

Wendy Bacon: Thanks very much, April. Well, I'd like to thank you all for inviting the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism to be part of this forum, and it's a privilege for us to be a co-sponsor of the forum. Now I can really only talk about this question as a citizen and as a woman journalist and as a journalism educator. As a citizen I've been just appalled at our media and at the political lack of will to do anything about the racism in our society, which I think I've never in my whole life felt anything as upsetting as the incident that we've been commemorating over here, where people were just left to drown at sea.

Now, our media is racist. I think we have to be quite frank about that. Yes, some windows have opened over the last 30 years, and to some extent the situation of Aboriginal people in this country is better reported than it was 30 years ago. It is still not well reported. But parts of our media are overtly racist, in particular the tabloid media and the talkback radio. Now I want to talk a little bit about this, but not so much to go through a litany of how they are racist, because I think most people in this audience are here because you know and understand that, but to talk a little bit about the people to whom this media is speaking. Now these people by and large, when you look at the demographics of our media, they're by and large lower income people, less educated people, overall they have far less information than other people. And they are not generally privileged in terms of resources. Now they receive these racist messages in the context of an overall appalling lack of information about our world. Recently I've been doing a study on the way aid development and human rights is covered by the Australian media. We've done a very expensive content analysis. Now I just want to talk about television for a minute, because television is where 80 percent of the Australian population get their information from. Now we did an analysis of all the television I the week the Tampa story -- or it's not just a story, that's a very bad way that journalists tend to think about the world, just as a story -- but when the Tampa boat was stranded there we did an analysis that week of all the television. Now as you all know, the Tampa turned into a dramatic media event and people followed blow by blow. Of course the journalists weren't allowed on to the boat, so it was very much mediated through, and interpreted through, the eyes of journalists, the politicians who were quoted, and so on. Now the rest of the television overseas news that is interesting, now if you wanted to know about Afghanistan, and you happened to be one of the majority of news watchers -

- or not the majority -- but the largest slice in market terms, who watch the Channel 9 news, I was informed last week that over the two years before the Tampa incident, or probably about two years, there've probably been about seven stories overall that mentioned Afghanistan. That's including the Australian aid workers who were locked up there, and including a couple of stories, including a 60 Minutes story, so it includes current affairs, which was an interview with bin Laden. In fact, most of the stories had looked at the relationship between the U.S. and bin Laden, probably something not that most of us had our minds on, but was an underlying issue for the U.S. Now, other than that, there is no information that has gone out, or almost none, over Channel 9, over those years, which could have told the Australian people something about the plight of the people, particularly the women, in Afghanistan. And if you're a journalist you look for a story. And if the story of the situation of the women in Afghanistan is not a story, I don't know what is. Because the situation of the women in Afghanistan, in terms of laws and what they are and are not allowed to do, is certainly the equivalent of black people in South Africa, and the Jewish people in Germany. In 1996, some laws were passed which prevented Afghan women even attending school. Now surely, from our point of view, that would have been a story. But it wasn't a story that the Australian media chose to tell. Or about the devastating effects of war on the people of Afghanistan. And you've already heard about that from someone who is much more qualified to speak than me.

So this media that we've got is, from a journalist's point of view, it is a very poor media. Now, I would like to think of journalism as something more that is about democracy, is about giving a voice to the voiceless. But it's not like in our society. But even if we took this journalism from a very standard straight mainstream journalist's viewpoint it is very poor journalism. It is by and large grossly inaccurate. It promotes ignorance, it doesn't promote knowledge. So just looking at it from a journalist's point of view, it really doesn't in any way meet our ethical guidelines.

Now when the Daily Telegraph published their appalling -- and they do it every few years, we've had a very bad spate of it this year, but we had a bad spate of it in 1998 directed at the Lebanese community. We've had appalling instances around the Gulf War. It's repetitive. It doesn't only happen in this society. It happens -- appalling reporting around the Falklands War and Britain, it happens in Europe. It is not just something that is Australian. But when the media report the situation of crime in Western

Sydney and the Tampa crisis the way they reported it in the context of so little information, and then when Muslim women get beaten up, or when something like that happens, I think the media does have blood on their hands.

Now, as a journalist of course, our profession, as a whole, if you take professions as having some sort of an overall responsibility, as opposed to just seeing your own individual career at stake, I think we share by being part of a racist media, we have to share that idea that we have blood on our hands. Now from the point of view of someone who's working in a university as a journalism educator, what can we, what do I think we can do about that. Well, I think we're probably more interested to hear today about what other people think we should do about it. But I thought I'd just mention a few ideas.

We've launched a series of conferences through one of our researchers, Tania Drayer [?]. We had April and others speak at our conference on the public right to know. And we want to put on the table what freedom of expression should mean for all people in Australia, and how the freedom for expression should also mean accountability and the right of all people in Australia to information, and the right of all people to have a voice and not be trampled on. So that's one thing we're trying to do, but also there is another thing we can do and that's do journalism about journalism, from within the university. And if you look at our website, which is www.journalism.uts.edu.au, if you look at our website and see that in 1998 we did an investigation into a Daily Telegraph story that some of you will remember, called Dial-A-Gun. And that, in one single, I think it was 200 or so words in an article in the Daily Telegraph, they used the word Lebanese more than seven times. So in a 200 word article, they used the word Lebanese more than seven times. Now that is completely unnecessary, it is in breach of the AJA's Code of Ethics, and we interviewed the journalist, and we actually put up the story of the story, and I think perhaps there is a role for doing that going out, much as you would do today, is telling the stories from your point of view, is also for us to investigate the media and its racist methods.

People say it worked well to get more journalists into the media who were from non-Anglo backgrounds, and of course, I agree with that. But it is a long term strategy and it does take a critical mass. It isn't just, yes, everyone helps, but I think to change the culture of the media and to be able to operate in a news room, countering the lines of

authority and countering the way that the news agenda is formed, you've got to be part of a group and you've got to have some overall backing. But I'd like to think of perhaps, through maybe connections with groups that are here today, we might be able to think of some other strategies which could actually bring some pressure to bear on the media. Because I think all the voices and all the complaints certainly are worth it. But I think in the end we have to think in structural terms. Now one of the things I've thought of is could we do one big joint complaint, not perhaps to the Anti-Discrimination Board, who some people do prefer to complain to them, but to the journalists' union, the MEAA and actually put in a joint complaint and ask them to deal with it in a public way, through a public hearing. Could we, obviously we have to reach out to people in Australia who are reached by this media. We have to try through the education system and other means to turn the racist attitudes around and that can only be done, probably by grass roots methods. And I had another idea. It's a bit of a fantasy and is possibly not even a great idea, but I was thinking about the way the environmental movement has brought some pressure to bear on some big companies. And in the end, the advertisers are what supply the money to the media. The media is carefully niche marketed to particular audiences in the way I was describing earlier. But perhaps we need to look at the people who advertise on talkback radio, and we need to look at the people advertising in Daily Telegraph. And perhaps through consumer power, because there are a lot of power in the communities that we come from, consumer power, maybe we should try to bring some pressure to bear. It's a long term thought, but I think in the end we have to come out with some very concrete plans to attempt to put pressure back on the media not to promote this divisiveness, scary, racist ideology.