertips. (And they use it.) That is an amazing advancement...”<sup>34</sup>*

Fear of damaging crossfire appears to govern the official approach to social media in both India and Australia. Australia’s former Prime Minister Tony Abbott wants Australian public servants’ commentaries on social media scrutinised by their peers for negative remarks about the government and bureaucracy. At the same time, legitimate concerns exist. The privacy of individual social media users, potential liability for unmediated content uploaded by users, and the online editing skills required to manage debates appearing on government social media sites –are all factors understandably inhibiting institutions from wholeheartedly

32. Maya Ranganathan, “Why Candidates are opting for Social Media”, *The Hoot*, 30 March 2014, <http://thehoot.org/web/home/story.php?storyid=7403&pg=1&mod=1&sectionId=12&sectionname=Online%20Media>.

33. Ankhi Das, “Why Facebook matters This Election”, NDTV, 4 March 2014, <http://www.ndtv.com/elections/article/election-2014/blog-why-facebook-matters-in-this-election-491317?pfrom=home-otherstoriesxxx>

34. Ev Williams, “Welcome to Medium”, <https://medium.com/about/welcome-to-medium-9e53ca408c48>.



adopting social media strategies. However, if Mr. Abbott's ideas are taken up, Australian government departments, embassies and high commissions might be better to shut down commentary options on their social media sites altogether, except perhaps during crises and natural disasters where vital information shared on social media can often save lives.

A Lowy Institute report, *A digital DFAT: Joining the 21st century*, published in November 2010, provides a glimpse of the trepidation and confusion among Australian diplomats and DFAT staff about the future of social media in diplomacy.<sup>35</sup> Fergus Hanson, a Lowy Institute research fellow and former DFAT analyst, writes: "Even though the platforms will change, social media are here to stay... Social media, while often difficult to practise by governments, offer opportunities to engage key niche audiences... Social media if done well offer a good platform to disseminate foreign policy messages..." By 2014, Facebook's population had reached one billion users. DFAT's social media platforms were up and running; its Twitter feed has more than 35,700 followers, while its DFAT Spokesperson Twitter handle has over 11,000 followers. But options for engaging in new media platforms were still buried at the bottom of DFAT's webpage. Recommendations for DFAT to spread Australia's foreign policy messages through appropriate niche news and information media are proving more difficult than imagined. In a 2012 blog following the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs' recommendations for DFAT to establish an office of e-diplomacy, Hanson writes: "Stop procrastinating and throw away the typewriters... Having looked at DFAT's use of e-diplomacy several times over the years, this time the Committee showed a little more frustration with the pace of modernisation"<sup>36</sup>. Clearly, when it comes to new media, Australia can't really afford to be quite so dependent on its foreign service to disseminate niche news stories about our country.

The Australian government's inability to visualize the necessary flexibility and balance needed for regulating new media's global outreach perhaps explains why DFAT lacks the confidence to implement a more vigorous online presence. Unmediated debate or commentary on Australia's embassy and high commission websites and Facebook pages is unthinkable. Staff and skill shortages make the task even harder. Individual Indian and Australian politicians trying to limit their own negative exposure in the new media environment often find themselves fighting a losing battle. In early 2014, when the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott uploaded "A message from the PM – Delivering on our promises" to YouTube, viewers claimed it contained deceptive content. Flagged as "inappropriate", Mr. Abbott's YouTube account was then suspended.<sup>37</sup>

## Social Media's Role in Crisis Situations Must Move Beyond Official Channels

In early September 2014, widespread flooding devastated the northern Indian city of Srinagar and led to a complete breakdown in government communications. Instead, India's social media played an essential role in generating reliable, up-to-date and accessible on-the-ground information. From minute-by-minute accounts of ongoing rescues and relief efforts, to call outs to save stranded local families as well as immediate relief aid and fund raising needs, Facebook provided an invaluable service in the early days of the disaster.

Lives were saved in Srinagar due in no small part to the cut-through candour typical of the

35. Fergus Hanson, *A Digital DFAT; Joining the 21st Century* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2010), [http://www.lowyinstitute.org/files/hanson\\_a\\_digital\\_dfat\\_web.pdf](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/files/hanson_a_digital_dfat_web.pdf).

36. Hanson, "DFAT should embrace the digital age", 31 October 2012, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/10/31/DFAT-embraces-the-digital-age.aspx?COLLCC=2049309889&COLLCC=2022797265&>.

37. Matt Young, "YouTube suspends Prime Minister's YouTube account", *News.com.au*, 3 February 2014, <http://www.news.com.au/technology/online/youtube-suspends-prime-minister-tony-abbotts-youtube-account/story-fn5j66db-1226816451591>.



thousands of Facebook users sharing on the ground reports.

The pace of information exchanged on Facebook especially during the early hours of the Srinagar disaster underlines the positive reach of social media as a public tool. Several days later, still without reliable electricity or communications, the Indian Army deployed Twitter and WhatsApp messenger services to try to reach stranded Kashmiris who still had internet connections through mobile phones. But the vast informally assembled community of social media users constantly exchanging vital information became a remarkable resource in its own right. The lesson here for social media managers and policy developers running Australian government departments' Facebook pages and Twitter feeds from the Srinagar experience is clear: in times of crisis, the boundaries between the public and institutions need to be collapsed swiftly, so information supplied by the public can be accessed as soon as possible. By mid-September 2014, more than a week after the Srinagar flooding catastrophe, DFAT's website and social media page updates remained weeks out of date and had failed to post any information about dedicated new-media tools such as Google's "person finder" for anyone in Australia looking for Kashmiri relatives or friends. DFAT's *smartraveller* Twitter feed also contained no information about the situation in Srinagar and messages sent directly to DFAT and smartraveller Twitter accounts at the time remain unanswered to this day.

The #I'llridewithyou Twitter campaign of individuals offering to travel with Muslims in the wake of the December 2014 Sydney Lindt cafe siege is another example of a swift, unmediated public social media innovation, a warmly shared people-to-people gesture of support that helped solve a problem and made global news. Throughout the last decade, the rapid increase in new media usage through mobile technology in both India and Australia has caused major changes in public reportage of disasters, sieges and uprisings. There is much persuasive evidence to suggest that government agencies in India and Australia must learn to engage more inclusively with public social media reporting and feedback, particularly in times of crisis. Public diplomacy between India and Australia will benefit from fostering increases in public-private new media partnerships rather than attempting to ignore, divert or control the spread of online information through poorly developed social media engagement strategies.

## What Now for Australia in the Asian Century?

In the last two years, a number of positive steps in revitalising the Australia-India relationship have been taken. Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop have both made successful visits to India, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reciprocal trip to Australia in 2014 was the first by an Indian head of state in 25 years and has done much to build inter-country trust. His warm relationship with Mr Abbott was a "bromance". Modi's English language speech to the Australia's federal parliament was an historic moment in the Australia-India friendship, more notable for the fact that the Indian PM has yet to be given similar opportunities in the broader international developed world.

Since the Gillard government's 2013 release of the Asian Century White paper, the status of Australia's relationship with India, and the emphasis on increasing people-to-people awareness and understanding has remained unaltered in spite of the change of government. Background interviews with DFAT officials offer cautious optimism for those seeking to



build stronger links between India and Australia. Australia will continue to build on its positive relationship with India in a “deliberate and thoughtful way”. On the media uproar over student assaults, observers note: “We were not nimble or flexible enough. We did not have as many champions for the Indian-Australian relationship as we thought.”

The Abbott Government announced its New Colombo Plan in October 2013. The international educational exchange model will see Australian students sponsored for study in Indian institutions beginning in 2015. The New Colombo Plan intends to build long-term loyalties through the experience of young Australians studying in Asian universities. The hope is that these students will return from their immersive studies with positive memories and experiences that will lay the foundations for confident, up-to-date interactions with Asia for generations. Similar programs hosted by Australian universities are already seeing increasing numbers of Indian researchers and postgraduate students working closely with Australian peers. The recently formed \$20 million Australia India Scientific Research Fund is another example of constructive engagement between our two countries promising far reaching benefits. There is no question the New Colombo Plan will also achieve a significant portion of its aims; the pilot placements of Australian students in Indian universities begins in 2015. But given the speed at which the Australian-Indian relationship is evolving, the New Colombo Plan is unlikely in the shorter term to address the vast gaps in Indian media’s knowledge of Australian society, nor in the Australian media’s knowledge of India. “The future (for Australian Indian relations) will require more voices and more entities defending our society,” a DFAT spokesman noted. “It is very important for Australians to inject themselves into the Indian debate...” A greater resilience in the relationship, and the inclusion of a wider variety of voices defending, or at least explaining Australia will also be beneficial. DFAT believes Australia’s Indian community can fill in more of the gaps of awareness and support for Australia. “We need to harness the Indian Diaspora in Australia to lend their voices in defending the positives of our society...” I am not convinced the Indian Diaspora should be continually taxed to defend the indefensible on behalf of its new country; it is perhaps naive from a public relations viewpoint to depend too much on this community. Reassuringly, however, DFAT experts recognise the lack of Indian intellectual viewpoints available in Australian media. “We don’t see much of Indian intellectual voices in Australia. We could do with more exposure to Indian culture and literature.” My initial questions to DFAT were aimed at discovering where in Indian media DFAT staff source their information and how far-reaching and up-to-date their new media usage is. No-one was particularly forthcoming; the media providing content material for the High Commission’s daily briefings remain part of an oblique old-world school of diplomatic tradecraft.

Nonetheless, two important, although differently-oriented Australian think tanks, the Lowy Institute in Sydney, and the Australia India Institute at Melbourne University, are doing tremendous work to help broaden Australia’s engagement with India. At the Lowy Institute, the focus is soon to be sharpened with the appointment of former Indian Foreign Minister Shyam Saran as an international fellow. The Institute’s commissioned research, hosted talks, annual surveys of Indian-Australian attitudes, as well as vital round tables, dialogues and debates are broadly focused on defense and security issues. The work of some of Australia’s finest experts in this field is freely available on the Lowy’s website ([www.lowy.org](http://www.lowy.org)), providing an essential archive on the subject. The Lowy’s new media publication, *The Interpreter* is also a reliable resource. But the web-based publication remains cautious about interacting with readers. It recently announced a more liberal approach to readers’ comments, but the volume of commentary published remains low, and the site has a way to go to achieve the Lowy’s public outreach agenda in new media.

Greater potential for public engagement in the Australian-Indian friendship lies in the



wider ranging programs presented by the Australia India Institute. Hosting Indian experts' presentations, talks, conferences, commissioned research, debates and dialogues, the AII has published a number of ground-breaking reports on significant issues affecting both societies. The AII Perceptions Task Force's *Beyond the Lost Decade* remains one of the most comprehensive, far sighted and fearless investigations of the Australian Indian friendship – an exemplary demonstration of Australia's innovative capacity for candid self-examination and critical reflection. Some six years since it was published, *Beyond the Lost Decade* still merits wider discussion in both India and Australia.

From a new media perspective, the AII's website is engaging, attractive, purposeful and relatively easy for students, researchers and the public to use. The site has the potential to add much needed people-to-people texture to the India Australia dialogue, by becoming a dynamic online portal for Indian-Australian intellectual and cultural exchanges, news and opinion as well as reposted articles of note and moderated debates. Reader interactivity could be enhanced further for debates or to promote Indian-Australian intellectual engagement on specific topics. The AII's commitment to wide-reaching social media inclusiveness was readily evident on the personal Facebook page of its former CEO and Foundation Director, Professor Amitabh Mattoo. His page is often rich in expert reflections, personal responses to news and current affairs as well as re-postings of pertinent articles. Professor Mattoo's followers span four continents.

## Reading Australia's Mixed Messages

Different governments in both India and Australia appear to declare their cultural priorities through their choice of language, at times sending mixed messages to other societies. It is vitally important to verbally acknowledge Australia's respect for Indian culture in all our dignitaries' addresses to that society. Virtually every speech by international politicians and diplomats goes to some lengths to emphasise an understanding of the impact of culture in traditional societies in influencing domestic if not international policies as well. Such acknowledgements are invariably reflected in mainstream Indian news coverage of international dignitaries' visits. It is a sentiment Australia could do with restating as often as possible. Former Prime Minister Abbott's successful 2014 visit to India provided the right occasion for the repatriation to India of the bronze Dancing Shiva, and another important stone Shiva, which had been looted and then sold on to the National Gallery of Australia, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Although Abbott's important gesture was largely overlooked by Indian media, it made a positive difference to Australia's profile in important Indian circles. The more Australia's leaders make a point of acknowledging our respect for India's cultural heritage, the more persuasively genuine our soft power outreach will be seen to be.

While DFAT has Australia's best interests at heart, it is not always clear the foreign service and diplomatic cadre speaks for Australian people. Neither country has the habit of appointing cultural attaches to their embassies and high commissions. To capitalise on Australia's cultural export potential and speed up engagement and exchange, roving cultural attachés might usefully be appointed to cover India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, and wherever else cultural trading partnership opportunities exist.

The same applies for India. New media will inevitably see citizens of both societies move out of the mediated diplomatic space to build independent non-institutional dialogues embracing dynamic exchanges of views and argument and cultural and information exchanges.



Creatively the “idea of Australia”<sup>38</sup> still remains something of a mystery to India. The temptation to gain consensus in summarising our attributes as a nation, invariably reduces rather than expands the idea of Australia’s dynamic society in the global community; there can be no one official story of “the idea of Australia” in a free thinking new world culture such as ours after all. Australia’s visual artists, film makers, actors, directors, authors, musicians, writers, and comedians compete successfully in international markets. Australia’s Indigenous artists’ work is celebrated throughout the world. Yet Australian independent creativity is – with a few tightly managed exceptions – largely absent from India’s experience of our country’s story. Australian artistic expression can’t be expected to fulfil our government’s diplomatic agenda in India. But Australia’s creativity can certainly add a great deal of texture and substance to the idea of our society there. Creating interest for Australian questions in India is achievable. Self-examination is a philosophical strength in our society; Australia’s vigorously independent arts culture readily demonstrates this bold insightfulness. The arts in Australia add an essential depth of authenticity to our country’s soft-power outreach. But governments will need to support our cultural exports to India more effectively in future if the creative idea of Australia is to be better understood there. There is equally a growing imperative to highlight Australia’s scientific, educational, humanitarian and financial industry’s engagement in India through media campaigns and focused topical coverage. We are not yet capitalising sufficiently on positive stories about Australian achievements in the region.

## Attaining Authenticity for Australia’s Interests In India’s New Media Environment

From an Indian perspective, if Australia wants to raise its profile in Indian new media and become a more credible and dependable voice there, it will need to show greater creativity, editorial commitment and technological flexibility so as to create innovative partnerships with Indian media professionals, publishers and editors and most importantly, readers. While Australia’s institutions hesitate and mainstream media’s distrust of Indian authorship and ownership of the Indian story persists, opportunities to expand positive awareness will continue to be squandered. Investment partnerships in new media publishing initiatives will invariably add a much needed dimension to building positive public awareness of the idea of Australia there.

The main opportunity to expand Australia’s profile and influence in the Indian media market lies in recent changes to India’s foreign investment rules for new media news sites and partnerships for start-ups. Although foreign investment in Indian mainstream media is limited to about 26% ownership, no restrictions apply to new media start-ups and international new media co-productions, as an Australian-Indian new media publishing partnership would be classified. To date, new media titles such as Atlantic Media’s innovative Indian business site, Quartz Media, *The Huffington Post* India and *Buzzfeed* India have begun building solid sub-continental readership. Australian media publishers seeking to profit from similar opportunities will require capital, obviously – but also time, patience, expertise, vision, creativity, flexibility and editorial faith in the next generation of Indian journalists and editors.

38. To borrow from the exceptionally well-conceived title, *The Idea of India*, by Professor Sunil Khilnarni (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1999).





Reciprocity can play an influential role in the Australian Indian friendship. Australian mainstream and new media publishers could substantially expand the idea of contemporary India in Australia by publishing Indian journalists and editors' reviews, debates, commentaries and analyses about their country in Australian publications. This inclusiveness will invariably help draw Australian media and readers closer to contemporary Indian perspectives, and increase the intellectual familiarity between the two cultures with more inclusive flexibility and informality than current university exchanges, senior editors' dialogues, diplomatic conclaves, round tables and other think-tank events allow. Publishing Indian reports of Indian news and current events for Australian readers would build trust in the abilities of Indian media professionals in Australia and expand the knowledge exchange between our two societies. *Contributoria's* model of sponsoring independent journalism is worth investigating, just as corporate or private sponsorship could help fund pages specifically about India in Australian publications.

A third potential way of broadening Australia's relationship with India through its media environment might be modelled on one of new media's earliest and most respected successes. In 1998, the US-born, Canterbury, New Zealand-based academic Denis Dutton launched Arts & Letters Daily,<sup>39</sup> a web page hosting links to international current affairs articles, essays, analyses, commentaries and reviews. The site, modeled on an 18<sup>th</sup> century broadsheet with four or so new articles posted six days a week, is a scrollable single page, free of animated advertising clutter. Initially attracting a healthy New Zealand following, ALD, now owned by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, averages up to 3 million global visitors per month. Dutton's success lay in the site's simplicity, his gently contrarian editorial selections and his witty, short write-ups above the link to each article. Sam Sachs in the *Wall Street Journal* writes: "ALD's links are gold, attracting tens of thousands of new readers to articles whose readership might otherwise be painfully small. Of course, even big and well-known venues covet an ALD link. But the windfall is almost epochal for little magazines."<sup>40</sup> A low-cost Australian-Indian new-media partnership might follow the pattern set by Dutton's regionally-based, globally-celebrated achievement – a de-institutionalised, collaborative venture transcending distance, embracing our respective intellectual strengths and shared curiosities, engaging younger Indians and Australians alike to produce an Australian Indian-specific arts and letters portal, to manage debate and to promote new articles as they appear. Any takers?

Finally, for young or retrenched Australian journalists, joining an Indian news publishing company could provide a life-changing professional experience, opportunities to develop skills, close and confident connections with Indian colleagues, and the chance to gain a wider perspective on the many bewildering complexities of contemporary Indian life.

The personal and professional experience gained from working as a writer and editor for an Indian news publisher, on an Indian wage, in Indian working conditions has provided this writer with an invaluable connection with India's new and old media. I am most grateful to Tehelka's publishers for giving me this opportunity. Participating in the unique dynamics of an Indian newsroom, collaborating on sensitive Indian stories, challenging stereotypes and being actively challenged in return, anchoring special topic issues and constantly participating in the great Indian debate at ground level, so to speak, has given me access to some of the brightest of the new generation of Indian media professionals. Almost a decade later, it worries me that in spite of their growing influence in India and abroad, so little of these writers' and editors' exceptional work is visible in Australia. I dream of these buoyant creative resourceful writers and journalists soon becoming more critically engaged in the Australian Indian friendship.

39. [www.alddaily.com](http://www.alddaily.com).

40. Sam Sacks, "A Maecenas for the Internet Age; Denis Dutton showed how intellectual life can be made to flourish on the Web", *Wall Street Journal*, 8 January 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704405704576064540563199586?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424052748704405704576064540563199586.html>.



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