Politely Racist

A CASE STUDY ON READERS' COMMENTS IN AUSTRALIAN MAINSTREAM NEWSPAPERS

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Like all of our work at All Together Now, this report was researched and written on unceded Aboriginal Land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We acknowledge their Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge that Australia was, is and always will be Aboriginal Land.

Contents

Executive summary

The evolution of social commentary into virtual platforms presented readers with a new-found freedom to express their views online, in a commenting space protected by anonymity and unrestrained by face-to-face features of opinion exchange, such as reading verbal cues and body language. Every day, thousands of online news readers scroll down to read and write below-the-line comments. Pervasive in its impact, audience engagement plays a key role in informed citizenry and generating a healthy public deliberation. Reader comments, an important aspect of audience engagement, are overlooked yet powerful pieces of reproduced information that influence the shaping of discourses around racism.

Politely racist explores online reader comments in response to negatively racialised opinion pieces about Muslim people, published by Australian mainstream newspapers. As All Together Now's previous research[1] shows, Muslim people are negatively targeted in a disproportionate manner by mainstream social commentary in Australia. The aim of this report is to unravel the role played by comment sections in perpetuating, normalising and consolidating racist ideas. *Politely racist* seeks to generate a discussion around the insidious nature of conversations taking place in the comment sections of negatively racialised opinion pieces. **Our findings** indicate that:

- discussions taking place in these comment sections encourage **opinion polarisation**, further entrenching readers' discriminatory views;
- comment sections are a **cradle for racist discourse** where freely exchanged discriminatory ideas are polite enough in tone to pass moderation, but racist in content.

The report makes **key recommendations** to address the systemic racism which is at the root of our findings. All Together Now (ATN) recommends a long-term approach, involving multiple sectors of society:

1 Journalists need to consider more closely the effect of their work.

2 All news organisations need to cultivate and maintain an anti-racist culture within their workplaces.

3 Mainstream media organisations need to increase cultural diversity across all parts of their operations.

4 The Federal Government and the media industry need to invest in media literacy education for audiences.

5 All sectors of society need to invest in opportunities for independent journalism.

6 The Federal Government needs to continue financial support for public journalism.

Glossary

Burqa

Loose enveloping garment that covers the face and body and is worn in public by certain Muslim women.

Discourses

For the purposes of this report, we define discourses as structures of language that locate a story within broader and recurrent ideologies. Discourse plays a fundamental role in how the brain interprets and understands racism, yet is not necessarily apparent from a quick reading of a text. Prejudices are not innate: they are acquired and learned, often through communication, that is, through text and talk[2]. Discourses tap into and often build on these prejudices by grounding texts in a deeper layer of meaning. Note that, throughout this report, we also use 'discourse' in a more generic sense to refer to a type of speech, or a collection of ideas and conversations, for instance, 'political discourse' or 'public discourse'.

Inclusive portrayal

A portrayal that promotes racial equality, condemns racism, defies racial stereotypes, gives a voice to a minority group, or has an equivalent intent.

Negative portrayal

A portrayal that is reasonably likely to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of people because of their race, colour or national or ethnic origin, or religious intolerance motivated by racist considerations.

Neutral portrayal

A portrayal that does not satisfy the negative or inclusive definitions provided above.

Niqab

A veil for covering the hair and face except for the eyes that is worn by some Muslim women.

Opinion piece

Used in this report when referring to editorials, opinion articles and 'blog posts' published by columnists in the opinion or commentary section of a newspaper, excluding readers' letters. An opinion piece is different from a news piece because it expresses the author's opinions, beliefs or views, without making factual claims or statements.

Race

While there are no valid biological criteria for dividing people into distinct racial categories, the concept of 'race' is a social construct that creates and organises systems of difference.[3] For the purpose of this research, we look at instances where the concept of race is used explicitly (through language) or implicitly (through framing) to infer conclusions about and based on someone's racial background. 'Race' as a producer of difference is commonly used to describe a person's physical features, such as skin colour, hair type and/or colour, body shape or facial features.

Race-related

We use this term to describe racialised media content. Sometimes we use the two terms, 'racialised' and 'race-related' interchangeably. The meaning of 'racialisation' is multidimensional. Depending on the context within which these terms are used, they can have different connotations. 'Racialised' has a negative meaning when used as a metaphor for processes of exploitation, domination and subjugation, while its non-negative meaning is reclaimed when used as a metaphor for struggles over meaning and identity.[4]

Racial background

A person's racial background comprises "race", ancestry, nationality, accent and cultural background, which includes religion, food, arts and crafts, clothing and other cultural practices.

Racism

Unjust covert or overt practices and structures that discriminate (with or without intent) against a person or a group on the basis of their racial background. Racism can be manifested by a person, a group, an organisation or a system.

Social commentary

Umbrella term used when referring to print, digital and television opinion and commentary in Australian mainstream media. It includes newspaper opinion pieces and television current affairs programs.

Why racialised discourse in the media matters

Between April 2018 and June 2020, ATN collected and analysed 724 race-related newspaper opinion pieces and television current affairs segments from mainstream media sources.

Muslim Australians were portrayed negatively in a disproportionate manner, with 78% (80 pieces of social commentary) of the total (102) media pieces about Muslim people being negative, and only 22% (22 media pieces) being inclusive or neutral. The majority of these opinion pieces were published by News Corp-owned newspapers, while other media agencies barely discussed Muslim Australians in their columns or current affairs (Figure 1).

This normalisation of anti-Muslim sentiments in mainstream newspapers is even more troublesome in the context of new evidence published by the United Kingdom's Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) and Hedayah, a United Arab Emirates-based violent extremism research centre, where they state that:

It is increasingly clear that radical right extremism [in Australia] mobilises around a common set of anti-Muslim populist, ethno-nationalist, white supremacist and chauvinist narratives in Australia and transnationally.[5]

Pervasive in its impact, audience engagement plays a key role in informed citizenry and generating a healthy public deliberation. However, the comment sections of negatively racialised opinion pieces, where readers engage in back-to-back exchanges of discriminatory opinions, have become petri dishes that cultivate racist sentiments. The purpose of this report is to generate a discussion around the insidious nature of online conversations that play out in the moderated comment sections of mainstream newspapers, sparked by negatively racialised opinion pieces.

While this report is an in-depth exploration of reader comments from a sample of negatively racialised opinion articles, the full methodology and quantitative results of our media monitoring research can be accessed on our website here.

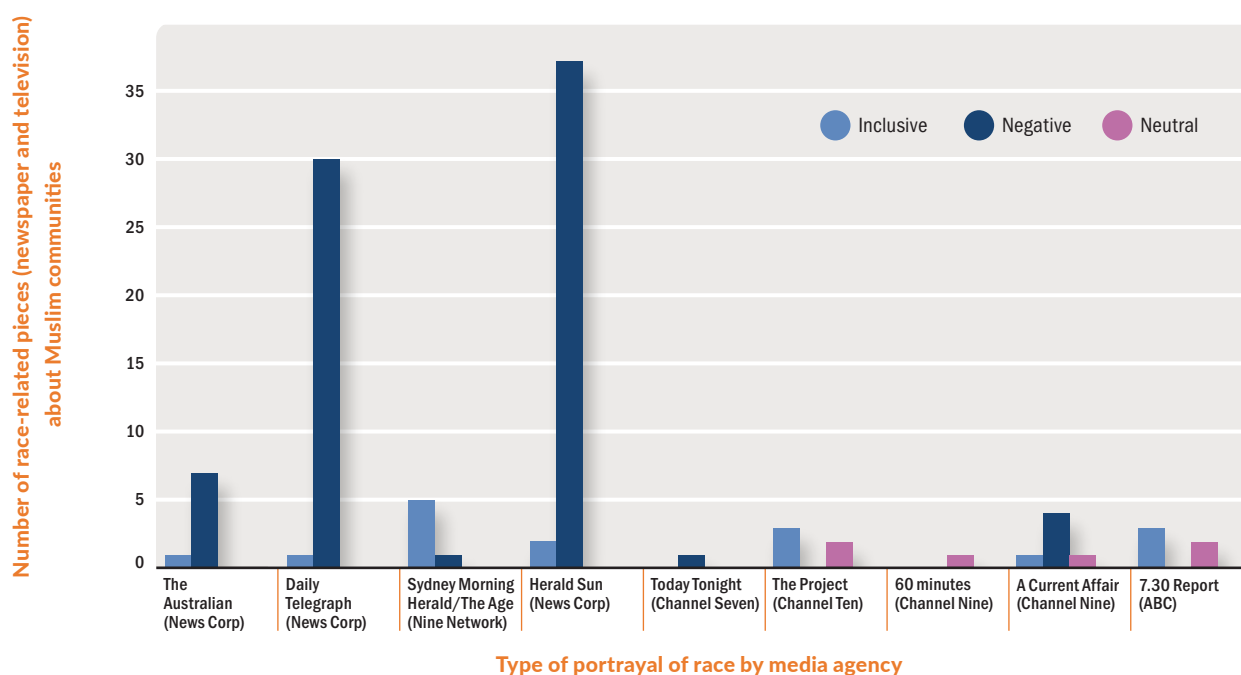**FIGURE 1** • TYPE OF PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES BY MEDIA AGENCY

A note on Australian media ownership

Media ownership in Australia is highly concentrated. Newspapers with the highest weekly readership – measured across both online and print – are owned by two corporations: News Corp and Nine.[6] In 2011, when *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* were owned by Fairfax, "News Corporation titles accounted for 65% of circulation. Fairfax Media, the next biggest publisher, controlled just 25%".[7] Although these percentages may have changed due to the increased digitalisation of news and the existence of other online news organisations such as The Guardian, Pedestrian and Crikey, Roy Morgan statistics show that the most-read mastheads in Australia are owned by the two companies.[8]
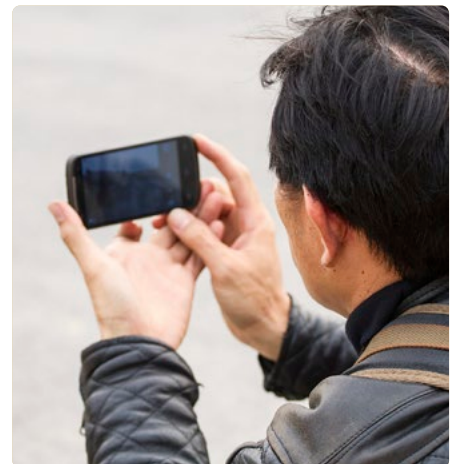
In recent months, a high number of smaller media organisations such as BuzzFeed, 10 Daily and ABC Life have either disappeared or significantly reduced in size, likely linked to COVID-19 and the resulting economic downturn. This is concerning because these organisations often presented alternative views, with a stronger tendency to platform people from diverse backgrounds. This brings even greater urgency to the need for more diverse representation among the major publications.

SOURCE • ALL TOGETHER NOW,
SOCIAL COMMENTARY, RACISM AND COVID-19

Why explore audience engagement with racialised discourse?

With the surge of social media and increased use of online platforms for opinion sharing, more than a decade ago, mainstream news websites started spreading out to virtual platforms.[9] The online comments sections of mainstream media outlets gave readers new spaces and processes to interact with article content as well as other reader comments, at the end of the articles.

While audience engagement changed, the nature and shape of journalistic practices also underwent transformations including but not limited to novel forms of digital engagement. These range from positive examples such as citizen journalism during the Arab Spring, to the problematic echo chambers and filter bubbles that fuel polarisation. For traditional media outlets, going digital meant wider audience access as long as they came up with new, revenue-generating business models. Where subscription-based models failed to make online newspapers sustainable, ad revenue from increased page views and, implicitly, for many of them, click bait, became a necessity. Since 2017, when All Together Now started monitoring Australian media, we have seen digital newspapers adopting engagement models similar to social media platform formats, such as the blog sections, where columnists post short opinion pieces multiple times a day. This resembles "social media business models [that] thrive on engagement, which incentivizes emotionally charged and freely flowing content".[10] The low cost of opinionated content is also one of the causes attributed by journalists to the increase in opinion pieces and commentary in the media, along with competition and the ability to differentiate their product.[11]

From a news consumption perspective, the emergence of social media created a need for mass media to rethink how it invited readers to interact with media pieces. Whether it is sharing the opinion pieces on readers' personal social media pages, or posting comments in below-the-line spaces, engagement became a revenue measurement tool and readers were given an opportunity to actively participate in news consumption. Among the detrimental effects of this change is the commodification of journalism, where media pieces can easily become mere 'products' that need to get clicks in order to make profit.

From an audience engagement perspective, online newspaper comment sections allow readers to present their views and criticisms in a guarded online environment. While previously journalists held a central position as producers of news, online comment spaces initiated a power shift, guiding audiences towards a more active and central position in news consumption. Australian mainstream news sites allow readers to create an account and submit their comments for review by a moderator before getting published under an online article. Readers can engage in this conversation in the comfort of their

home behind the safe shield of anonymity that comes in the form of a 'username'. Gone are the basic and formal features of opinion exchange such as reading verbal cues and body language. In fact, previous research has identified that online reader comments tend to include racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic sentiments that are culturally sensitive and tend to be rebuffed by the general public.[12]

This is particularly relevant in Australia, where there is documented evidence of negatively racialised mainstream media[12,14,15] and a strong backlash against regulating racist speech (e.g., the push to weaken the 18C section of the *Racial Discrimination Act*).[16] We know anecdotally that socio-political commentators in Australian media are highly popular (figures of readership per commentator are undisclosed), thus having the potential of engaging large audiences. One official attempt at addressing this issue was the *Race for the Headlines: racism and media discourse report* produced by the Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales in 2003, which failed to bring

evidence proving the link between racist media and its influence on audiences.[17] The backlash was harsh, and the report was buried. In spite of the increasingly central and significant role of audience comments, little attention has been paid to analysing the content of reader comments.[18] The complex dynamic between media and its active audiences[19] is further complicated when looking at race-related issues. In one of the few existing studies that look at audience interaction with race-related media content, Faulkner and Bliuc (2016)[20] used a social psychology lens to analyse how people commented on news sites in support or opposition of racist incidents. In this report, All Together Now will carefully consider the symbiotic relationship between media and its 'consumers', without implying a top-down power relation. As a means of addressing an existing gap in research and expanding All Together Now's Media Monitoring work, this report presents the findings of an analysis into the nature of audience comments on negatively racialised opinion pieces about Muslim Australians.

Methodology

Using the data and findings of ATN's Media Monitoring research conducted between April 2018 and June 2020 (Figure 1), we conducted the qualitative analysis of reader comments to gain an in-depth understanding into how audiences react to and interact with online opinion pieces that negatively portray Muslim people and communities.

We used a conceptual framework (Figure 2) to look at reader comments, evaluating different aspects of audience engagement. Based on previous studies into online reader comments and audience engagement, we designed the framework using key concepts of audience engagement such as sentiment, tone, interactivity and constructive discussion.[21]

We completed the comment analysis using the comments posted by readers responding to 29 articles that contained negative opinions about Muslim Australians in three leading newspapers: *The Daily Telegraph* (n=14), *Herald Sun* (n=14) and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (n=1), from April 2018 to March 2019, analysing a total of 4,558 comments using Nvivo. We coded each comment for the five aspects of audience engagement (Figure 2) and conducted a thematic analysis to identify the themes arising from the reader comments.

While measures were taken to select a representative sample size, we were restricted in our ability to generalise the findings by the small sample size, which was a result of time and scope limitations of the project (for more information on how we collected the data, read our full methodology on our website). The analysis delved into understanding the nature of online reader comments, looking specifically at readers' agreement or disagreement with the content of the article, sentiments conveyed by reader comments, tone and the nature of reader interaction with the article content and other reader comments.

Sentiment	Positive | Negative | Neutral
Agreement	Agree | Disagree | Neutral
Tone	Civil | Hostile | Ironic/sarcastic | Neutral
Interactivity	Article content | Reader comment | None
Constructive discussion	Ref. to personal experience | New facts | New viewpoints | None
Themes	

FIGURE 2 • CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING READER COMMENTS

Research insights

Opinion polarisation

One of the most marked results to emerge from the data is in relation to reader agreement with the content of negatively racialised opinion pieces. Most of the comments in *The Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun* agree with the content of the opinion pieces (Figure 3). In contrast, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, which tends to publish a higher number of racially inclusive opinion pieces than other outlets (see Figure 1), appears to have an audience that disagrees with the content of negatively racialised opinion pieces.

The commenters' agreement with negatively racialised content also resonated with the nature of themes that came across in audience comments. The themes discussed in reader comments were similar to the content in negatively racialised opinion pieces and appeared to reiterate and reinforce discriminatory ideas presented in opinion pieces (see page 11).

While racism in opinion journalism is nothing new, our analysis raises concerns about significant ways opinion journalism, coupled with reader comments that bolster racially biased opinions, can transform the discourse around race and racism. One of the key concerns is the impact of racially biased audience engagement in creating opinion polarisation. Opinion polarisation, also known as group polarisation or attitude polarisation, refers to the phenomenon where group deliberation leads people sharing similar opinions towards a more extreme direction.[22] When like-minded people start discussing a particular topic and share their similar opinions, they tend to end up having opinions that are more extreme compared to their views before the discussion began. In our analysis, we noticed similar trends in reader comments, where in responding to racially biased opinion pieces, readers continued to discuss racist ideas building on the content of the article, as well as other reader comments.
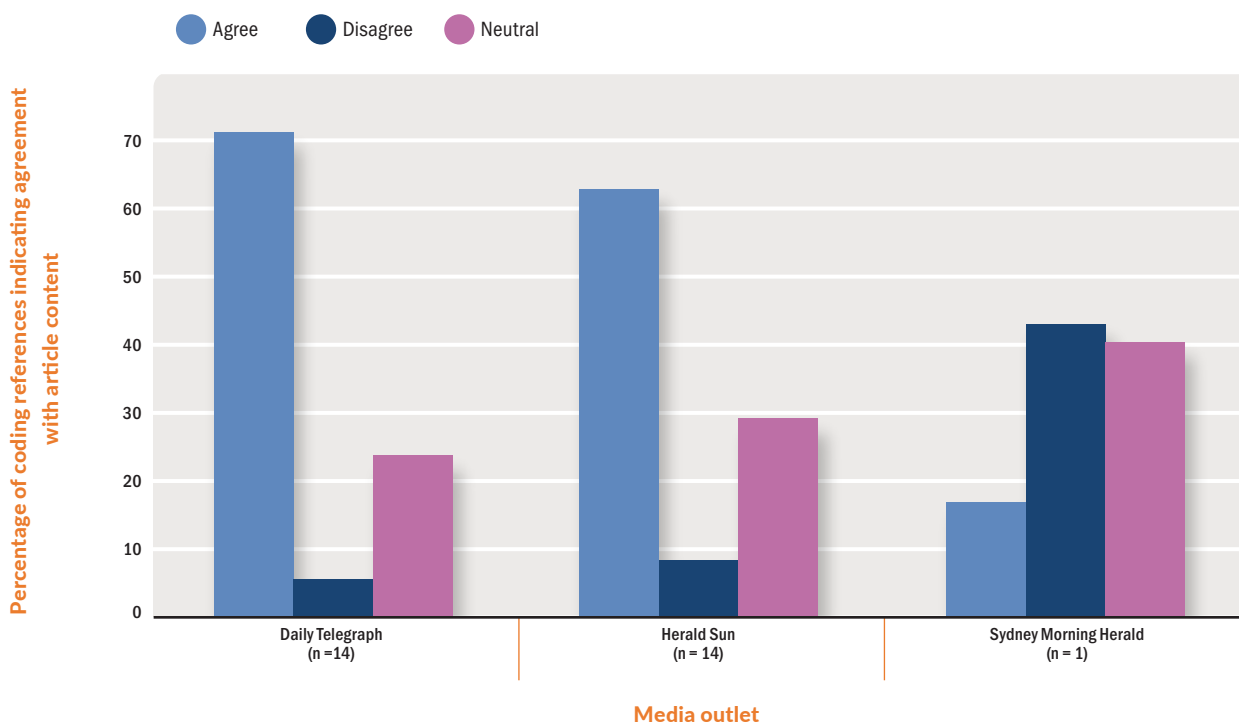

FIGURE 3 • MEDIA OUTLET AND COMMENT AGREEMENT

This trend was particularly noticeable in reader comments expressing anti-Muslim sentiments and comments that indicated ridicule and disrespect towards Islamic culture. A good example is the reader conversations on opinion pieces about Muslim women wearing burqas and niqabs. When one reader posted a comment ridiculing the burqa, making references to its 'letterbox'-like appearance, other readers contributed to the discussion by adding comments that were overtly racist in nature, for example, asking how one can identify who is behind the burqa in specific contexts such as during school pick-up times.

The readers who contributed to these discussions in comment sections went back and forth replying to each other's comments with ideas that further expressed prejudice towards Muslim women, their attire and appearance. As the comment exchange progressed, the ideas they shared appeared to become more overtly racist, with readers referring to Muslim men having to use tags similar to the ones on airport luggage to avoid bringing home the 'wrong' woman. Within the increasingly offensive comments that blended racial prejudice with misogyny, Muslim women were referred to as 'Casper the Ghost' and 'baby factories' and were the subjects of numerous jokes about their choice of attire and appearance.

What is evident when looking at the back-to-back conversations taking place among readers is that the comment sections give them the opportunity to openly discuss discriminatory and contemptible ideas that are rejected by the public in the open. Being able to voice these views amid a group who shares similar beliefs appears to encourage readers to continue their activity on these platforms. According to Jakubowicz et al. (2017):

> News websites and blogs which allow user comments can also develop into communities as people comment not only on the article but on each other's comments.[23]

Engaging with other readers who validate their views can also add confidence in upholding viewpoints that are not perceived by readers as being racist. Peer validation could be a reason for readers to continue returning to platforms that share and confirm their opinions, all the while confined to thought bubbles that reinforce and further polarise their racist beliefs.

Further research using a bigger data sample that looks at other types of racism (apart from Islamophobia) is necessary before making a general claim on opinion polarisation and propagation of hate speech on mainstream media platforms.

A cradle for racist discourse

With the rise in opinion journalism and columnists often appearing on the front pages of digital and printed newspapers, social commentary has the potential to strongly influence mainstream discourses about race and racism. These columns' comments sections then become places where we can observe the activation and evolution of racist discourses. To explore this, we looked at the audience interaction with negatively racialised opinion pieces, and the tone and nature of sentiments conveyed in their comments.

TONE AND SENTIMENT
Most reader comments had a neutral tone (more than 80% in all three media outlets) and conveyed neutral sentiments (more than 90% in all three media outlets). Although neutral in tone and sentiment and lacking common features of racist language such as offensive word choice and profanity, the majority of comments on articles published by *The Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun* were in agreement with the ideas presented in the selected negatively racialised opinion pieces. This shows that racist ideas aren't necessarily delivered using rude or uncivil tone and sentiment. The neutral tone of comments can be a result of organisational commenting policies. For example, at the time of data collection for this project, both *The Daily Telegraph*

148

and *Herald Sun* indicated that the "comments section is a place for healthy, construc-
tive and challenging conversations. The basic rules are simple – we encourage you to
share your views, but be respectful of your fellow commenters. We don't allow abuse,
racism, sexism, predatory behaviour, trolls, threats, spam, ALL CAPS, or hyperlinks
to other sites".[24] However, while the commenting policies keep offensive language
at bay, the neutral tone and sentiment appear to be a disguise that helps racist ideas
pass through comment moderation.

The neutral nature of comments begs for an exploration into the use of coded
language in presenting racist ideas, which is beyond the scope of this report. While
organisational commenting policies and commenting guidelines are likely the reason
for the neutral tone in comments, the fact that racist content successfully passed
through the comment moderation process and were approved for publication by
the moderators, thereby becoming part of public deliberation, is deeply concerning.
From an audience engagement perspective, however, the neutral nature of sentiment
and tone in comments, while attributed to comment moderation by media outlets,
can be seen as creating a positive and encouraging environment for other readers
to join commenting spaces.[25]

THEMES AND NON-FACTUAL CONVERSATIONS

In addition to analysing tone and sentiment in negatively racialised opinion pieces,
we conducted a thematic analysis to explore the themes within reader comments.

A look at word frequency indicated that, as can be expected, there is a strong similar-
ity in frequently used words in racially biased article content and audience comments,
as displayed in Figure 4 and Figure 5. This suggests that readers' comments were in
strong alignment with the content in the negatively racialised opinion pieces.
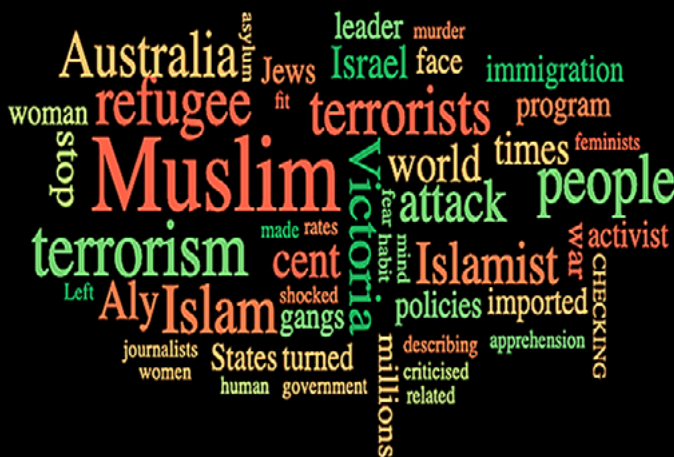

FIGURE 4 • ARTICLE CONTENT WORD FREQUENCY

FIGURE 5 • READER COMMENT WORD FREQUENCY

Taking the analysis a step further, we coded the audience comments to identify key themes within the reader comments (Figure 6).

Interestingly, all five themes were directly connected to ideas about race and racism. For instance, the comments criticising the political left were in direct relation to the liberal outlook on accepting migrants and refugees. Under 'religion', the subtheme with the highest number of references was regarding 'anti-Islam' sentiments. Conversely, only nine references were made to 'religious harmony'. Additionally, the readers appear to not only agree with the negatively racialised content, but add to the discussion by linking racist ideas to other aspects of society that may not have been the focus of the content in the opinion piece. The relation identified here between racism and larger societal themes demonstrates that racist ideas are not fringe, or confined to radical online spaces. Our findings show that racism is interwoven with mainstream discourses ranging from law enforcement and security, terrorism, culture and ethnic identity, to feminism and climate change.
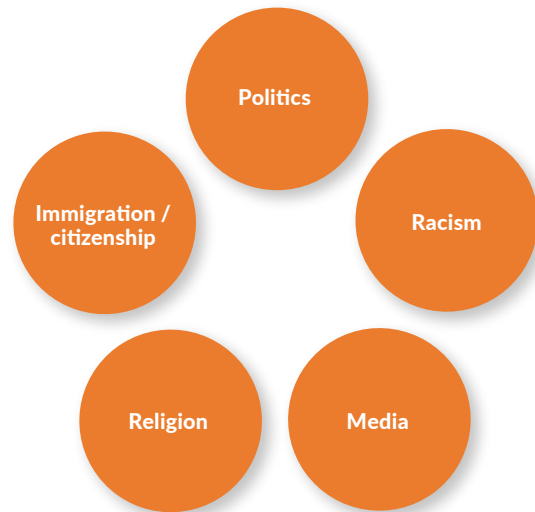

FIGURE 6 • KEY THEMES IN READER COMMENTS

Legend:
- Ref. to personal experience or narrative
- New view point(s) not in article but relevant
- New fact(s) not present in article but relevant
- None

Percentage of coding references indicating constructive discussion

Media outlet

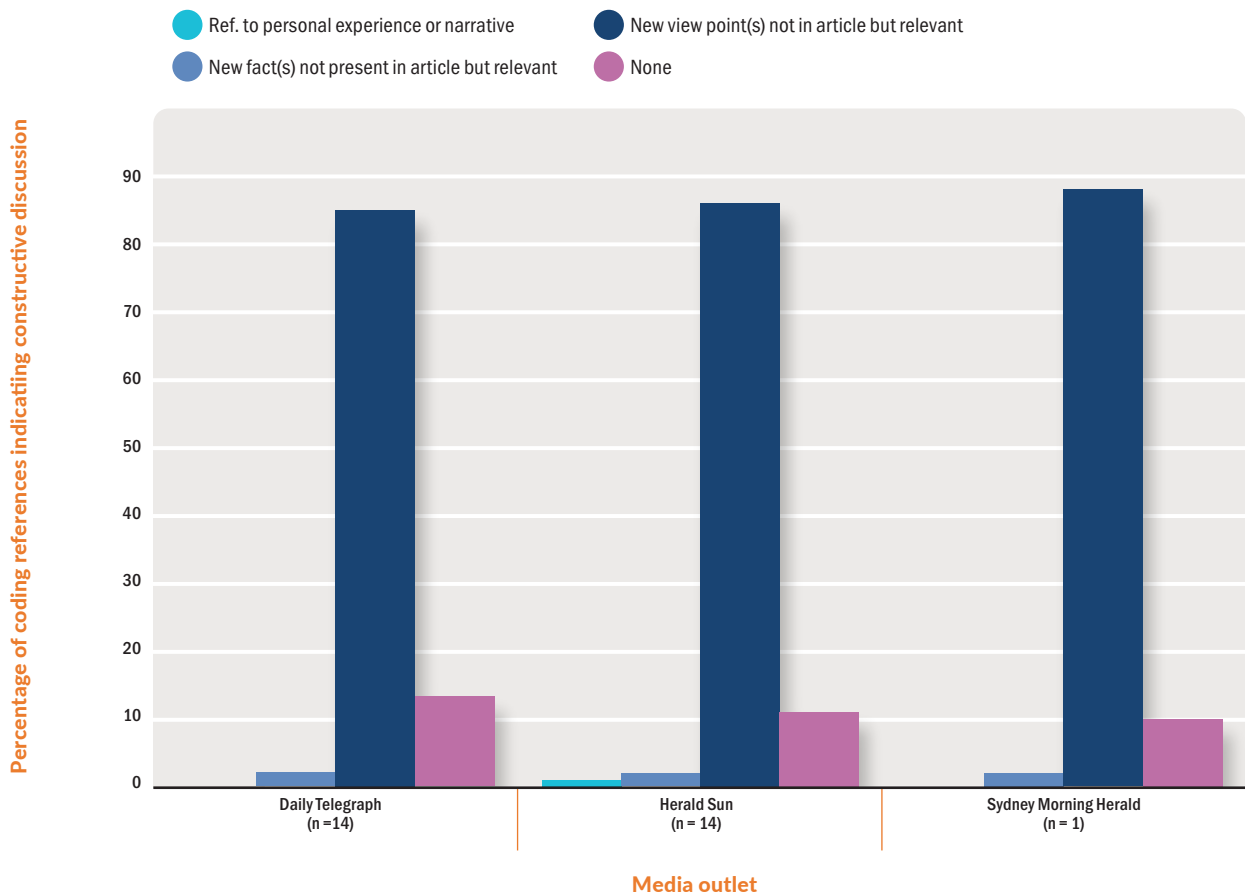Daily Telegraph (n =14) — Herald Sun (n = 14) — Sydney Morning Herald (n = 1)

FIGURE 7 • ELEMENTS OF CONSTRUCTIVE DISCUSSION

Adding a further dimension to the nature of the discussion shaping up around these opinion pieces, we looked at how reader comments align with different aspects of constructive discussion such as references made to personal experiences, new facts, and new viewpoints. The findings indicate that the majority of commenters tend to voice their personal viewpoints, without referring to any facts either related to the article content or their viewpoint (Figure 7). While the lack of factual information may be a characteristic that is common to modern audience engagement, given the nature and themes of these particular discussions, the lack of critical engagement in the audiences is concerning.

As a whole, one of the important insights that can be derived from the thematic analysis is the 'ripple effect' created by the ideas publicised via the racially biased opinions pieces. The racially prejudiced opinions voiced by the authors are discussed in agreement, and extrapolated and connected to draw connections with other political, socio-economic and cultural topics. The audiences' agreement with the content, coupled with the nature of the themes, indicate that these opinion pieces help activate discourses that breed racially negative opinions in society. While opinion pieces sit at the periphery of the larger gamut of news reporting, they were first introduced in *The New York Times* in 1970 to promote pluralism and diversity by generating an intellectual discussion "with the purpose of prompting civic discourse and learning among the general public".[26] The quality of the content and the nature of the discussion that negatively racialised opinion pieces generate, as evident from our analysis, appear to be doing quite the opposite.

AUDIENCE INTERACTION

Adding another layer to our analysis, we explored the nature of audience interaction in these comments, looking specifically at whether the commenters interact with the content of the article or with other reader comments. As presented in Figure 8, the majority of readers in all three media outlets interacted with the content of negatively racialised articles. Although not as prevalent as the interaction with the article content, more than 30% of comments in each media outlet were in response to another reader's comment. This finding echoes previous research where audience interaction between readers was identified as accounting for 20% to 50% of comments analysed.[27]
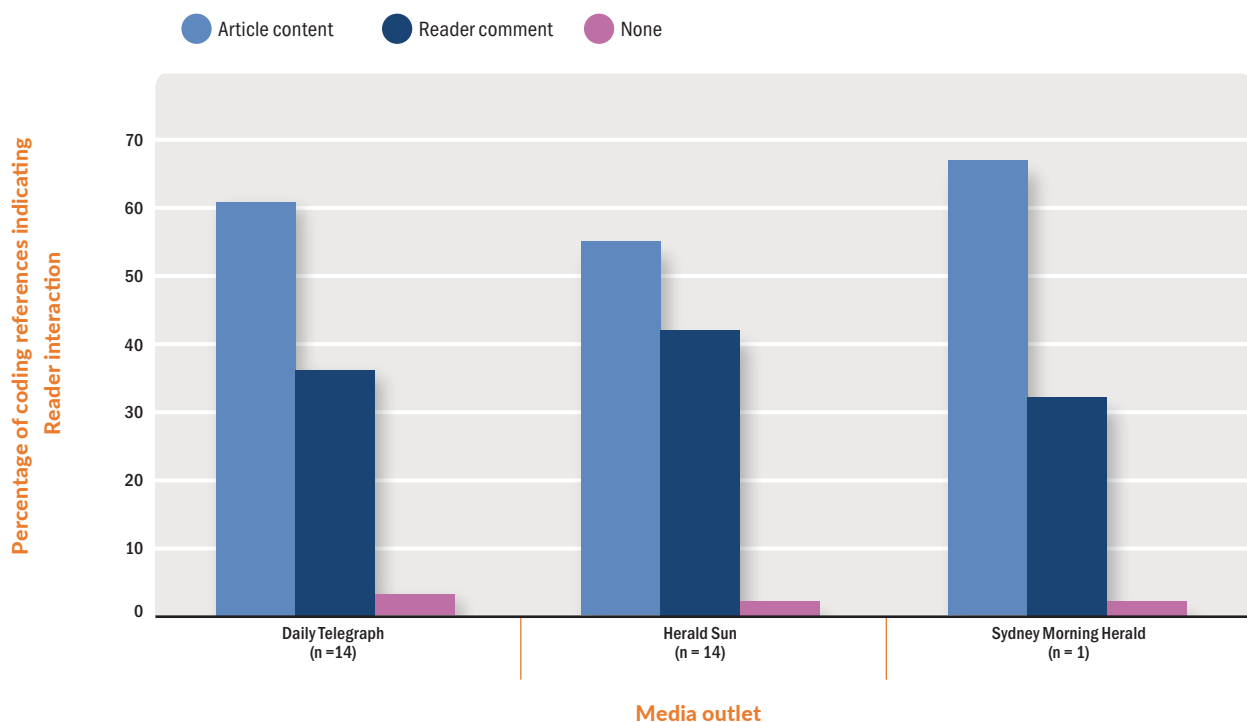

FIGURE 8 • COMMENT AGREEMENT

Taken together, the presentation of comments and the ways the readers engage in commenting spaces appear to have qualities that help facilitate healthy public deliberation.

However, although the comments are civil and neutral in tone and sentiment, thus making the platform a welcoming and encouraging place to exchange ideas, the ideas themselves, discussed within these commenting spaces are racist in content. Otherwise stated, the comment sections of two out of three media outlets examined provide an environment for readers to express their discriminatory opinions towards Muslim people.

While writers and readers actively participating in these commenting platforms voice their opinions in the guise of free speech, it is worthwhile remembering that freedom of speech is not absolute. Only a glimpse of the negatively racialised opinion pieces is needed to see that here, freedom of speech is used as a loophole to discuss and reinforce Islamophobic beliefs. In these online spaces, freedom of speech is redefined by its defenders to border on hate speech and used as a Trojan horse for the perpetuation of racist discourse.

While more in-depth analyses of this nature are required to evaluate all aspects of the negative impact of poorly moderated opinion sharing, our findings present preliminary insights into the importance of regulatory mechanisms of a more nuanced nature at both institutional and policy levels. Our analysis raises the question about whether comments sections act as breeding grounds for disseminating racist ideas. As demonstrated by data presented above, the seemingly neutral tone and sentiment likely achieved through comment moderation do not facilitate healthy public deliberation, although in general[28] they are features necessary for healthy audience engagement. In fact, what these platforms facilitate is quite the opposite, acting as petri dishes that provide an ideal growth environment for racist ideas to originate and flourish.

Way forward: recommendations

Based on our findings, and informed by current developments in the field, such as the Senate Inquiry into Media Diversity and the newly published report on Australian radical right narratives by Hedayah and CARR, we present six recommendations. They address the issue of systemic racism that permeates Australian society and media. We make long-term recommendations that should be implemented as a concerted effort between multiple sectors of society, from media agencies, to governments, non-profits, researchers and advocacy organisations.

1 Journalists need to consider more closely the effect of their work

We acknowledge that journalism strives to be impartial and factual, while columnists do not operate under the same rules of impartiality. Even so, our findings present an opportunity for all content producers to reflect on how their work impacts their audiences and public discourses.

- To ensure racial objectivity, journalists need to ask themselves, when writing an article, whose anxieties they are addressing. Journalists need to be self-critical of their own work by reflecting on who the beneficiaries of their work are and whether the subject matter is presented in the public interest of white people only (Anglo-Celtic/European Australians), or rather, is equally representative of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC).
- Journalists need to embrace complexity when discussing polarising topics, over a 'both sides' approach. Complicating the narratives helps people ask more questions, come up with higher quality ideas and lessens polarisation.[29]

2 All news organisations need to cultivate and maintain an anti-racist culture within their workplaces

For media organisations to become more diverse, they first need to change the environment in which they are inviting Black, Indigenous and People of Colour to participate and thrive. Media organisations need to have an Executive team that reports to the Board of Directors about progress in ensuring the organisation's policies and practices are fully inclusive and fair and respectful for all. Additionally, media organisations should provide all staff members, especially those in leadership roles, with cultural intelligence and anti-racism training.

3 Mainstream media organisations need to increase cultural diversity across all parts of their operations

There has long been a call to increase diversity in newsrooms and media organisations.[30] We know that people's lived experiences shape how they engage in social commentary and the reporting of particular issues.

Mainstream media organisations need to increase the cultural diversity across all parts of their operations so that it is representative of the wider Australian population. This includes journalists, presenters and producers as well

as management and executives. In our 2020 report, *Social commentary, racism and Covid-19*, published in partnership with CIRCA and the Asian Australian Alliance, we found that 89% of racist social commentary was authored by people of Anglo-Celtic and/or European backgrounds.[31]

One of the ways this can be done is by expanding the pipelines through which First Nations people and people of colour can enter the media industry. In 2020, All Together Now partnered with the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy to facilitate the Muslim Women's Leadership Program, where young Muslim women receive one-on-one mentoring from more senior Muslim women with experience in media engagement and community advocacy. The program also involves a series of workshops and experiential projects to provide immersive industry experience. We note that the Judith Neilson Institute has recently started a similar mentorship program for people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Such programs are an important step in challenging the structural barriers and racist policies that limit diversity in the media.

4 The Federal Government and the media industry need to invest in media literacy education for audiences

As long as audiences 'consume' poor-quality information, there will be a supply of misinformation and poorly researched news and commentary. Research shows that "media and information literacy improves critical thinking, awareness of media bias, and the desire to consume quality news".[32] Additionally, all sectors of society need to invest in human-centred solutions to improve media literacy, which refers to the ability to discern the reliability of information sources, distinguishing facts from opinions and resisting emotional manipulation. All Together Now strongly supports all the recommendations made by the *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs* report, published by researchers from Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra.[34]

5 All sectors of society need to invest in opportunities for independent journalism

Research shows that people exposed to nuanced, complex journalism are more likely to stay curious and open-minded during a difficult conversation about a polarising issue.[35] Investments that support existing and emerging independent publishers are needed to "redress the imbalance created by the power and dominance of the major media companies and the economic collapse of quality journalism in Australia".[36] All sectors of society need to invest in independent journalism and foster a diversity of views and news sources, particularly in rural and regional Australia.

6 The Federal Government needs to continue financial support for public journalism

The government should provide continuous financial support, at an arm's length, for public broadcasters ABC and SBS, to ensure that all Australians "have access to a free source of independent news and information".[37] The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission's *Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report* also recommends stable and adequate funding for the public broadcasters "in recognition of their role in addressing the risk of under-provision of public interest journalism that generates broad benefits to society".[38]

Endnotes

1. All Together Now, *Social commentary and racism in 2019*, All Together Now, 2019, viewed 18 August 2020, <https://alltogethernow.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Social-Commentary-and-Racism-2019-1.pdf>.

2. TA Van Dijk, *Discourse and Racism, The Blackwell Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, pp. 145–59.

3. S Jhally, S Hall & Media Education Foundation, *Race: The floating signifier*, Media Education Foundation, Northampton, MA, 1996.

4. H Winant, *Racial Conditions*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994.

5. W Allchorn, *Australian Radical Right Narratives and Counter-Narratives in an Age of Terrorism*, Hedayah and Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, 2021, viewed 31 March 2021, <https://www.hedayahcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/002_Final_CARR-Hedayah_Australia-Country-Report_2021JAN26.pdf>.

6. Roy Morgan, 'Over 15.7 million Australians read newspapers in print or online', Roy Morgan Research 2019, viewed 17 June 2020, <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/7971-australian-newspaper-print-readership-and-cross-platform-audiences-march-2019-201905100051>.

7. T Flew & B Goldsmith, 'FactCheck: does Murdoch own 70% of newspapers in Australia?', *The Conversation*, 8 August 2013, viewed 17 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/factcheck-does-murdoch-own-70-of-newspapers-in-australia-16812>.

8. Roy Morgan, 'Over 15.7 million Australians read newspapers in print or online', Roy Morgan Research.

9. MK Shanahan, 'How news sites' online comments helped build our hateful electorate', *The Conversation*, 15 December 2016, viewed 7 April 2021, <http://theconversation.com/how-news-sites-online-comments-helped-build-our-hateful-electorate-70170>.

10. KM Lord & K Vogt, 'Strengthen Media Literacy to Win the Fight Against Misinformation', *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 18 March 2021, viewed 31 March 2021, <https://ssir.org/articles/entry/strengthen_media_literacy_to_win_the_fight_against_misinformation>. (Note: we have used American research which we consider applicable due to the similarities between the evolution of Murdoch-owned press both in America and here in Australia.)

11. M Kimberly, *From news to talk : the expansion of opinion and commentary in US journalism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, 2019, p. 45. (Note: we have used American research which we consider applicable due to the similarities between the evolution of Murdoch-owned press both in America and here in Australia.)

12. TN Friemel & M Dötsch, 'Online Reader Comments as Indicator for Perceived Public Opinion', *Kommunikationspolitik Für Die Digitale Gesellschaft*, 2015, viewed 6 April 2021, <doi: 10.17174/DCR.V1.8.>.

13. All Together Now, *Social commentary, racism and Covid-19*, All Together Now, 2020, viewed 26 March 2021, <https://alltogethernow.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ATN-Media-Report-2020_online.pdf>; All Together Now, *Social commentary and racism in 2019*, All Together Now, 2019; UM Rodrigues & Y Paradies, *Transnational News and Multicultural Australia: Cultural Diversity and News in Australia*, Deakin University, Melbourne, 2017.

14. S Poynting & G Noble, 'Dog whistle journalism and Muslim Australians since 2001', *Media International Australia*, November 2003, vol. 109, pp, 41–49.

15. J Ewart et al., 'News Media Coverage of Islam and Muslims in Australia: an opinion survey among Australian Muslims', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, June 2017, vol. 37, pp. 147–63.

16. G Hutchens, 'Push to weaken Racial Discrimination Act opposed by ethnic and religious groups', *The Guardian*, 10 November 2016, viewed 29 March 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/nov/10/ush-to-weaken-racial-discrimination-act-opposed-by-ethnic-and-religious-groups>.

17. A Jakubowicz, 'Media research and the politics of racism in New South Wales', *Australian Quarterly*, Australian Institute of Policy and Science, November–December 2003, vol. 75, no. 6, pp. 13–17, 40.

18. MW Hughey & J Daniels, 'Racist Comments at Online News Sites: A Methodological Dilemma for Discourse Analysis,' *Media, Culture & Society*, 2013, 35(3), pp. 332–47, viewed 6 April 2021, <doi: 10.1177/0163443712472089>; C Ruiz, D Domingo, JL Micó, J Díaz-Noci, K Meso & P Masip, 'Public Sphere 2.0? The Democratic Qualities of Citizen Debates in Online Newspapers', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2011, 16(4), pp. 463–487; E Manosevitch & DM Walker, 'Reader comments to online opinion journalism: A space of public deliberation', paper presented to the 10th International Symposium on Online Journalism, Austin, TX, 2009.

19. S Livingstone, 'Active audiences? The debate progresses but is far from resolved', *Communication Theory*, 2015,25(4,) viewed 30 March 2021, <https://onlineli-brary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/comt.12078>.

20. N Faulkner & A Bliuc, 'It's okay to be racist': Moral disengagement in online discussions of racist incidents in Australia, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2016, 39(14), pp. 2545–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1171370>.

21. K Coe, K Kenski & SA Rains, 'Online and Uncivil? Patterns and Determinants of Incivility in Newspaper Website Comments', *Journal of Communication*, 2014, 64(4), pp. 658–79, <doi: 10.1111/jcom.12104>; TB Ksiazek, 'Commenting on the News,' *Journalism Studies*, 2018, 9(5), pp. 650–73, <doi:10.1080/1461670X.2016.1209977>; KC Schrøder, 'Audience Reception Research in a Post-Broad-casting Digital Age', *Television & New Media*, 2019, 20(2), pp. 155–69, <doi: 10.1177/1527476418811114>.

22. CR Sunstein, 'The Law of Group Polarization', John M. Olin Program in Law and Economics Working Paper No. 91, 1999; CR Sunstein, 'Deliberative Trouble – Why Groups Go to Extremes', *Yale Law Journal*, 2000, Vol. 110: 7.

23. A Jakubowicz, K Dunn, G Mason, Y Paradies, AM Bliuc, N Bahfen, A Oboler, R Atie & K Connelly, *Cyber Racism and Community Resilience. Strategies for Combating Online Race Hate*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

24. News Corp, 'Commenting Guidelines', News Corp, 2018, viewed 12 June 2020, <https://www.newscorpaustralia.com/commenting-guidelines/>.

25. K Coe, K Kenski & SA Rains, 'Online and Uncivil? Patterns and Determinants of Incivility in Newspaper Website Comments', *Journal of Communication*.

26. A Coppock, E Ekins & D Kirby, 'The Long-Lasting Effects of Newspaper Op-Eds on Public Opinion', *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 2018, 13(1), pp. 59–87, <doi: 10.1561/100.00016112>.

27. C Ruiz, D Domingo, JL Micó, J Díaz-Noci, K Meso & P Masip, 'Public Sphere 2.0? The Democratic Qualities of Citizen Debates in Online Newspapers', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*; M Ziegele, M Weber, O Quiring & T Breiner, 'The Dynamics of Online News Discussions: Effects of News Articles and Reader Comments on Users' Involvement, Willingness to Participate, and the Civility of Their Contributions', *Information, Communication & Society*, 2018, 21(10), pp. 1419–35, <doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2017.1324505>.

28. K Coe, K Kenski & SA Rains, 'Online and Uncivil? Patterns and Determinants of Incivility in Newspaper Website Comments', *Journal of Communication*.

29. A Ripley, 'Complicating the Narratives', *Solutions Journalism*, 11 January 2019, viewed 6 April 2021, <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/complicating-the-narratives-b91ea06ddf63>.

30. M Hayman-Reber, 'Remaking our newsrooms', *The Saturday Paper*, 18–24 July 2020; J Rogers, 'Australia's media has been too white for too long. This is how to bring more diversity to newsrooms', *The Conversation*, 7 July 2020; Media Diversity Australia, *Who Gets to Tell Australian Stories?*, Media Diversity Australia, 2020, viewed 1 September 2020, <https://www.mediadi-versityaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Who-Gets-To-Tell-Australian-Stories_LAUNCH-VER-SION.pdf>.

31. All Together Now, *Social commentary, racism and Covid-19*, All Together Now 2020.

32. KM Lord & K Vogt, 'Strengthen Media Literacy to Win the Fight Against Misinformation', *Stanford Social Innova-tion Review*, 18 March 2021.

33. ibid.

34. T Notley, S Chambers, S Park & M Dezuanni, *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs*, Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra, 2021.

35. A Ripley, 'Complicating the Narratives', *Solutions Journal-ism*, 11 January 2019.

36. Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the state of media diversity, independence and reliability in Australia, 'Speaking up for Journalism', submission from Monica Attard, Eric Beecher, Peter Fray, Bruce Guthrie, Wendy Harmer, Andrew Jaspan and Alan Kohler, 2021, viewed 31 March 2021.

37. Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the state of media diversity, independence and reliability in Australia by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, viewed 31 March 2021.

38. Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC), *Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report*, ACCC, June 2019, Part 1, Chapter 6, section 6.8, viewed 6 April 2021, <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20Plat-forms%20Inquiry%20-%20Final%20report%20-%20part%201.pdf>.

Politely Racist

A CASE STUDY ON READERS' COMMENTS
IN AUSTRALIAN MAINSTREAM NEWSPAPERS